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In memoriam:

Joseph Levine, 1933–2008

The historian's historian

Preface

This book is a re-examination of “the old historicism”, the classical historicist tradition that began in Germany with Chladenius in the middle of the eighteenth century and that ended with Max Weber at the beginning of the twentieth century. This tradition has shaped our intellectual universe to an extraordinary degree, so that today we are all historicist in our ways of thinking. Yet we are in danger of forgetting this tradition, of letting it slip away into the mists of the past. When people think of historicism today they probably have in mind “the new historicism” of literary studies or the “historicism” vilified by Popper in the 1940s. But neither have much in common with the old tradition.

My chief task has been to introduce the Anglophone reader to the major figures of the historicist tradition. I attempt to assess their historical significance, to analyze their main arguments, and to indicate the chief problems in the interpretation of their thought. My approach is historical and systematic: historical, insofar as I place each thinker in context and trace the evolution of his thought; and systematic, insofar as I assess the validity of his arguments and reconstruct the logical structure of his thought.

My ultimate hope is that this study expands our historical horizons. Most of the thinkers studied here are unfamiliar to the Anglophone world. Some are introduced for the first time, while others are examined in depth for the first time. While the work of Herder, Ranke and Weber is more familiar to an Anglophone audience, their thought on history has been much understudied by philosophers.

Some readers of the manuscript regretted the lack of focus on political context. I share entirely their belief in the importance of that context; but I believe that such studies have to follow the more basic tasks of exposition and interpretation, which have still not been achieved for most of these thinkers. We understand *why* a thinker writes only after we understand *what* he writes. For this reason a study of his political motivations has to be based upon a philosophical interpretation of his main ideas. Other readers missed the lack of reference to non-German sources of historicism. If they have not received their full due here, it is partly because of lack of space, partly because the German sources have been so much less known than the French, English or Italian.

The main precedent and model for this work has been Friedrich Meinecke's *Entstehung des Historismus* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1936). It was Meinecke's grand ambition to trace the genesis of German historicism from its beginnings in the late seventeenth century until its culmination in Ranke. Such was Meinecke's thoroughness, however, that after 500 pages he never got beyond Goethe. Although Meinecke's work has great merits—his analyses of texts are unfailingly perceptive, and his historical

perspective deep and broad—it still has serious flaws which make it an inadequate introduction today. Meinecke ignores crucial figures, his interpretations are often anachronistic, and his conceptual scheme is misleading and simplistic. The present work attempts to retell Meinecke's story in the light of later research.

The occasion for this book was the invitation in 2005 by Michael Rosen and Brian Leiter to write the article on historicism for the *Oxford Handbook of Continental Philosophy*. Having studied Möser, Herder and Hegel over the years, I believed I was sufficiently qualified to write the article. Further research quickly cured me of my illusions. Now, several years after the publication of that volume, I think I am finally in a position to justify the trust the editors placed in me. The present introduction is meant to replace the flaws of the earlier article.

While writing this book I often wondered how my colleague Joseph Levine would react to it. I was summoning the courage to show him some drafts when I heard of his untimely death in January 2008. I will never know his reaction, though it would have made it a better book. I dedicate this book to his memory.

F.B.

January 2011

Syracuse, New York

Introduction: The Concept and Context of Historicism

1. An intellectual revolution

In 1936, in the nostalgic preface to his magisterial *Die Entstehung des Historismus*, Friedrich Meinecke wrote that historicism was “one of the greatest intellectual revolutions experienced by Western thought.”¹ Historicism was an intellectual revolution, Meinecke believed, because it replaced the older ahistorical ways of thinking, which had prevailed from antiquity throughout the Middle Ages, with a new historical way of thinking, which had begun in the middle of the eighteenth century. The older ahistorical way of thinking saw human nature, morality and reason as absolute, eternal and universal; the new historical way regarded them as relative, changing and particular. Historicism, in determining the historical causes and contexts of values, beliefs and actions, showed how their very identity depends upon those causes and contexts. Hence it was impossible to generalize values and beliefs beyond one's own age, as if they somehow held for humanity or reason in general. Any belief in a universal worldview, a supernatural revelation, an absolute moral code, a natural law or natural religion, was ethnocentric, arising from an illusory attempt to leap beyond one's own age.

Though Meinecke has fallen out of favor, few scholars today would question his thesis about the significance of historicism. But if we accept that thesis, we have some explaining to do. We have to answer some very basic questions. What, more precisely, is historicism? Who were the historicists? What were their central aims and ideas? And how did they justify their new historical way of thinking?

Any attempt to define “historicism” immediately runs into a major obstacle: the many meanings of the word. The term has been used in very different, even contradictory, ways.² For some, it means the attempt to determine the general laws of history;

for others, it means the exact opposite: the repudiation of such laws and the attempt to know the unique and singular events and personalities of history.³ Which of these usages is correct? It is impossible to say, of course. We must not hypostasize the term, as if there were some hidden essence of historicism, some deeper core meaning, which has somehow persisted throughout its different and conflicting uses.

To avoid this obstacle, I will give “historicism” a prescriptive rather than descriptive definition. While a descriptive definition attempts to determine what a word means, how it has been used, a prescriptive definition lays down what it *ought to* mean, how it *should be* used. The only rationale for a prescriptive definition is that it aids enquiry. Since our interest here is in understanding the origins and foundations of Meinecke's intellectual revolution, I will define “historicism” so that it best serves that end. The task of the definition is to capture that meaning of the word that best explains Meinecke's revolution. I will define historicism by determining the common characteristics of those thinkers who contributed most to it.

Following this guideline, we do well to define “historicism” along the lines of Ernst Troeltsch, who first introduced the word in its modern sense. According to Troeltsch, “historicism,” when stripped of all its accidental and negative connotations, means “the fundamental historicization of all our thinking about man, his culture and his values.”⁴ What, though, does it mean to historicize our thinking? Since Troeltsch offers no further explanation, we have to supply one for him. Roughly, to historicize our thinking means to recognize that everything in the human world—culture, values, institutions, practices, rationality—is made by history, so that nothing has an eternal form, permanent essence or constant identity which transcends historical change. The historicist holds, therefore, that the *essence, identity or nature* of everything in the human world is made by history, so that it is *entirely* the product of the particular historical processes that brought it into being. In other words, among things human, there is no distinction between a permanent substance and changing accidents, because even their substance is the product of history. The particular causes that have brought human things into being make them what they are; and these causes are utterly historical, i.e., they depend on a specific context, a definite time and place. Hence the historicist is the Heraclitean of the human world: everything is in flux; no one steps twice into the river of history.

Such a thesis seems metaphysical, indeed almost religious. Little wonder that historicism has often been described as a *Weltanschauung*. But what gives historicism all its power and plausibility is its source in modern science. Historicism grew out of the attempt to create a science of the human world, one on par with the sciences of the natural world. The general thesis of historicism follows straightforwardly from two perfectly plausible premises, both essential to its scientific program. First, that there is a sufficient reason for everything that exists or happens in the human world. Second, that these reasons are historical, i.e., that they depend on a specific temporal context, particular circumstances at a particular time. Together, these premises mean that everything in the human world is the product of its historical causes, that it is made by its specific temporal context.

Seen in very general terms, historicism is the counterpart of naturalism. Just as naturalism states that everything in the *natural* world is in principle explicable according to science, so historicism states that everything in the *historical* world is in principle explicable according to science. Just as naturalism eventually led to natural history, the denial of stable species and eternal kinds, so historicism led to the denial of an eternal human nature or reason. Historicism simply took the lesson of natural history and applied it to the human world.

Although the analogue of naturalism, historicism is not simply a species or form of it, the application of the laws and methods of natural science to the human world. The historicist does not *necessarily* claim that everything in the human world is explicable according to the same methods and laws that hold for the natural world. The historicist *could* make such a claim; but he *need* not do so. The precise relationship between the methods of historical and natural science was a fraught question *within* historicism. Some historicists held that there is a fundamental difference in kind between these methods; others, however, insisted that they are essentially the same. Both parties were historicist insofar as they upheld the general thesis of historicism that everything in the human world changes with history. Both held that history could be a science in a broad sense of the term, i.e., some methodical means of acquiring knowledge conforming to rigorous epistemic standards; it's just that they had different conceptions of the specific methods of history.

Historicism has often been opposed to naturalism, as if its very identity consists in the claim that the methods of historical knowledge are *sui generis*, distinct in kind from those of the natural sciences. This is the position of Meinecke, Troeltsch and many others.⁵ There are, however, two serious problems with this view. First, there were in fact very few historicists who held that the methods of history are distinct in kind from those of the natural sciences. This generalization applies best to Droysen and Dilthey in

the late nineteenth century, who conceived their method of understanding (*Verstehen*) in explicit opposition to naturalism. However, to define historicism in terms of their methodological views alone is to restrict severely the extension of the term. It is to make the historicist tradition have two members—if that amounts to a tradition at all. Second, historicism grew out of a naturalistic program in the eighteenth century, the attempt to create “a science of man” by applying the methods and laws of Newtonian physics to history.⁶ The founding fathers of the historicist tradition—Chladenius, Möser, Herder and Humboldt—were indeed champions of this program. The foundational role of these thinkers has been often recognized, indeed stressed, by all scholars of historicism, especially Meinecke. So if we insist upon a sharp distinction between historicism and naturalism, we must place these thinkers *outside* the historicist tradition, a consequence few scholars are willing to accept. Since opposition to naturalism was a later development of the historicist tradition, beginning only with Droysen and Dilthey in the late nineteenth century, any anti-naturalistic conception of historicism is anachronistic.

Besides its central thesis of the omnipresence of historical change, there are two further defining principles of historicism.⁷ The first is the principle of individuality. This principle has many meanings in the historicist tradition, and its precise sense depends on its context. Its general meaning, however, is this: that the defining subject matter of history, and the goal of historical enquiry, is the individual, i.e., this or that determinate person, action, culture or epoch which exists at a particular time and place. This principle goes back to Plato and Aristotle, but the historicists gave it a new significance. Contrary to their classical forbears, they insist that the individuality of things—what makes them different from one another—is as much an object of science as their universality, the generalizations or laws that hold regardless of individual differences. The second defining principle is holism, which, very crudely, states that the whole is prior to its parts and irreducible to them. From Herder to Weber, holism has been a central and characteristic feature of historicism. Historicists have insisted that the individual human being is not a self-sufficient and independent unit but that its very identity and existence depends on its place within a whole, the wider social, historical and cultural world of which it is only a part. According to this holism, society,

state, culture or epoch is not an aggregate or composite, which consists solely in its parts, each of which exists independent of the whole; rather it is an indivisible whole or unity, which determines the very identity of its parts, none of which can exist apart from it. Atomism, the thesis that the whole is reducible to its parts, was rejected as the legacy of an antiquated mechanical manner of thinking. Clearly, these principles are closely interrelated: individuals are understood as irreducible wholes or unities, the wholes or unities as individuals.

Behind these principles, and indeed the central thesis of historicism, stood an old philosophical tradition, one dating back to William of Ockham and the fourteenth century: nominalism. The importance of nominalism for some major protagonists of early modern science—Bacon, Hobbes, Locke, Glanvill, Hume—has been well-established.⁸ Nominalism also played a prominent role in the thinking of major historicists, especially Chladenius, Herder, Ranke, Rickert, Simmel and Weber, who, in differing ways, explicitly affirm it. The nominalist holds that whatever exists is determinate or particular, that universals are only constructions of our mental activity, existing neither in things nor in a separate intelligible world. Such a thesis is the rationale for several of the defining doctrines of historicism. First of all, it explains the historicist's emphasis upon the omnipresence of change, for his elimination of eternal essences and permanent forms from the flux of history. Like a true nominalist, the historicist condemns these essences and forms as hypostases, as reifications of abstract terms. Second, nominalism is also the source and rationale for the historicist's principle of individuality. The reason the historicist makes the individual the goal and subject matter of history is because for him only the individual is real. Because of their nominalism, historicists would say that history is the most real science of them all. After all, it alone focuses upon what is real: the particular; the other sciences, viz., physics, chemistry, in their attempt to formulate general laws, leave behind concrete reality. Finally, nominalism is the source of the relativism so often associated with historicism. Because of his nominalism, the historicist would urge the historian to honor a specific methodological precept: to be precise; to identify the determinate causes of a determinate action, the particular embodiments of a particular thought or intention. The meaning and purpose of a thought, intention, value or belief did not exist apart from the determinate context, actions and words that expressed or embodied it. Since these expressions and embodiments are so different, indeed incommensurable, there cannot be a single form of human nature, reason or value. To talk about reason, value or human nature in general, apart from their specific expressions or embodiments in a specific time and place, is to indulge in mere abstractions.

Though prevalent and fundamental, this nominalist strand of historicism has been often overlooked. Indeed, the popular view is that historicism, because of its holism, is infested with metaphysics. Holism appears to involve commitment to abstract entities, to universals that exist apart from and prior to the parts that compose them, which is the very antithesis of nominalism. Surely, it seems, the nominalist should reject holism; since he insists that the particular alone has a self-sufficient or independent existence, he should maintain that the whole is only an abstraction, a composite of particulars. It is important to see, however, that holism and nominalism can be perfectly compatible. Holism need not involve any commitment to the existence of universals: the whole too can be individual, its parts mere abstractions from it. The holist need not claim that the whole *exists* separate from its parts; he can indeed insist that the whole exists only in and through them, and that it has only a *logical* or *explanatory* priority over them. As Aristotle taught long ago, what is first in order of being—the particular—need not be first in order of explanation or reason—the universal.⁹ It is indeed this apparently paradoxical nominalist holism, or holistic nominalism, that is a fundamental and common characteristic of the historicist tradition. It is a deep misunderstanding, indeed a caricature, to charge historicism with hypostasis, essentialism, mysticism, or any belief whatsoever in abstract entities.¹⁰

2. History as a science

Historicism was more than an abstract intellectual tendency, the attempt to historicize thinking about the human world. What makes it a single, coherent and continuous intellectual tradition is its agenda, goal or program.¹¹ This agenda was simple but ambitious: to legitimate history as a science. Its aim was not to make history a science—arguably, it had already become that since the Renaissance—but to show what makes history a science. All the thinkers in the historicist tradition, whether naturalist or anti-naturalist, wanted to justify the scientific status of history. They used “science” in the broad sense of that term, one corresponding to the German word “*Wissenschaft*,” i.e., some methodical means of acquiring knowledge.¹² Although the historicists had very

different, even conflicting, conceptions of such science, they shared the same general goal of justifying the scientific stature of history. The intellectual revolution of historicism went hand-in-hand with this new attitude toward history, the modern belief that history could become a science in its own right, deserving all the status and prestige of the new natural sciences.

To avoid anachronism, it is important not to read modern or positivist preconceptions of science into the historicist program. One of these preconceptions is the opposition between science and art. Although the historicists wanted to make history a science, many of them did not see that goal as compromising its status as an art. Herder, Humboldt, Ranke and Simmel saw history as in equal measure both science and art. It is only with Droysen, later in the nineteenth century, that a sharp distinction appears between art and science; and even then his distinction was not popular. The relationship between science and art later became an issue *within* the historicist tradition, one that divided the historicists among themselves; but the entire tradition should not be identified with the idea that history should be a science and not an art. Another preconception is the assumption that history can be a science only if it achieves complete objectivity, i.e., results that are valid completely independent of the standpoint of the historian. From the very beginning of the historicist tradition in Chladenius, the claim was made that history can be a science yet also be perspectival, i.e., valid only from the standpoint of the historian. Such perspectivalism was meant not to undermine but to support the scientific status of history: knowledge can still be relative to a perspective, and it is only by recognizing its relativity that we avoid the errors involved in making absolute or transcendent claims. This argument is later advanced, in one form or another, by Herder, Droysen, Simmel, Weber and the neo-Kantians. Whether or not history demands objectivity was another question discussed and debated in the historicist tradition. We should not, therefore, equate the whole tradition with a naive claim to objectivity. If we do that, we end out limiting the entire historicist tradition down to a misreading of Ranke.¹³

Whatever its conception of science, the historicist program is, by its very nature, more philosophical than historical. To justify the scientific status of history, it is necessary to address basic epistemological issues. How is historical knowledge possible? What is the difference between it and knowledge of nature? What is the relationship between history and art? Is objective historical knowledge possible? Given such questions, it should be plain that the historicists' concern was not *first-* but *second-order* history, i.e., historiography, the methods and standards of writing history. Hence historicism was an essentially *philosophical* tradition. It came into being in the late eighteenth century when historians began to reflect philosophically, or when philosophers began to reflect about history.

Although a philosophical tradition, historicism should not be equated with the aims and problems of the philosophy of history. The historicist tradition was essentially *epistemological*, involving second-order reflection upon historical knowledge; it was not *metaphysical*, involving first-order speculation about the laws, ends or meaning of history itself. Some of the most important historicist thinkers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, viz., Humboldt, Ranke, Dilthey, Weber, were highly critical of the philosophy of history, fearing that any association with its metaphysics would contaminate or undermine the scientific status of history itself. It is necessary to get beyond the common conception, still prevalent in the Anglophone world, that historicism was essentially concerned with speculative philosophy of history.¹⁴

Adhering strictly to this epistemological conception of historicism, it is not difficult to determine who were the major historicists, the main thinkers of the historicist tradition. They were all those historians and philosophers who were chief contributors to the philosophical discussions concerning the scientific status of history. They were J. A. Chladenius (1710–59), Justus Möser (1720–94), Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803), Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767–1835), Friedrich Karl von Savigny (1779–1861), Leopold von Ranke (1795–1886), Moritz Lazarus (1824–1903), Johann Gustav Droysen (1838–1908), Wilhelm Windelband (1848–1915), Heinrich Rickert (1863–1936), Emil Lask (1875–1915), Wilhelm Dilthey (1833–1911), Georg Simmel (1867–1918) and Max Weber (1864–1920).

Doubtless, many historians will find this list much too short, because it does not include many of those eighteenth- and nineteenth-century figures whose works were fundamental in making history a science. To name just a few, the great Göttingen historians Johann Christian Gatterer (1727–99), Johann Stephan Pütter (1725–1807) and August Ludwig Schlözer (1735–1809).¹⁵ Our task, however, is not to trace the rise

in the scientific status of history but only to reconstruct the attempts to justify that status. This means that our study excludes many historians who were not philosophers, such as Gatterer, Pütter and Schlözer, and that it includes many philosophers who were not historians, such as Rickert, Lask and Simmel. As it happens, most historicists were historians as well as philosophers, viz., Herder, Möser, Windelband, Dilthey and Weber; but there is no reason, given our definition, they have to be both.

What about Hegel and Marx? Were they not historicists too? For many scholars, Hegel and Marx were indeed the paradigms of historicism. After all, they adhered to the general principles of historicism; and they shared the historicist agenda. Their influence on the study of history has been indeed so great that it seems impossible to ignore them. Arguably, however, Hegel and Marx fall outside the historicist tradition in the strict sense defined here, because their chief contribution lies more with the philosophy of history than its epistemology. They were more intent on making history into a kind of science than justifying its status as a science. At least this is how Hegel and Marx saw themselves, and it is how they were perceived by most historicists. Humboldt, Ranke, Droysen and Dilthey argued that history could become a science only by breaking the stranglehold of Hegelianism, whose dialectic method was far too speculative and metaphysical. Later, Simmel, Rickert and Weber were critical of Marx for similar reasons. They charged that, despite his repudiation of Hegel's idealist metaphysics, Marx presupposed a materialist metaphysics all his own. For better or worse, Hegel and Marx were marginalized by the major historicists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Although it excludes some figures, the concept of historicism developed here is still very broad or inclusive. It makes an historicist anyone who contributed substantially to the program of justifying the scientific status of history. It does not equate historicism with any particular view about historical method. Both those who affirmed and those who denied the affinity of history with natural science are brought under the umbrella of historicism.

In advocating such a broad concept I hope to escape the problems with other prevalent concepts of historicism, all of which identify historicism with some specific theory about the intellectual foundations of history. Thus some scholars equate historicism with the attempt to determine general laws of history,¹⁶ or with the belief that there are goals to history.¹⁷ Other scholars do just the opposite: they make historicism the doctrine that the business of history is the study of the unique or singular and the repudiation of general laws and goals.¹⁸ Still others simply conflate

historicism with the hermeneutical tradition.¹⁹ The problem with all these concepts is that they are too narrow, excluding many thinkers who, by common consent, are historicists. The first concept would exclude Ranke, Dilthey and Droysen, who rejected the philosophy of history. The second gives no space for Möser, Herder and Humboldt, who did attempt to formulate general laws of history. The third concept leaves out Windelband, Rickert and Lask, who, though they had little conception of hermeneutics, were major contributors to the epistemology of history. If we adopt any of these concepts, we end up limiting historicism to a few figures, so that it is questionable whether it amounts to a tradition at all.

The ultimate test for any concept of historicism is that it be broad enough to include within it all the thinkers who played an important role in Meinecke's intellectual revolution. The problem with the other concepts of historicism is that they exclude some of these thinkers. The most telling testimony against their excessive narrowness comes from the practice of the scholars who advance these concepts, for they end up discussing in detail thinkers who do not really fit their own definitions.²⁰ Once, however, we adopt a broader concept of historicism, the inclusion of these figures is entirely defensible; at least our interests match our definition of the subject matter. Ultimately, the best argument for the broader concept of historicism offered here is that other scholars have tacitly presupposed it.

3. Historicism and Enlightenment

Why was historicism such an intellectual revolution in the Western world? We have already briefly stated Meinecke's reasons for this view. But to appreciate fully the depth and breadth of this revolution, we need to measure more precisely its dimensions and consequences. Just how to do this has been a matter of much controversy and interpretation.

Seen from a broad historical perspective, historicism undermined the perennial search in Western philosophy to find *transcendent* justifications for social, political and moral values, i.e., the endeavor to give these values some universal and necessary validity, some support or sanction outside or beyond their own specific social and cultural context. Such justifications could be straightforwardly religious viz., divine providence or supernatural revelation; but they could also be thoroughly secular, viz., natural law or human reason. In either case, historicism questioned their validity.

The historical significance of historicism is best measured by its *break* with the Enlightenment, which had dominated European intellectual life during the eighteenth century. The star of historicism rose as that of the Enlightenment fell. Although historicism grew out of the Enlightenment, some aspects of its program, if taken to their limits, undermined crucial ideals and assumptions of the Enlightenment. True to the legacy of the Enlightenment, historicism demanded that we extend the domain of reason, i.e., that we find a sufficient reason for everything that happens. Its contribution to extending the empire of reason would be to illuminate the historical world as the new natural philosophy had explained the natural world. But this program eventually undermined the Enlightenment's attempt to provide rational or universal principles of morality, politics and religion. The more we examine the causes of and reasons for human beliefs and practices, the more we discover that their purpose and meaning is conditioned by their specific historical and cultural context, the less we should be inclined to universalize those beliefs and practices. It now becomes difficult, if not impossible, to provide a universal justification of moral, political and religious beliefs and practices, as if they had a purpose, meaning and validity beyond one's own culture. Thus the rational defense of moral, political and religious beliefs, one of the central aspirations of the Enlightenment, proved illusory.

From the perspective of historicism, then, the general problem with the Enlightenment is that it remained, in spite of itself, too deeply indebted to the legacy of the Middle Ages which it pretended to overcome. The theology of the Middle Ages had always required a transcendent sanction for social, political and moral values. Although the Enlightenment removed the religious trappings of such a transcendent sanction, it continued to seek it in more worldly terms, whether that was natural law, the social contract, a universal human reason, or a constant human nature. All these concepts seemed to promise a validity beyond the flux of history, a sanction transcending the concrete context of culture, politics and society. All the thinkers of the Enlightenment—the French *philosophes*, the German *Aufklärer* or the English free-thinkers—wanted to find some eternal and universal Archimedean standpoint by which they could judge all specific societies, states and cultures. One of the most profound implications of historicism is that there can be no such standpoint.

For some recent scholars, the thesis that the historical and philosophical significance of historicism rests upon its break with the Enlightenment is an old myth.²¹ These scholars have argued that the Enlightenment was never an ahistorical age, and that the methods and standards of writing history of the later historicists were already apparent in eighteenth-century writers firmly within the Enlightenment tradition. The main

target of their criticism has been Meinecke, who had constantly opposed historicism to the Enlightenment.²² Rejecting Meinecke's paradigm as simplistic and misleading, these scholars have advocated instead a continuum rather than a break between historicism and the Enlightenment.

While it is true that the Enlightenment was not an ahistorical age, and while it is also true that historicism grew out of the Enlightenment, it scarcely follows that there was no break between historicism and the Enlightenment. These scholars have corrected the flaws of one crude generalization only by making another: that there is pure continuity between historicism and Enlightenment. If historicism was indebted to the Enlightenment in some respects, it was opposed to it in others. The problem is to be precise, specifying the exact respects in which historicism both continued and broke with the Enlightenment. Here we identify three fundamental points of discontinuity.

A characteristic doctrine of the Enlightenment was individualism or atomism, i.e., the thesis that the individual is self-sufficient and has a fixed identity apart from its specific social and historical context. This thesis appears constantly in the social contract doctrines prevalent in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It reflects the widespread belief, voiced by Rousseau and Hume among others, that there is a permanent human nature, i.e., that people are one and the same throughout history. This individualism or atomism has been traced to another characteristic tenet of the Enlightenment: its belief that the proper procedure of science consists in analysis, the dissection of a phenomenon into its constituent parts.²³ This method, which had been used with such success in the natural sciences, was made into a model for the study of society and state.

It is striking that almost all thinkers in the historicist tradition, beginning with Möser and Herder in the eighteenth century and ending with Simmel and Weber in the nineteenth, questioned this individualism. They insisted instead that human identity is not fixed but plastic, that it is not constant but changing, and that it depends on one's distinct place in society and history. It is necessary to oppose, therefore, the individualism or atomism of the Enlightenment with the holism of the historicist tradition. Rather than seeing the whole as reducible to its individual members, each of which exists independently, historicism insists that the whole is prior to its parts and the very condition of their existence and identity.

Another defining article of faith of the Enlightenment was its belief in natural law, i.e., that there are universal moral standards that apply to all cultures and epochs. These

standards were regarded as “natural” because they are based upon a universal human nature, or the ends of nature itself, and because they do not rest on the positive laws and traditions established in a specific state. The natural law tradition assumed, therefore, either that there is a uniform human nature throughout the flux of history, or that there is a universal human reason to sanction the same moral values for all epochs and cultures.

It is telling that the leading nineteenth-century historicists—Ranke, Droysen, Savigny, Dilthey and Simmel—self-consciously and explicitly rejected the natural law tradition. While this tradition was still alive in some respects in Herder, Möser and Humboldt, who all use the idiom of natural law, they were also very critical of it. All thinkers in the historicist tradition held that the doctrine of natural law had illegitimately universalized the values of eighteenth-century Europe as if they held for all epochs and cultures. To know the values of a culture or epoch, they argued, it is necessary to study it from within, to examine how these values have evolved from its history and circumstances. The more we examine values historically, the more we see that their purpose and meaning depends entirely on their specific context, on their precise role in a social-historical whole. Since these contexts are unique and incommensurable, so are the values within them; it therefore becomes impossible to make generalizations about what values everyone ought to have, regardless of social and historical context.

Crucial to the Enlightenment's attempt to rationalize the world was its program of political modernization, especially its efforts toward bureaucratic centralization and legal codification. The enlightened policies of Friedrich II in Prussia, of Joseph II in Austria, and of the revolutionary government in France, strived to create and impose a single uniform legal code valid for all cities, localities and regions within an empire; the old chaotic patchwork of local and regional customs and laws were to be abolished for the sake of a single rational constitution. These efforts at legal codification went hand-in-hand with political centralization, the attempt to govern and administer all parts of a country by a single ruler and bureaucracy. Local self-government and regional autonomy were to be eradicated as relics of the medieval past.

The historicist tradition began as a resistance movement to this program. Against the Enlightenment's attempt to create legal uniformity and central control, the early historicists (Möser, Herder, Savigny) defended the value of local autonomy and legal diversity. Against the Enlightenment's cosmopolitanism, they stressed the value of having local roots, of belonging to a particular time and place. Thus the principle of individuality had not only an epistemological but also a moral and political meaning: that locality and nationality, as the very source of personal identity, is to be cherished and preserved at all costs. Later historicists (Droysen, Simmel and Weber) believed in the inevitability of the centralized national state; but they were not cosmopolitans and only widened the locus of belonging to include the entire nation.

4. The problem of historical knowledge

Apart from its break with the Enlightenment, there is another reason that historicism marks an intellectual revolution: the attempt to justify history as a science rejected a paradigm of knowledge going back to antiquity. That paradigm, as laid down by Aristotle in the *Posterior Analytics*, states that science consists in “demonstrable knowledge,” where demonstration consists in “an inference from necessary premises.”²⁴ To know a proposition to be true, Aristotle held, it has to be valid conclusion of a syllogism, all of whose premises are universally and necessarily true, i.e., such that they are true in all cases and cannot be otherwise.²⁵ Clearly modeled around mathematics, Aristotle's ideal of science is scarcely applicable to history. When measured by such strict standards, history proves to be far from science. Since the subject matter of history is particular, this or that person or event, and since it is also contingent, such that it is logically possible for it to be otherwise, it lacks the universality and necessity required of Aristotle's ideal. Aristotle himself had drawn just this conclusion. It was chiefly for this reason that he placed history below even poetry as a form of knowledge.²⁶ Whereas the historian could say only what a particular person did at a particular time, the poet at least could inform us about something more universal: what a certain *kind* of person would do under a certain *kind* of circumstances.

The stigma against history endured well into the early modern era. Despite the reaction against scholasticism, Aristotle's ideal of science lived on in some of the major minds of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Descartes, Hobbes, Leibniz and Wolff, for example, upheld Aristotle's model of science as demonstrable knowledge. They insisted that science consists in a system of provable propositions, all of which are derived from definitions or self-evident premises. To have scientific status, a proposition must have a universal and necessary validity, so that all empirical propositions, including historical ones, are not knowledge in the strict sense. On such grounds these thinkers duly banished history from the realm of science. Hence Descartes, in his *Discours de la Méthode*, warned that even the most accurate histories should play no role in the foundation of knowledge.²⁷ And Hobbes, in his *De Corpore*, excluded history from philosophy “because such knowledge is but experience, or authority, and not ratiocination.”²⁸ Leibniz and Wolff too were explicit that history, because it dwells in the realm of particularity and contingency, cannot have the status of science.²⁹ Common historical knowledge is the lowest grade of knowledge, Wolff once wrote,

because it depends on the senses and gives us no insight into the reasons for things.³⁰ For the early modern rationalists, then, there is a chasm between the realm of science and history. The historian remained firmly chained in the depths of Plato's cave.

In an important respect the age of Enlightenment of the eighteenth century only deepened the problem of legitimating historical knowledge. The foremost value of the Enlightenment was intellectual autonomy, thinking for oneself. To think for ourselves, we must regulate our assent according to our insight, accepting only those propositions that we can confirm by our own reasoning or experience. We should never accept a proposition simply on trust or faith, on the basis of authority alone. Here again history seemed to fail these basic demands. For it is impossible to test its propositions by my own experience, let alone by my own reasoning. The problem is that history is about the past, and the past is no more, lying beyond the experience of everyone. While it is possible to repeat the experience required by the natural sciences, it is impossible to repeat the unique and singular events or actions of history. Hence history *per necessitatem* has to be based on testimony, trust and faith in the reports of others. All the more reason to think, therefore, that history, by its very nature, cannot be a science.

For all its sweeping changes, Kant's Copernican Revolution was not a complete break with the past. Though a sharp critic of rationalism, Kant still upheld its ideal of science. His endorsement of the rationalist ideal is perfectly explicit when he states that science consists in a system organized around self-evident principles.³¹ His allegiance to the mathematical ideal of the rationalist tradition was also unwavering. It appears in the preface to his *Metaphysische Anfangsgründe der Naturwissenschaften* when he declares that a discipline is scientific just to the extent that its subject matter permits mathematical treatment.³²

How did the historicists respond to these challenges? How did they attempt to vindicate the scientific status of history in the face of Kant, the Enlightenment and the rationalist legacy? There were many different responses, all of them complex and intricate, which we will discuss more fully in later chapters. Here we sketch only an overview of some major developments.

Already in the late seventeenth century one line of response was clear. Infected by the new rationalist spirit, many early modern historians in France and Holland, viz., Pierre Bayle, Jean Baptiste Dubot and Lenglet du Fresnoy, began to demand higher standards of proof in history itself.³³ These "historical Pyrrhonians" applied Descartes' method of doubt to history. They were skeptical of the traditional sources, which they

would accept only insofar as sufficient evidence could be provided for them. All sources had to be authenticated, as far as possible, by going back to their origins and checking them against originals in archives. Just as Descartes once established rules for scientific method, so there were now rules of historical method, viz., accept only those reports that had been written by eye witnesses, that could be confirmed by other contemporary accounts, that were consistent with other testified facts, and so on. Historians now realized that the simple humble fact was more a goal than a starting point of enquiry. This new rationalist spirit in history grew slowly throughout the eighteenth century, until by the end of the century it had become the norm, not least in Germany itself. The academies of Munich, Mannheim and Göttingen, for example, now demanded that, before acceptance for publication, all historical works had to be based on a thorough study of the sources, and that these sources had to be cited in the work itself.³⁴ The historicists of the late eighteenth and nineteenth century in Germany were all champions of this new rationalist spirit. Its greatest exemplar in the nineteenth century was Ranke, who was simply the symbol and culmination of a long tradition.

Another line of response was inspired by Bacon, who, in the beginning of the seventeenth century, spearheaded the reaction against the Aristotelian tradition and its demonstrative paradigm of knowledge. In his *Novum Organon* Bacon attacked the demonstrative paradigm as an ineffective means for the investigation of nature. While demonstration is a useful tool for the exposition and organization of knowledge that is already acquired, it is useless as a method for the discovery of new knowledge. To make discoveries, we must do more than simply reason about nature; we must go directly to her and force her to answer our questions, i.e., we must conduct experiments. We will know something about nature if we have the power to take her apart and then to put her back together again. Hence knowing nature is not just a matter of thinking but of acting: "human knowledge and human power meet in one."³⁵ The skeptic's doubt that we can know nature could be countered with the simple fact that we have power over her, that we can make her do our bidding.³⁶ Bacon succeeded in discrediting the old demonstrative paradigm not least because he showed its vulnerability to skepticism. As a critique of that paradigm, the skeptic's attack on knowledge is unanswerable, for it shows correctly that nature cannot be known through reasoning or demonstration alone.

Although Bacon was tireless in stressing the social and political benefits of his new method, he saw it chiefly as a means to investigate nature. Seeing its significance and application to the human world was the contribution of Giambattista Vico's 1725 *Scienza Nuova*. It was Vico's great discovery that Bacon's paradigm applies to the

human world even more than the natural one.³⁷ The social and political world should be perfectly intelligible to us, Vico argued, for the simple reason that it is our own creation. While human beings can know little of the natural world, because they make so little of it, they can know much of the cultural world because its laws, languages, institutions and arts are their own productions. Though Vico's work was little known in Germany, the Baconian paradigm behind it was spread through another powerful agent: Kant. Bacon's paradigm was nothing less than the spirit behind Kant's "new method of thought." In the preface to his *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* Kant had made *a priori* knowledge the paradigm of all knowledge, and contended that we know objects *a priori* only to the extent that we make them.³⁸ Our own knowing activity is transparent to ourselves, he argued, so that we know things to just the degree that we produce them. It was indeed not for nothing that Kant made a citation from Bacon's *Instauratio Magna* the motto for his work.

So, despite Kant's persistent rationalism, despite his ahistorical conception of reason, and despite his complete lack of "historical sense," his philosophy still had a revolutionary significance for the new human sciences after all. That significance came from its Baconian paradigm of knowledge. Though Kant himself did not foresee the application of his principle to the social and cultural world, its implications were clear enough for later generations. Humboldt, Ranke, Droysen, Rickert, Lazarus, Lask, Dilthey, Simmel and Weber all applied Kantian principles to historical knowledge itself. The new Kantian paradigm seemed to unlock, at least in principle, the entire human world, past and present. We can understand the human world, they believed, for the simple reason that we have made it, and whatever we create is perfectly transparent to ourselves. By the same token we also have the power to understand the past because we have the capacity to relive it, to engage in the same creative activities as people once did before us.

As important as Bacon's paradigm was for the new up-and-coming science of history, it still was not sufficient to justify its scientific status. After all, we, the present generation, do not create *all* the past; indeed, we are the heirs of a massive inheritance, a powerful apparently alien force that shapes the present and the world in which we now live. How, then, do we know that past, the one that we do not create and that creates us? It is in just this respect, however, that historicism once again shows itself to be revolutionary. Historicism involves a completely new attitude toward the past, one that makes the past part of the living present rather than something lost and gone forever. For the historicist, the past is not something alien to us but it lies deep inside us; it does not disappear but remains present with us here and now, for it is the past that has made us who we are. Behind this new attitude toward the past was the new holistic anthropology of historicism, the anthropology developed by Herder, Möser, Savigny

and Humboldt, which reacted against the individualism or atomism so characteristic of the Enlightenment. According to that older anthropology, the individual has a fixed nature and identity independent of its specific culture, its particular place in society and history; the individual remains essentially the same even if its culture changes, and even if we move it to a different place in society and history. The past does not live on inside the individual because history plays no role in forming his identity. According to the new historicist anthropology, however, the individual's very identity depends upon its specific culture, its precise place in society and history. The past therefore lives on inside us, having made us who we are. This new anthropology means that we can determine who we are only by returning to our origins and roots. To recover the past, then, we only have to retrace the steps by which we came into being, to unravel what is already within us.

But even granting this point, a skeptic would say, does not justify bestowing scientific status upon history. For even if we admit that history makes us who we are, we are still in no better position to determine what actually happened in the past. After all, we cannot know the past simply through introspection. We cannot escape the fact that knowledge of the past is painful detective work, a matter of making sense of a few scraps of information, of reconstructing the odd bits and pieces of evidence that we find in records and remains. But any such reconstruction, it seems, is far from the certainty required by science. Here again, though, the historicist was ready with a reply to this kind of skepticism. This response was first formulated by Chladenius in the 1750s, and his line of reasoning in many respects represents the tradition as a whole. In his 1751 *Allgemeine Geschichtswissenschaft* Chladenius had argued against the historical Pyrrhonist that historical enquiry has its own *sui generis* standards of knowledge, and that it should be measured by them alone rather than some unattainable standard of demonstration. While historical knowledge is indeed often uncertain, it makes no sense to doubt it wholesale simply because it is indemonstrable; history is not mathematics, and we should not expect it to be so. As Aristotle once said, we must expect no more exactitude of a discipline than its subject matter permits.³⁹ Of course, we can doubt many historical propositions, but that is because they do not conform to the standards of evidence appropriate to history, and not because we cannot prove it *more geometrico*. Chladenius explained in great detail the specific rules that the historian would follow in assembling and assessing evidence. These rules ensured standards and rigor; and if followed, they could provide the historian with sufficient certainty about his subject matter, or at least the certainty that he could not have certainty, which is also a token of science.

5. Social and historical context

The fundamental principle of historicism is that all human actions and ideas have to be explained historically according to their specific historical causes and context. That principle is self-reflexive, of course, applying to historicism itself. It too is intelligible only if we place it within its specific social and historical context.

Whatever the deeper cultural and political sources of historicism, its immediate social and historical context was set by the institutions in which history was learned and taught, i.e., the universities. The attempt by historicists to justify the scientific status of history reflects the struggle in German universities, which goes back to the sixteenth century, to make history an independent faculty. If history were a science, the historicists believed, it should have the same status and prestige as other disciplines, and so it too should be an autonomous faculty.

For the historicists, much was at stake in this struggle. It was not only a question of status and prestige; it was also a matter of liberating themselves from servitude. For centuries in Germany, history had to serve as a handmaiden to other disciplines, especially theology and law. If, however, history were autonomous, it would finally have the right to pursue its own agenda, independent of the research goals of other disciplines. No less important, it could make a claim to funding. After the reform of the universities in the post-Napoleonic era, scientific status became indispensable to claim government support. The ethic of *Wissenschaft* was the *raison d'être* of the entire modern university system.⁴⁰

Ever since the late Middle Ages, history had a humble place in German universities.⁴¹ The faculties of the medieval university had a hierarchical structure, where history played a minor role at the lowest level. There were three “higher faculties”—law, medicine and theology—where theology stood at the top of the pyramid, followed (in descending order) by law and medicine. At the base of the pyramid there lay “the lower faculty”: philosophy. “Philosophy” was then a composite name for many different disciplines. It comprised the traditional liberal arts, which were divided into the *trivium* (grammar, rhetoric and logic) and the *quadrivium* (arithmetic, geometry, music and astronomy). The purpose of the higher faculties was to give vocational training, whereas the aim of the liberal arts was to give the student a general education in his first years. Since their aim was to prepare the student for the higher faculties, the liberal arts were essentially cast in a service role. As a small part of one of the liberal arts, history was a very minor servant, an *appendentia artium*. History was part of the *trivium* because it was

generally regarded as a part of rhetoric. Although the subsumption of history under rhetoric appears strange by modern standards, it is easily comprehensible once we consider the general humanist practice of teaching through classical texts. The chief sources of history were classical authors—Herodotus, Thucydides, Livy and Caesar—and understanding their texts required considerable philological expertise. And so it was that professors of history were usually professors of rhetoric or even poetry.

The study of history in German universities was introduced by humanists in the late fifteenth century.⁴² They saw history as an integral part of a person's general education. This was not least because the classical historians were good models of style, for learning how to speak and write Latin well. Tacitus and Livy were as imitable as Ovid and Horace. The humanists' chief argument for studying history was, however, moral. The ancient historians taught moral precepts by means of examples. They showed the good consequences of right actions, the terrible consequences of wrong ones, and so encouraged the student to follow virtue and shun vice.

Still, these were only reasons for studying *pagan* history. The main reason for learning history in the early modern era was, of course, religious. Since history unfolded according to divine design, studying it was a means of understanding providence, the ways of God on earth. Such was Melanchthon's justification for the study of history, which he made an essential part of the liberal arts curriculum in Protestant universities.⁴³

Whether for moral or religious reasons, history in the post-Reformation era was not studied for its own sake but essentially for pedagogical reasons. There was little reason or incentive to engage in critical historical enquiry. Since the texts studied already had classical or sacred status, their truth or value was taken for granted. Not surprisingly, professors of history regarded themselves more as pedagogues than scholars.

Although it was not studied for its own sake, and although it had a lowly status in the university curriculum, the study of history was still valued in the early modern era. From the beginning of the seventeenth century, it was generally assumed, for sacred or secular reasons, that history is an invaluable guide to life, a *magistra vitae* as Cicero called it. In the period between Melanchthon's death (1560) and the onset of the Thirty Years War (1618), history had acquired a definite place within the curriculum, and its role was even expanding.⁴⁴ There was a history professor in all universities, whether Protestant or Catholic. Although the history professorship was usually coupled with rhetoric or poetry, there were in some Protestant universities even independent chairs in history within the philosophy faculty. Rostock, Wittenberg and Heidelberg all had separate chairs, and the new University of Helmstedt had even two. One of the most fruitful developments for the study of history was that Melanchthon made universal

history into a regular part of the curriculum in Protestant universities.⁴⁵ Universal history then became the basis for instruction in history; well into the nineteenth century Ranke would give lectures on the subject.

The prestige of history improved greatly in the eighteenth century.⁴⁶ Though still seen as a liberal art, history found an increased role in theology and jurisprudence. It became a specialty within the theological and legal faculties, so that they had their own chairs of history. Theological faculties established chairs of ecclesiastical history, legal faculties chairs for legal history. It was especially in the law faculties that history prospered. There had always been the closest connection between law and history: precedents had to be studied, titles to property investigated, claims to nobility authenticated; understanding Roman law required knowledge of Roman history and culture, while understanding German customary law demanded study of the Middle Ages. The alliance of history with law had already become explicit and official after the Thirty Years War (1648).⁴⁷ The new structure of the Holy Roman Empire gave rise to a wealth of legal cases whose settlement required careful historical enquiry. That trend grew apace in the eighteenth century with the expansion of the territorial states. When the administration of these states grew, so did the need for more trained lawyers and bureaucrats. Since universities had to meet the needs of the state, law faculties had to expand, and with them the need for historical research. And so, by the middle of the eighteenth century, the University of Göttingen, the most modern university in Germany, had established several chairs of history within its legal faculty.

Although the status of history had grown in the eighteenth century, it still had no autonomy, no research agenda of its own. Its status was essentially that of a handmaiden or *Hilfswissenschaft* to theology and jurisprudence. There were still no independent faculties of history. Though there were indeed independent chairs, they were never joined together to form a single department.⁴⁸

With all the upheavals of the revolutionary era (1789–1814), the fate of history improved dramatically. The winds of political change swept over the universities. Napoleon abolished many of the traditional universities, and the few remaining ones had to modernize quickly to survive. Regarding the purpose and structure of the modern university, a new revolutionary doctrine arose. The leading theorists of educational reform in the 1790s and early 1800s—Kant, Fichte, Schelling, Schleiermacher and Humboldt—made philosophy the supreme faculty in the organization of the

university.⁴⁹ This was a virtual reversal of the traditional order: the lower faculty now became the highest!⁵⁰ Philosophy was accorded such stature for various reasons: it alone was critical while other faculties rested on authority; it alone gave a systematic grasp of the whole extent of knowledge; it alone could teach people scientific thinking as such. The ascent of philosophy to supreme place in the hierarchy meant a corresponding elevation for its old appendage. History, once the aid of the lower faculty, now became the page of the highest. It is noteworthy that the reformers placed history on the same level as the natural sciences, which had been growing in prestige since the seventeenth century. Many reasons were also given for the new place of history in the academic hierarchy: history was the basis for understanding human nature; history was integral to philology, which was crucial to critical thinking; history, along with nature, was one of the two appearances of the absolute; history was the tool of national memory, the means of preserving traditions and values destroyed by the Revolution; and so on. Whatever the reason, all these reformers were in accord that history is worth studying for its own sake, and that it should not simply serve as an aid to church or state. It was Schiller who spoke best for a new more idealistic generation when he belittled the *Brotwissenschaften*—the old professional schools of theology, law and medicine—and stressed the intrinsic value of history, which alone held the key to understanding human beings.⁵¹ While there was a wide gap between the reformers' theories and reality,⁵² their thinking still indicates an important change in mentality, a new attitude toward history. The idea that history is a science in its own right, having its own standards and methods and worth pursuing for its own sake, became more and more of a reality in the course of the nineteenth century.

The model university for the reform movement of the early nineteenth century was the new University of Berlin, which was inaugurated in 1810. It was fortunate for history that the minister in charge of the new university was Wilhelm von Humboldt, one of the leading historical thinkers of his age who happened to see history as the queen of the sciences.⁵³ It was in Berlin that history became for the first time a faculty in its own right, independent of theology and law. The first professor of history there was Barthold Georg Niebuhr (1776–1831), who gave his first lectures in the winter semester of 1810. By all accounts, Niebuhr's lectures, on Roman history, were a

triumph, inaugurating a new era for history.⁵⁴ From then on, almost without interruption until the end of the century, Berlin would offer lectures on the theory and methods of history.⁵⁵

Yet history's struggle for recognition and liberation was not over. Its deliverer now threatened to become its new master. While philosophy had liberated history from the shackles of theology and law, it posed the danger of a new form of servitude. It was not that philosophy wanted to lay down the agenda for historical research; it was more than happy to grant history autonomy in its choice of subject matter. The problem was that the philosophers—Schiller, Fichte, Schelling and Hegel—had little idea of, or appreciation for, the distinctive methods and goals of historical research. They saw history as part of philosophy, and they could conceive it only as the philosophy of history. So now the danger of servitude was one of form or method instead of content or agenda. Just as it had once freed itself from theology and law, history would have to liberate itself from philosophy. This last struggle for autonomy would take place throughout the nineteenth century when Savigny, Ranke, Droysen and Dilthey defended the *sui generis* status of history and rebelled against the idealist philosophy of history.

The struggle for autonomy and recognition finally came to fruition in the later half of the nineteenth century. Now there were not only chairs for history but independent faculties organized according to historical categories (ancient, medieval and modern). The old chairs for history in theology and law seceded and became elements of the history faculties themselves. In a telltale sign of the growing scientific status of the discipline, more than half of the German universities now offered lectures on "*Historik*," i.e., the methods and standards of historical research.⁵⁶ The golden years of German historicism were from 1850 until the late 1880s.⁵⁷ History enjoyed greater prestige than ever before, and it was regarded as a science no less than chemistry or biology. And so it was that the nineteenth century became the age of history just as the eighteenth had been that of reason.

6. The crisis of historicism?

In 1921 Ernst Troeltsch wrote a popular article for the *Deutsche Rundschau* with the catchy and dramatic title "Die Krise des Historismus."⁵⁸ The idea that historicism was in a crisis, that it was heading for self-destruction, proved infectious. Since Troeltsch's

article appeared, the crisis of historicism has been a regular trope in discussions of this topic. It is as if it were an incontestable fact that historicism somehow collapsed and disappeared during the first decades of the twentieth century. The only problem, it seems, is to explain the reasons for this puzzling fact.

It is necessary to ask, however, if there really was a crisis of historicism after all. Although historicism ceased to be a dominant force in German intellectual life after the 1920s, there are reasons to doubt that its demise had anything to do with a crisis, some deep tragic flaw hidden within the tradition itself. If there were a crisis, that had to do with the problems historicism created for its critics rather than any inherent problem of historicism itself. Troeltsch saw a crisis in historicism chiefly because it threatened his own conservative religious views. Talking about a crisis of historicism was a clever rhetorical device for foisting his own spiritual crisis upon his enemy. The reasons for doubting the objective existence of this crisis grow when we note that there are many theories about the crisis of historicism. There are as many crises of historicism, it turns out, as there are objections to historicism itself. A quick survey of secondary literature will find at least five different versions.

Which of these theories is correct? All of them and none. All of them, because they all point to real problems in the historicist tradition; none of them, because they cannot explain the disappearance of the historicist tradition. Behind all accounts of the crisis of historicism there was the tacit assumption that historicism disappeared because of some deep tragic flaw or inconsistency. But, as we have seen, there is no unanimity about this flaw or inconsistency; and even if there were such agreement, there is no reason to believe that historicism would disappear because of it. Since when does an intellectual movement disappear simply because of intellectual or theoretical difficulties alone?

There is, however, a much simpler explanation for the decline of historicism. Here we only need to recall the original project behind historicism: to have history recognized as a science. In attempting to achieve this goal the historicists were remarkably

successful, at least in the sense that history became an autonomous faculty in universities, a recognized academic subject having the same prestige as the natural sciences. Skeptics only need to consider the remarkable rise of history as an academic discipline in Germany since the movement began in the middle of the eighteenth century. So the reason for historicism's demise is simple: having achieved what it set out to do, historicism did not need to exist anymore. On this reading, historicism was not an abject failure but an astonishing success. Indeed, since it continues to exercise such enormous influence, it never really died at all. It continues to live in all of us, and it is fair to say that, as heirs of Meinecke's revolution, we are all historicists today.

Notes:

- (1) Friedrich Meinecke, *Die Entstehung des Historismus*, in *Werke*, eds. Hans Herzfeld, Carl Hinrichs and Walther Hofer (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1965), III, 1.
- (2) On the history of the term, there are many useful sources. See Dwight Lees and Robert Beck, "The Meaning of 'Historicism'," *American Historical Review* 59 (1953–54), pp. 568–77; Gunter Scholtz, "Historizismus" in *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie* (Stuttgart: Schwabe & Co., 1974), III, 1141–7; Christopher Thornhill, "Historicism" in the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1998), IV, 443–6; Georg Iggers, "Historicism" in *Dictionary of the History of Ideas* (New York: Scribner, 1973), II, 456–64; Erich Rothacker, "Historismus," in *Schmollers Jahrbuch* 62 (1938), 388–99, and by the same author "Das Wort 'Historismus,'" *Zeitschrift für deutsche Wortforschung* 16 (1960), 3–6.
- (3) Karl Popper has used the term in the first sense. See his *The Poverty of Historicism* (London: Routledge, 1961), p. 3. Popper's usage has been especially common in the Anglophone world. See, for example, Simon Blackburn, *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 174. It has been above all Meinecke who has used the term in the second sense. See his *Die Entstehung des Historismus*, pp. 1–10.
- (4) Ernst Troeltsch, *Der Historismus und seine Probleme*, in *Gesammelte Schriften* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1922), III, 102.
- (5) See Meinecke, *Historismus*, pp. 1–10, and Troeltsch, *Historismus und seine Probleme*, pp. 103–6, 372–5, 381. I accepted this distinction in my earlier article "Historicism," *The Oxford Handbook of Continental Philosophy*, eds. Brian Leiter and Michael Rosen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 155–79. For the reasons stated above, I now reject this distinction.
- (6) Meinecke and Troeltsch connected the natural-scientific model of explanation exclusively with positivism, which became an intellectual force only in the 1840s. See, for example, Troeltsch, *Historismus und seine Probleme*, pp. 371–5. They thereby underestimated the importance of the "science of man" project for Herder, Möser and Humboldt. The influence of this project of the Scottish Enlightenment on German thinkers has been the theme of much recent historical research. See below, chapter 3, section 2, and chapter 4, section 6.
- (7) See Meinecke, *Entstehung des Historismus*, pp. 155, 369, 595; and Troeltsch, *Historismus und seine Probleme*, pp. 277–313. Both emphasize that these principles have their origins in a vitalist metaphysics, whether Leibnizian (Meinecke) or Schellingian (Troeltsch). While such a metaphysics indeed plays an important role in the early stages of historicism, it becomes less central in later stages; indeed, there was a reaction against it. Holism is still salient in the work of Dilthey, Simmel and Weber; but it is more methodological than metaphysical.
- (8) The classic study is Pierre Duhem, *Le système du monde: histoire des doctrines cosmologiques de Platon à Copernic* (Paris: Hermann, 1954–73). For a discussion of this issue, see Frederick Copleston, *A History of Philosophy: Late Medieval and Renaissance Philosophy* (New York: Doubleday, 1963), III, 165–9; and E.J. Dijksterhuis, *The Mechanization of the World Picture* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961), pp. 164–70.
- (9) Aristotle, *Metaphysics* Book V, 11, 1018b, 30–6; Book IX, 8, 1050a, 3–20.
- (10) No one has done more to perpetrate these misconceptions than Karl Popper, who sees essentialism as definitive of historicism. See especially his *The Poverty of Historicism*, pp. 26–34. See also *The Open Society and its Enemies* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1950), pp. 34–6, 206–18. Popper's attribution of essentialism to Simmel and Weber, p. 485n30, shows that he has failed to study them.
- (11) To ascribe a common goal or agenda to these figures does not mean that they formed a *self-conscious* movement or tradition. It is necessary to stress that the concept of historicism, as the designation of a specific intellectual tradition, is strictly an anachronism, an historian's reconstruction. Many thinkers who belonged in this tradition would not have called

themselves “historicists”; indeed, toward the end of the nineteenth century, when the word came “historicism” came into general use and acquired derogatory connotations, some utterly repudiated the label. This was the case for Dilthey, Simmel, Windelband, Rickert and Lask, who equated “historicism” with “relativism”.

(12) Johannes Hoffmeister, “*Wissenschaft*” in *Wörterbuch der philosophischen Begriffe* (Hamburg: Meiner, 1955), pp. 673–4.

(13) This is the mistake of Hans-Georg Gadamer. He attributes to the historicist tradition a crude positivistic conception of science. For he argues that the historicist tradition, despite its attempt to develop a *sui generis* historical method, was still deeply influenced by the methods of the natural sciences in accepting the ideal of objective and impersonal knowledge. See his *Wahrheit und Methode*, in *Gesammelte Werke* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1990), I, 13, 235–6, 340, 344, 378–9. It was, however, only Ranke who came close to espousing such an ideal, and even he never understood it in the naive sense that Gadamer imagines. See below chapter 6, sections 4–6. Chladenius's perspectivalism, which had an important influence on the historicist tradition, already undermined the positivist conception of history. Gadamer, however, never came to terms with Chladenius's doctrine. See below chapter 1, section 2. Gadamer's understanding of historicism is especially implausible considering that Droysen, Simmel and Weber explicitly repudiated the positivist conception of objectivity. The neo-Kantians were also highly critical of positivist conceptions of science, though Gadamer fails to do them justice. He has the same untenable reading of the neo-Kantians, whom he charges with a naive “objectivism”. See his remarks to the “Vorwort zur 2. Auflage” in *Gesammelte Werke* II, 439, and his comment in “Hermeneutik und Historismus,” *ibid.*, II., 388. Unfortunately, Gadamer inherited Heidegger's antipathy to the neo-Kantians and never saw beyond it.

(14) In the introduction to his *Philosophy of History: An Introduction* (London: Hutchinson, 1951), pp. 9–14, W.H. Walsh took Herder, Hegel and Spengler as his chief examples of the German historicist tradition and described its central concern as the development of a speculative philosophy of history. Walsh's work was very popular and successful, going through two editions and many printings. Its influence in forming Anglophone perceptions of the historicist tradition cannot be underestimated.

(15) On the role of Gatterer and Schlözer in the development of a scientific history, see Hermann Wesendonck, *Die Begründung der neueren deutschen Geschichtsschreibung durch Gatterer und Schlözer* (Leipzig: Krüger, 1976), and Herbert Butterfield, *Man on His Past* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1955) pp. 39–61.

(16) This is Popper's concept of historicism. See his *The Poverty of Historicism*, p. 3.

(17) See Maurice Mandelbaum, *History, Man & Reason* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1971), p. 42.

(18) This concept of historicism is developed by Meinecke, *Die Entstehung des Historismus*, pp. 1–10; Troeltsch, *Der Historismus und seine Probleme*, pp. 27–67, 102–10; Karl Mannheim, “Historismus,” *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik* 52 (1924), 1–60; and Georg Iggers, *The German Conception of History* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1968), pp. 3–42.

(19) This is the position of Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, I, 203.

(20) Thus Meinecke and Gadamer regard Herder and Humboldt as fathers of historicism, though they developed a naturalistic program at odds with their anti-naturalistic conception of historicism. Iggers holds that organicism and idealism are constitutive of the historicist tradition; but he then discusses at length Windelband and Rickert, who were critical of organicist conceptions of society and the state.

(21) See, for example, Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1951), pp. 197–233; Hans Peter Reill, *The German Enlightenment and the Rise of Historicism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), pp. 2–3; Friedrich Jaeger and Jörn Rüsen, *Geschichte des Historismus* (Munich: Beck, 1992), pp. 10–11; and Herbert Schnädelbach, *Geschichtsphilosophie nach Hegel* (Freiburg: Alber, 1974), pp. 27–8.

(22) To no small degree Meinecke's critics have been charging against open doors. They have criticized Meinecke for a point he would never have questioned, and that he indeed went to great pains to demonstrate: that historicism has its roots in the historiography of the Enlightenment. This could be regarded even as the central thesis of Meinecke's *Die Entstehung des Historismus*, which traces the origins of historicism back to its roots in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

(23) Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Enlightenment*, pp. 3–36.

(24) Aristotle, *Posterior Analytics*, Book I, chapter 3, 73a.

(25) *Ibid.*, Book I, chapter 5, 74b; Book I, chapter 8, 75b.

(26) *Poetics* 1451a36 and *Metaphysics* A981a.

(27) Descartes, *Oeuvres de Descartes*, eds. C. Adam and P. Tannery (Paris: Vrin, 1964–76), VI, 6–7. See too *Regulae ad Directionem Ingenii*, X, 366–7.

(28) Hobbes, *De Corpore*, Chapter 1, sec. 8.

(29) See Leibniz, *Novus methodus discendae docendaeque jurisprudentiae* §32, in *Sämtliche Schriften und Briefe*, ed. Prussian Academy of Sciences (Darmstadt: Reichl, 1930) VI/1, 284; and Wolff, *Philosophia rationalis sive logica* §7, in *Gesammelte Werke*, eds. J. Ecolle et al. (Hildesheim: Olms, 1968), II/1, 3.

(30) Wolff, *Philosophia rationalis* §22, *Werke* II/1, 10.

(31) Kant, KrV, B 3–4, 90, 860–1.

(32) Kant, *Schriften*, IV, 470.

(33) On this development, see Ernst Cassirer, *Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, pp. 197–223; Andreas Kraus, *Vernunft und Geschichte: Die Bedeutung der deutschen Akademien für die Entwicklung der Geschichtswissenschaft im Späten 18. Jahrhundert* (Freiburg: Herder, 1963), pp. 105–17; and Meta Scheele, *Wissen und Glauben in der Geschichtswissenschaft. Studien zum Historischen Pyrrhonismus in Frankreich und Deutschland* (Heidelberg: Winter, 1930).

(34) Thus Kraus, *Vernunft und Geschichte*, pp. 106–11.

(35) Bacon, *The New Organon*, ed. Fulton Anderson (New York: Macmillan, 1960), p. 39.

(36) On Bacon's response to skepticism, see *The New Organon*, especially “The Great Instauration,” pp. 21, 28, “Preface,” p. 33, and Book I, §lxvii, pp. 65–6.

(37) See *The New Science of Giambattista Vico*, trans. Thomas Bergin and Max Fisch (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1961), §§163, 359, 499, where Vico stresses Bacon's importance for the sciences.

(38) Kant, KrV A xx, B xiii, xviii.

(39) Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book I, chapter 3, 1094b.

(40) On the importance of the *Wissenschaftsethik* in the modern university system, see Charles McClelland, *State, Society and University in Germany 1700–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), pp. 151–61.

(41) On the structure of the late medieval and early modern university, see Notker Hammerstein, *Bildung und Wissenschaft vom 15. bis zum 17. Jahrhundert* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2003). On the place of history in this structure, see Josef Engel, “Die deutschen Universitäten und die Geschichtswissenschaft,” *Historische Zeitschrift* 189 (1959), 223–378.

(42) On the role of the early humanists, see Emil Scherer, *Geschichte und Kirchengeschichte an den deutschen Universitäten* (Freiburg: Herder, 1927), pp. 9–29.

(43) On the role of Melancthon, see Scherer, *Geschichte und Kirchengeschichte*, pp. 29–33, 104–5, 120.

(44) *Ibid.*, p. 103.

(45) *Ibid.*, p. 48–9, 104–5.

(46) On the study of history in eighteenth century Germany, see Kraus, *Vernunft und Geschichte*, pp. 163–205; Konrad Jarausch, “The Institutionalization of History in 18th-Century Germany,” in *Aufklärung und Geschichte*, eds. Hans Bödeker et al. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1986), pp. 25–48; Peter Hanns Reill, “Die Geschichtswissenschaft um die Mitte des 18. Jahrhunderts,” in *Wissenschaften im Zeitalter der Aufklärung* ed. Rudolf Vierhaus (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1985), pp. 163–93; and Theodore Ziolkowski, *Clio the Romantic Muse: Historicizing the Faculties in Germany* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), pp. 11–26.

(47) Scherer, *Geschichte und Kirchengeschichte*, p. 140.

(48) Engel, “Die deutsche Universitäten und die Geschichtswissenschaft,” p. 280.

(49) The basic writings are Kant, *Der Streit der Fakultäten, Schriften*, ed. Prussian Academy of Sciences (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1902f), VII, pp. 1–116; Fichte, *Deducirter Plan einer zu Berlin errichtenden höheren Lehranstalt* (1807), *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. I.H. Fichte (Berlin: Veit, 1845–6), VIII, pp. 95–219; Schelling, *Vorlesungen über die Methode des akademischen Studiums, Sämtliche Werke*, K.F.A. Schelling (Stuttgart: Cotta, 1859), IV, p. 214; Humboldt, “Über die innere und äußere Organisation der höheren wissenschaftlichen Anstalten in Berlin,” in *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Prussian Academy of Sciences (Berlin: Behr, 1903–36), X, pp. 250–60; and Schleiermacher, *Gelegentliche Gedanken über Universitäten in deutschen Sinn*, volume IV *Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, ed. Dirk Schmid (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1998), pp. 15–100.

(50) Engel, “Die deutsche Universitäten und die Geschichtswissenschaft,” p. 288.

(51) See his “Was heisst und zu welchem Zweck studiert man Universalgeschichte?,” *Werke, Nationalausgabe*, ed. Benno von Wiese et al. (Weimar: Böhlau Nachfolger, 1970), XVII, pp. 359–76.

(52) McLelland stresses the gap and warns against assuming too great an efficacy of the reformers' ideas. See *State, Society and University*, pp. 115, 121, 127, 137–8, 147–8.

(53) On Humboldt's reasons for this view, see below, chapter 3, section 10.

(54) On Niebuhr's first lectures, see Ziolkowski, *Clio*, pp. 26–32; and on Niebuhr's general significance, see Heinrich Ritter von Srbik, *Geist und Geschichte vom deutschen Humanismus bis zur Gegenwart* (Salzberg: Otto Müller Verlag, 1960), I, pp. 210–20; and G.P. Gooch, *History and Historians in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Longmans, Green and Co, 1955), pp. 14–23.

(55) On these lectures, see Horst Blanke, Dirk Fleischer and Jörn Rüsen, “Historik als akademische Praxis,” in *Dilthey-Jahrbuch für Philosophie und Geschichte der Geisteswissenschaften I* (1983), pp. 182–255, esp. pp. 218–21.

(56) *Ibid.*, p. 209.

(57) Engel, “Die deutsche Universitäten und die Geschichtswissenschaft,” p. 352.

(58) See his “Die Krise des Historismus,” *Die neue Rundschau* 33 (1922), 572–90. This article is an epitome of his massive *Der Historismus und seine Probleme* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1922).

(⁵⁹) See Schnädelbach, *Philosophy in Germany 1831–1933* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 62–4. For a fuller discussion of Nietzsche in this connection, see Christian Emden, *Friedrich Nietzsche and the Politics of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 129–73.

(⁶⁰) See Jaeger and Rösen, *Geschichte*, pp. 141–6.

(⁶¹) See, for example, Bambach, *Heidegger, Dilthey and the Crisis of Historicism*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995) pp. 1–20; Iggers, *German Conception of History*, pp. 128–9; and Meinecke, “Von der Krisis des Historismus,” in *Werke IV*, pp. 200–1.

(⁶²) Thus Iggers, *German Conception of History*, pp. 124, 133, 141, 143.

Chladenius and the New Science of History

1. The German Vico

The history of historicism should begin with *Johann Martin Chladenius* (1710–59). The name is still unfamiliar in the Anglophone world. There are only passing mentions of him in the standard histories of historiography,¹ and Collingwood ignores him entirely. Only in 1994 did Kurt Mueller-Vollmer provide a short excerpt and translation of some of his writings for *The Hermeneutics Reader*.² Ignorance about Chladenius is understandable, given that, for more than a century, he had virtually lapsed into oblivion. Yet such neglect was also in inverse ratio to his merits and significance. Chladenius had published in 1742 the first systematic treatise in German on hermeneutics, his *Einleitung zur richtigen Auslegung vernünftiger Reden und Schriften*; and in 1752 he published the first systematic treatise in German on historics, *Allgemeine Geschichtswissenschaft*. Chladenius's tragic fate invites comparison with his great Italian counterpart and predecessor, Vico. Both were pioneers in the study of history, both were unduly neglected, only to be rediscovered much later. Chladenius was thus the German Vico.

Chladenius's life was very ordinary, the kind unlikely to lift him from obscurity. Most of his days were spent in the provinces, far from the limelight, and his career was typical of a minor German academic in the early eighteenth century. Chladenius was born in 1710 into a Protestant family in Wittenberg, the little university town that was once the seat of the Reformation. His grandfather was a Protestant clergyman who had fled from Hungary to Germany because of his Protestant faith. His father was also a Protestant clergyman who eventually became professor of theology in Wittenberg, occupying Luther's own *Lehrstuhl*. All his life Chladenius would remain fiercely loyal to the Protestant faith of his forefathers, which, as we shall soon see, became the spiritual force behind his hermeneutics and historics. The young Chladenius received an elite education at the *gymnasium illustre* in Coburg, and in 1725 matriculated at the

University of Wittenberg, where he studied philosophy, philology and theology. After receiving his *Magister* in 1731 Chladenius began to lecture at Wittenberg. Intent on an academic career, he led a precarious existence as a *Privatdozent* there until 1739, when he was finally recommended for the next available professorship in philosophy. In 1742 he became *Professor extraordinarius* in Leipzig, where he taught ecclesiastical history. Now, it seemed, Chladenius had achieved his academic ambitions and could enter into the cultural scene, for Leipzig in the 1740s was the very center of German cultural life. But, for obscure reasons, he left Leipzig in 1744 to become *Rektor* of his *alma mater*, the *Gymnasium illustre* in Coburg. Chladenius returned to university life in 1747, when he was appointed professor of theology at the new university of Erlangen. There he taught theology, poetry and rhetoric until his early death in 1759. After his death all traces of him disappear. No major thinker of the eighteenth century mentions him. Only Ludwig Wachler, in his study of modern historiography, complained about Chladenius's undeserved obscurity.³

Chladenius's fortunes began to change in the late nineteenth century.⁴ In 1889, in his widely used *Lehrbuch der historischen Methode*, Ernst Bernheim declared Chladenius's *Allgemeine Geschichtswissenschaft* to be the first work to develop a systematic epistemology of history. "To my knowledge, the first [thinker] to have attempted to determine the relation of historical method to the theory of knowledge and logic was J.M. Chladenius in his book *Allgemeine Geschichtswissenschaft*; and after him for a long time there was no one."⁵ With these lines Chladenius was rescued from oblivion. Further recognition was not long in coming. First Ernst Müller published in 1917 his biographical study of Chladenius, which still remains the major source on his life.⁶ Then in 1930, in a widely used and respected study of early historical skepticism, Meta Scheele stressed the important role of Chladenius in the battle against historical Pyrrhonism.⁷ Finally, in 1936, in the third volume of his magisterial study of the history of hermeneutics, *Das Verstehen*, Joachim Wach deemed Chladenius nothing less than "the founder of the new historicism".⁸ And with that Chladenius had finally and fully arrived. Though in their studies of the history of historicism Troeltsch and Meinecke

would not mention Chladenius, this was their problem; just because they neglected him, their work was made obsolete. As if to compensate for their shortcomings, Peter Hanns Reill devoted significant attention to Chladenius in his significant study of Enlightenment historiography.⁹

A new chapter in Chladenius's reception began in 1977 with an important article by Reinhart Koselleck.¹⁰ Bernheim, Scheele and Wach had stressed the important role of Chladenius's historicism in developing an epistemology of history. The great achievements of Chladenius lay, in their view, in his analysis of historical discourse and response to historical Pyrrhonism. Koselleck, however, stressed another important and original feature of Chladenius's historicism: his perspectivalism, his doctrine that all history is determined by the specific standpoint of the spectator and the historian. For Koselleck, Chladenius's perspectivalism marked a break with the classical doctrine of historical objectivity, which had been the dominant doctrine since Lucian. Thanks to Chladenius, historians felt liberated, free to accept their own values, commitments and historical context as an integral, proper and necessary element of historical enquiry. With Chladenius, a new historiographic tradition begins, one that stresses the legitimate role of the historian's values and historical standpoint in the construction of history.

To appreciate Chladenius's achievement it is necessary to place him in his immediate historical context, which was largely set by the rise and spread of Wolffianism throughout Protestant Germany. When the young Chladenius came of age in the 1730s Wolffianism had become the predominant philosophy in Protestant universities. To question it was therefore to struggle against the current, to rebel against the prevalent view. The greatest intellectual challenge facing Chladenius came indeed not from skepticism but from Wolff's rationalism. Chladenius himself had endorsed much of Wolff's philosophy, especially its method of exposition and demonstration, which became a standard feature of his major works. But he realized that there lay a severe danger in generalizing the standards of Wolffian rationalism: there could be no place for historical knowledge at all. Wolff had endorsed the old demonstrative paradigm of knowledge: "By science I understand that aptitude of the understanding that demonstrates everything from incontestable premises."¹¹ But by such strict standards history could not be a science at all. Even worse, this would be disastrous for the Protestant faith itself. For, as an orthodox Lutheran, Chladenius believed that faith

rested on Scripture, and indeed in its literal and historical sense. If the record of divine revelation in Scripture could not be known, faith too would rest on a shaky foundation. It was this conflict between Wolffian rationalism and Lutheran orthodoxy that became the chief crux of Chladenius's intellectual development. Resolving it became the guiding motive for both his hermeneutics and historicism.

Such, very crudely, was the challenge Chladenius faced in his early years. Historical Pyrrhonism too was a problem for him, but it fell under the general cloud of Wolffianism, given that the skeptics had simply applied the classical standard of demonstrative certainty to historical texts and found them wanting. Chladenius's response was to defend history as a distinctive form of knowledge having its own *sui generis* standards and methods. He argued that history, like every discipline, has to be measured by its own characteristic criteria, the specific rules necessary to acquire and assess evidence for claims about its subject matter. While much in history is uncertain, there are still definite rules and standards for determining that it is so, and it is these rules and standards that guarantee its scientific status as a discipline. But Chladenius did not rest his case with just these general claims; he rendered his argument plausible by specifying in great detail just what these rules are and how they can be applied in specific cases.

And so it was that Chladenius later became recognized as the father of historicism. He had defended not only the possibility of history as a science, but also the autonomy of history, the independence of its rules and standards from those of the normal logic. It is a mistake to think that this view is anachronistic, as if it were a result not intended by Chladenius.¹² He is all too proud of his originality, all too concerned to lay down the foundations for what he conceives as a new discipline and science. Nevertheless, we must not lose sight of the eighteenth-century figure behind this modern role. For, as we shall soon see, Chladenius, unlike later historicists, made his historicism and hermeneutics the handmaiden of his theology. In the final analysis he reveals himself to be very much a man of his time: an orthodox Lutheran struggling to defend his faith against the onslaught of a new rationalism. He was forgotten not least because, even by early eighteenth-century standards, he was a conservative, fighting a rearguard action against the growing rationalism of his day. It is only by a feat of abstraction, when we take him out of his immediate historical context, that we recognize his significance for the larger historicist movement that would later claim him as one of their own.

2. Foundations of hermeneutics

Before Chladenius's historicism there was his hermeneutics.¹³ A decade before he published his *Allgemeine Geschichtswissenschaft* in 1752 he published his treatise on

hermeneutics in 1742, his *Einleitung zur richtigen Auslegung vernünftiger Reden und Schriften*.¹⁴ Gadamer has rightly warned us against reading Chladenius's hermeneutics as an early form of his historical methodology.¹⁵ The chief concern of the *Einleitung* is to understand texts, not the past. Nevertheless, there is still a close connection between these works: Chladenius's hermeneutics is the foundation for much of his historicism. The longest chapter of the *Einleitung* is devoted to understanding historical texts, which is the basis for most historical research.¹⁶ Furthermore, many themes of the *Allgemeine Geschichtswissenschaft* first appear in the *Einleitung*. It is no accident that Chladenius often refers in the later work to the earlier one.¹⁷

Though in his dedication Chladenius would boast of the novelty of his enterprise, the *Einleitung* was nothing new or revolutionary in the history of hermeneutics. It already had many important precedents in the late seventeenth century, viz., the works of Konrad Dannhauer, J.G. Meister and Johann Heinrich Ernesti.¹⁸ Decades before Chladenius, these authors called for a *secular* hermeneutics, i.e., one devoted to profane works, and a *general* hermeneutics, i.e., one that would interpret all kinds of text; some even proposed making hermeneutics a science in its own right, just as Chladenius would do. The *Einleitung's* chief claim to fame could only be that it was the first systematic treatise on hermeneutics in German.¹⁹

As the title indicates, the *Einleitung* is meant to be only the introduction to a theory of interpretation. This does not mean that Chladenius's aims were primarily pedagogical; they were much too systematic for that.²⁰ The *Einleitung* is intended as an introduction in the sense that it lays down the basic principles of a *general* hermeneutics, i.e., those necessary for the interpretation of *all* texts. It does not determine, however, the specific rules required for the interpretation of certain kinds of texts. Hence Chladenius declines to treat rules for the interpretation of poetry, law or Scripture,

on the grounds that these kinds of text require special principles for their interpretation which it is not the business of a general hermeneutics to describe (b2–b4).²¹

Chladenius informs us in his preface that his aim in writing the *Einleitung* is to make “the art of interpretation” (*Auslege-Kunst*)—or what he also calls “hermeneutics” (§176; 96)—into a “science” (*Wissenschaft*) (a2). Each term has a precise meaning for him. *Interpretation* signifies “bringing to bear all those concepts necessary for a complete understanding of a text” (b1). The *art* of interpretation means the application of the rules necessary for such a complete understanding; and to make this art into a *science* means proving, explaining and systematizing such rules (§176; 96). Chladenius, like most thinkers of his age, does not distinguish between art and science. He uses “art” in the traditional sense of the *ars liberales*, where it signifies the skill to produce anything, be it intellectual or physical.²² Science differs from art only insofar as it provides a more self-conscious and systematic version of its rules.

In his preface Chladenius declares that hermeneutics should be a science in its own right, having its own *sui generis* rules and structure. He complains that the rules of interpretation have become “an appendage” to logic (a3). Though he mentions no names, he almost certainly has in mind Wolff, who sketched his own theory of interpretation in two very short chapters of his *Deutsche Logik*.²³ Wolff saw hermeneutics only as an *application* of logic, i.e., how to think logically in writing, reading and criticizing books. Silently taking issue with Wolff, Chladenius finds good systematic reasons for making hermeneutics into a separate discipline. To be sure, the interpretation of texts is an application of logic; but it is also more than that, because it requires rules that cannot be derived from the laws of formal logic alone.²⁴

What is necessary to establish the scientific status of hermeneutics? There are for Chladenius two fundamental prerequisites. First, hermeneutics should be able to achieve certainty; it is not sufficient that it achieves mere probability. *Wissenschaft* is the business of knowing, and knowing requires nothing less than certainty. We can establish certainty, Chladenius believes, through syllogisms, by inferring valid conclusions from true premises. In the *Einleitung* the classical paradigm of knowledge as demonstration is still in place. Thus, toward the close of the work, Chladenius develops the concept of a “hermeneutical demonstration” which will prove the correct reading

of a text (§§752–3; 596–600). Such demonstrations will show, against all skeptics, that there can be certainty in hermeneutics. Second, hermeneutics must be able to find, explain and systematize its own *sui generis* rules. Chladenius's concern with rules was a hallmark of the Wolffian school, which had made rule-following the very paradigm of rationality.²⁵ Chladenius's call for rules is indeed reminiscent of two other prominent Wolffians in the mid-eighteenth century: Gottsched and Baumgarten. Gottsched strived to make poetics a science, and Baumgarten aspired to make aesthetics a science, by establishing the special rules for these disciplines. What Gottsched did for poetics, what Baumgarten did for aesthetics, that Chladenius would now do for hermeneutics. Like poetics and aesthetics, hermeneutics could become a distinct discipline and science by discovering, justifying and systematizing its *sui generis* rules.

It is ironic that, though he aspires to make hermeneutics independent from logic, Chladenius still clings to the model of logic in his attempt to justify its scientific status. He tells us in his preface that just as logic begins with the simplest parts of discourse (concepts), then proceeds to more complex parts (judgments), and finally reaches the most complex (inferences), so hermeneutics should do the same, starting with the simplest parts of texts and gradually proceeding to the text as a whole (a5). The rationale for this procedure seems self-evident to Chladenius. The attempt to interpret whole texts before their parts would be like the attempt to build a city before one knew how to erect a single house. But, as plausible as this might sound, one need not see things this way. A meaning holist would insist that texts do not have self-sufficient parts like cities have self-standing buildings, but that the text is an indivisible unity where the meaning of each part depends on its place in the whole. It is a revealing feature of Chladenius's hermeneutics that he rejects this holistic view and adopts a more atomistic one, according to which the meaning of a whole is dependent on its self-sufficient parts. In this respect Chladenius was still very much in the rationalist tradition of Leibniz and Wolff, which held that understanding involves analysis, i.e., the dissection of a whole into more basic units.

Granted that hermeneutics should begin with the simplest parts of texts, what are those parts? It is, Chladenius declares, the sentence (a5). Why is it not the word, given that each sentence consists in words? After all, this would be more consistent with the method of logic, which begins with concepts before judgments. Though Chladenius does not explicitly address this point, it is not difficult, given some of his remarks elsewhere, to reconstruct his rationale for beginning with sentences. Most concepts that appear in texts, he writes in Chapter 3 of the *Einleitung*, are already complex and contain implicit judgments (§§144–5; 79–81). Understanding a text is also for Chladenius very much a matter of reconstructing its epistemic basis, the evidence for it; and that evidence has to consist in sentences rather than concepts, because only

sentences have a truth-value; concepts by themselves make no judgments, and so are not true or false (§147; 81).

Whatever his rationale for beginning with sentences, Chladenius uses the distinction between forms of sentence to determine the basic kinds of texts, and so the fundamental parts of hermeneutics. Applying Wolff's distinction between truths of reason and fact, Chladenius maintains that there are two basic kinds of sentence: universal judgments, whose truth is demonstrable by abstract reasoning; and particular judgments, whose truth has to be confirmed by sense experience. Hence there are two fundamental kinds of texts: dogmatic texts (*Lehr-bücher*), which involve universal judgments and abstract reasoning; and historical texts, which involve particular judgments based on experience. The distinction between dogmatic and historical texts was crucial for Wolff, who organized his own hermeneutics around it.²⁶ It was no less fundamental for Chladenius, whose two largest chapters in the *Einleitung* are devoted to the interpretation of historical (Chapter 8) and dogmatic (Chapter 9) texts.

Despite the analogy with logic, Chladenius begins his hermeneutics not, as promised, with an analysis of sentences but with an account of understanding (*Verstehen*). This is perhaps more appropriate, given that understanding is the goal of interpretation. We *understand* (*verstehen*) someone, he explains, when we know from his words what he has thought (§2; 2). Understanding therefore involves comprehending not only what someone said but also what he or she intended to say; it is a matter not only of content but also of use. As his theory unfolds, Chladenius becomes more emphatic and explicit that understanding comprises a grasp of the *intention* of the speaker or writer, not only the meaning of his or her sentences. For Gadamer, this is the mistake of all traditional hermeneutics.²⁷ Though we cannot discuss such a basic question here, we should note the rationale for Chladenius's position. His underlying premise is that the purpose of speech is communication (§1;2), i.e., that people should understand one another through the words that they use. Hence he defines *speech* (*Rede*) as “the activity by which we, by oral means, make known our thoughts to others through words” (§1;2), and he maintains that it can be treated as a form of declaration (*Erklärung*) about someone's opinions (§§262, 265; 150–1; 152). The purpose of speech or writing is thus to make known the speaker's thinking or meaning. From this standpoint, understanding content, or what someone says, is only the means toward the end of communication. Since he is a nominalist,²⁸ Chladenius would reject any attempt to separate content from intention; to assume that there is content independent of the human beings who create and use it would be for him nothing less than hypostasis.

Chladenius's theory of understanding has to be placed in the general psychological framework of his thought, which he inherited from Wolff.²⁹ He saw hermeneutics as part of psychology, and its independence from logic meant for him only that it had its own distinctive place in psychology, "according to the doctrine of the soul" (§177; 97). Hermeneutics, he wrote, is one of those sciences that cannot progress without a more exact knowledge of the soul; and since psychology is still in its infancy, so is hermeneutics (§416; 301). This psychologism went hand-in-hand with Chladenius's nominalism: since meanings exist only in the intentions and activities of speakers and writers, we need to see them as part of psychology. Such "psychologism", a commonplace of the eighteenth century, would be later attacked by Husserl and the neo-Kantians in the nineteenth century. Before we dismiss it as antiquated, however, we should recognize the nominalism that is behind it.³⁰

Chladenius's theory of meaning follows from his general psychological views about understanding. Following Wolff,³¹ Chladenius defines the meaning (*Bedeutung*) of a word as the thought (*der Gedanke*) that we attempt to communicate to others (§80; 39). A word is a sign for a thought, which gives it its meaning (§740; 586–7). Chladenius has a simple psychological theory about the origin of meaning, according to which a word gets its meaning through association (§81; 40).³² According to this theory, we associate words with thoughts through habit, imagination and memory. If in the past we hear a certain sound, or read a certain sign, in connection with a certain thought, we in the future continue to connect that sound or sign with that thought (§81; 40).

Chladenius distinguishes four different forms of meaning: *proper* meaning (*eigentliche Bedeutung, significatio propria*), which is the ordinary and literal meaning of a word (§82; 41); *figurative* (*verblümte*) meaning, viz., metaphors, similes, which consists in the attribution of a property to a thing that it has only partially (§92; 46–7); *accidental* meaning, which arises from context (§129; 72); and finally *common* (*gemeine Bedeutung*) meaning, which is the general sense of a word, that which is defined in a dictionary (§130; 72). Chladenius goes to pains to point out that proper meaning is not the same as common (§130; 72–3). Proper meaning is opposed to figurative only, whereas common is opposed to both figurative and accidental meaning (§130; 72–3).

Chladenius's simplistic classificatory scheme seems to underplay the cultural and historical dimension of meaning. Since his scheme makes context only one source of meaning, and indeed a source that is merely "accidental", it seems as if proper meaning is independent of social and historical context, as if it mysteriously stays the same even if its contexts change.³³ These apparent implications are very misleading, however. For Chladenius explicitly states that even the *proper* meaning of a word changes over time

(§84; 42). He indeed stresses that change of meaning is one of the main sources of difficulty in interpreting ancient writings. If we are not sensitive to how a word changes meaning, he warns, we find ancient texts incomprehensible (§§53, 85; 22, 42–3). Far from ignoring context, Chladenius emphasizes that the meaning of speech depends on its specific situation, i.e., when, where and why something is said, and who says it (§8; 4–5). Another reason why understanding ancient texts is so difficult, he insists, is that their context is not apparent (§31;12). What makes a text old is not its age but loss of context (§37; 14). “Not years but changes in concepts, morals and customs makes a speech old and incomprehensible.” (§39; 16) Chladenius's emphasis on the historical and cultural dimension of meaning also appears when he insists that the proper meaning of many words are unique, scarcely translatable from one language into others (§77; 38). He thinks that this is the main reason foreign books are especially hard to understand.

Having explained the concepts of understanding and meaning in Chapters 1 and 3, Chladenius turns to the all important concept of interpretation in Chapter 4. Interpretation is the art of bringing to bear all the concepts necessary for a complete understanding of a text (§169; 92–3). But what does it mean to understand a text *completely*? “One understands a speech or a writing completely”, Chladenius answers, “when one thinks everything that the words, according to reason and its rules, can stimulate as thoughts in our souls.” (§155; 86). The phrase “everything the words can stimulate as thoughts” seems to sanction an imaginative free-for-all, where anything goes that we associate with a passage; but Chladenius prevents such an interpretative riot by introducing an important qualification: the thoughts must be “according to reason and its rules”, i.e., these thoughts must be in accord with the grammar and vocabulary of the language. Hence his definition means: one understands a speech or writing completely when one has all the thoughts permitted by its grammar and vocabulary. A complete understanding is to have what he later calls a “fruitful understanding”, which is when a speech or writing arouses all kinds of thoughts in us, *though thoughts consistent with its grammar and syntax* (§164; 90).

Prima facie this definition is problematic because such an understanding need not match what the author or speaker intended to say. According to Chladenius's own definition, understanding a sentence is a matter of comprehending what the author thought by its words (§2;2). Chladenius directly addresses this problem in Chapter 4, and his answer to it is crucial for his hermeneutics as a whole. To understand a speech or writing completely, he says, *should be* the same as understanding the speaker or writer completely (§156; 86). Nevertheless, there is often a gulf between what the speaker or writer intends to say and what they have actually said or written (§156; 86–7). Since people do not foresee everything, and since they do not have complete power over a language, they often say or write something they did not intend to say or write; and so readers often misunderstand their intentions, even though they understand their words correctly. Chladenius then concludes that it is necessary to distinguish two things: the meaning of the speaker or author, and the meaning of the speech or writing.

Since Chladenius distinguishes between the author's intention and the meaning of his words, Gadamer thinks he avoids the chief pitfall of romantic hermeneutics.³⁴ But if this is a pitfall, it must be said that Chladenius escapes it only to fall back into it. The distinction between author's intention and meaning made in Chapter 4 plays no significant role in Chladenius's later account of interpretation in Chapter 10. In this later chapter it becomes clear that, though there is sometimes a discrepancy between an author's intention and the meaning of his words, the interpreter has to proceed as if this were not the case. For Chladenius now makes it clear that the *ideal* or *complete* interpretation of a text is one that fully accords with the author's intention. We now learn that the reader should respect the author's intention, and make understanding it the goal of his interpretation. His reading of the text should reach the author's intention but never go beyond it; in other words, the reader must not think more or less than the author intended to say by his words (§696; 541–2). Chladenius reaches this conclusion by going back to his original conception of speech as communication. He makes the following argument: since texts are declarations of the author's opinion, and since their purpose is communication, the interpreter should attempt to understand the author's intention (§694; 540).

Chladenius gives a much fuller account of what he means by “complete understanding” in Chapter 10 of the *Einleitung*, which treats the general properties of interpretation. We now learn that the complete understanding of a text involves three different levels or kinds of understanding (§674; 519). There is first of all the immediate sense (*unmittelbarer Verstand*) of a passage, which is the sense that arises from focusing solely on the meaning of its words. We grasp the immediate sense simply by having mastery of a language, by understanding both its grammar and vocabulary. Then there is the *mediate* (*mittelbarer Verstand*) sense, which arises from “the application” (*Anwendung*) of a passage to our lives. The application Chladenius defines as “the activities our souls perform because we have read a certain book” (§425; 308–9). We know the mediate sense when we understand not only the words the author uses but the subject matter or object he is talking about. It consists in not only drawing inferences from the immediate sense, but also in applying what is said in the book to our lives, i.e., seeing what the consequences would be of acting upon it. The application consists in what Chladenius calls “living knowledge”, i.e., knowledge insofar as it has an influence on our will and actions (§§474, 616; 341, 467). Finally, there is the digression (*Ausschweifung*), which takes the words of the author as the occasion for saying something new or different. While the immediate and mediate senses are bound by the rules of reason, digression works according to the imagination, and so is not bound by rules at all. The difference between the mediate sense and the digression is that the mediate sense must still be based on the immediate, whereas the digression roams far beyond it

(§690; 535–6). When I digress I need not have in mind the words of the author at all, and many other things I say could have been stimulated by other sources.

Applying these distinctions to the problem of understanding the author's intentions, Chladenius explains that author and reader should agree regarding both the immediate and mediate sense (§694; 540). There is no special problem in understanding the author's immediate sense. Provided that the author writes what he means, and provided that author and reader share the same language, the reader can understand the author's meaning. There is also no problem regarding digressions, for the simple reason that a digression does not attempt to reflect the author's intention, and so there is no demand for understanding (§699; 544). There is, however, a serious problem of matching author's intention and reader's interpretation in the case of the mediate sense. Here it is necessary to observe two rules: (1) that the application cannot involve some concept of which the author was not aware; and (2) the application cannot imply some concept with which the author would have disagreed (§706; 554). In either case, the mediate sense attributed to an author is not in accord with his intention. Chladenius sometimes reads these rules very strictly, so that even drawing a valid inference from an author's sentences violates his intentions (§611; 464).

What, exactly, does Chladenius mean by the author's intention? When he introduces the concept it is to serve as a limit to the many meanings that can be read into a text. Hence he defines it as follows: “The *intention of an author* in a passage or book, or in general in his exposition, is the limitation of the representation which he has of his subject matter or in the passage.” (§695; 540). In this sense the author's intention is his purpose in using his words, what specifically he wants to get across to his reader. Chladenius later gives another more general definition of intention: “the consequence of an action that we foresee and for the sake of which we are moved to do it” (§723; 573). Applying this definition to an author, his intention consists in the foreseen consequences of writing his book, especially the application or effect he wants it to have on his readers. Corresponding to these definitions, there are two kinds of intention: the purpose of writing a specific passage, the point that the writer wants to get across with his words; and the purpose of writing a book in the first place (§723; 573). Both kinds of intention have to be taken into account in the complete interpretation of a work, Chladenius says. Since a passage can have many meanings or applications, an author can have many intentions. There is amid all these smaller intentions, however, one “chief intention” (*Haupt-Absicht*), which consists in what the author wants to achieve most in writing his book (§724; 574). A complete understanding of a text must take into account first and foremost the chief intention of the author, knowing why he wrote it and how he intended to affect the lives of his audience (§733; 580).

Only in his final paragraphs does Chladenius address the crucial question of how we achieve certainty in matters of interpretation. There is reason to doubt of such certainty, he concedes, because interpretations are often so different (§735; 581–2). What is there to ensure that the reader or interpreter really understands the meaning of

the author? All certainty of interpretation ultimately rests, Chladenius argues, on the nature of language itself. Since words are signs for thoughts, people who use the same signs should have the same thoughts (§741; 587). If author and reader share the same language, they share the same thoughts in using the same signs. Since, furthermore, the use of language is governed by rules, which are intersubjective, the reader should be able to understand the author's usage, the specific way he uses his signs (§737; 583). Although there can be doubts about the mediate sense of a passage, there can be certainty regarding its immediate sense. Such certainty arises from the common meaning of words (§§743–4; 589–90). Amid all the different modifications of a word in different contexts, this common meaning stays the same. Even though a word has many modifications of meaning, even though it has accidental and figurative uses as well as a literal one, one common meaning remains, providing the basis for the reconstruction of the meaning of complex passages (§744; 590). Although these modifications make a work more complicated, and so more difficult to understand, they occur according to definite rules of grammar shared by writer and reader alike (§746; 591–2). Such is Chladenius's confidence in achieving interpretative certainty that he thinks that we could even demonstrate or prove the meaning of a passage through the construction of a “hermeneutical proof” (§§752–3; 596–600). Such a proof states in its major premise a rule, and in its minor premise that a passage is an illustration of the rule; the conclusion then states what the particular passage ought to mean (§§656–8; 503–4). Chladenius realizes that usually such proofs would be tedious and unnecessary; the only reason he conceives them is to refute skepticism, to show that hermeneutics can, at least in principle, attain the certainty required of science.

It is evident that Chladenius's final argument in behalf of the certainty of hermeneutics leaves aside the many practical obstacles in producing an accurate interpretation of a text, viz., the difficulty of reconstructing an author's intention and context when there are few sources about it, the problems of translating foreign words that have no exact equivalent, and so on. It is a mistake, however, to regard this as naiveté on Chladenius's part.³⁵ He is well aware of these obstacles, and often emphasizes them. He realizes that in most actual cases certainty is unattainable, and that the interpreter has to resign himself to knowledge of his own ignorance. It is clear that Chladenius regarded his concept of a complete interpretation as an ideal that we could approach but never attain. The only point of his concept of hermeneutic demonstration was to show a *logical* possibility, to demonstrate that, *at least in principle*, it was possible to understand someone's else's meaning.

And despite his obsession with rules, Chladenius was far from seeing interpretation as a mechanical matter, as if its problems could be quickly resolved simply by the application of the right method. He saw interpretation as an ad hoc business where the reader struggled through texts and would resort to rules only when he stumbled

across an obscure passage. *Auslege-kunst* had no magic recipe for resolving obscurities, and the best it could do was classify the kinds of obscurities and the reasons for frequent misunderstanding (§673; 517). We explain difficult or obscure passages in the same way in which we explain anything: by reasoning from the known to the unknown (§673; 517). There is no *a priori* guarantee that we will be able to resolve the difficulties, and many of them will remain mysteries. So, like all enquiry, interpretation proves to be, Chladenius concedes, a matter of luck and skill (§673; 518).

3. Motives for a new science

Chladenius's major theoretical work is his 1750 *Allgemeine Geschichtswissenschaft*.³⁶ His main claim to fame rests upon this treatise. It is here that he explains the method of history, refutes historical skepticism, and puts forward his perspectivalism. Obviously, then, understanding Chladenius's historics demands coming to terms with the contents of this work. Before we proceed to that task, however, it is imperative to have some grasp of Chladenius's intentions and the place of this work within his opus as a whole. It is especially in this regard that the student encounters difficulties in understanding Chladenius.

Chladenius explains his reasons for writing the *Allgemeine Geschichtswissenschaft* in its preface. He traces his plans to write on history back to his early years as a lecturer in Wittenberg (1732–41). While giving lectures on logic, he says, he discovered a glaring gap in the conventional conception of this discipline (xiii). Logic claimed to be universal, to be a purely formal doctrine holding for *all* kinds of truth and *all* forms of discourse; but in all strictness it could claim to treat only *one* form of truth and only *one* kind of discourse. For in its traditional form, logic dealt with universal truths, the discourse of abstract reasoning; it did not treat the individual truths of experience, the discourse of history. But this was an extraordinary omission; it was to leave out one half of the *globus intellectualis*, since, as Leibniz and Wolff taught, there are two kinds of truth, the universal truths of reason and individual truths of fact. And so Chladenius came to the idea of a “new science”, one which would lay down rules for investigating historical truth as logic set up as rules for determining universal truth.

Though apparently straightforward, Chladenius's explanation raises a tricky question. Namely, how, exactly, did he understand his historics vis-à-vis the standard logic of his day? It is not clear from his preface whether Chladenius conceives his historics as a new part of logic or as a new science outside of logic. Some passages give the impression that Chladenius regards historics as a new discipline distinct from logic. Hence he calls it “a new science” (xix), and he complains that traditional logic had no way of dealing with historical works (xv). This impression is strengthened when we

consider Chladenius's parallel reasoning in the preface to the *Einleitung*. For there Chladenius expressly argued that hermeneutics is a new science independent of logic because its rules cannot be derived from “*Vernunftlehre*”; parity of reasoning would make historicism independent of logic, given that the rules for discovering and understanding *historical* truths are no more derivable from traditional logic. But, as natural as this conclusion appears, Chladenius does not draw it; indeed, he expressly forbids it. For he tells us explicitly in the first chapter of the *Allgemeine Geschichtswissenschaft* that historicism is “*ein Stück der Vernunftlehre*” (C1§38; 25). Indeed, his reasoning in the preface would seem to warrant this conclusion alone, because there he writes as if he were only fulfilling the original plan of logic to deal with *all* forms of truth. So we are left with the question: What is Chladenius's historicism? A new logic or a part of the traditional logic? Chladenius gives us no clear answer.

Another analogous structural problem concerns the relationship between Chladenius's *Allgemeine Geschichtswissenschaft* and his *Einleitung*. What is the relationship between his hermeneutics and historicism? Here again we encounter an ambiguity. On the one hand, it would seem that Chladenius's hermeneutics, or at least the largest part of it, i.e., that which deals with historical works, should be part of his historicism. For Chladenius tells us in his preface to the *Allgemeine Geschichtswissenschaft* that the problems he had in dealing with historical works in his hermeneutics made it necessary to make a fuller investigation in his historicism (xiv–xv). The discussion of historical works duly became a single chapter of the *Allgemeine Geschichtswissenschaft*, Chapter 7, “Von der Ausbreitung und Fortpflanzung der Geschichte.” On the other hand, however, there is reason to think that the historicism should be only a part of hermeneutics. For the basis of history rests upon its sources, upon historical works, whose interpretation is dealt with more extensively in the hermeneutics. And, sure enough, in Chapter 7 of the *Allgemeine Geschichtswissenschaft* Chladenius refers us to the earlier work for a more detailed treatment of how to deal with historical works (C7§16; 172). So we are now left with another ambiguity: Should hermeneutics be part of historicism, or historicism part of hermeneutics? Again, Chladenius provides no definite answer.

So far we have considered only one statement of Chladenius's intentions. They concern his *philosophical* reasons for writing the *Allgemeine Geschichtswissenschaft*. Yet, in his preface, he gave other statements of his intentions which show that he had non-philosophical reasons for writing his book. Some of his motives were straightforwardly pedagogical. Chladenius discovered that history was integral to the fields he had to teach, so he felt obliged to investigate more closely its methods and subject matter. One of these fields was ecclesiastical history. Having to lecture on that subject as a professor at Leipzig, Chladenius found it necessary to ponder the rules of historical method to resolve the many obscurities surrounding the origins of the church (xvi). Another such field was rhetoric and poetry. After becoming *Gymnasium Director* in Coburg, Chladenius had to teach “*die schöne Wissenschaften*,” i.e., rhetoric and poetry (xix). He now realized that most of the great speeches of antiquity involved historical narratives, and that the art of rhetoric consists mainly in telling stories. So if a speaker were to learn

his art, he would have to know how to construct narratives. For these pedagogical reasons alone, then, Chladenius had sufficient reason to write his work.

It seems from Chladenius's account of his intentions in the preface of the *Allgemeine Geschichtswissenschaft* that the decision to write it was overdetermined, the cumulative result of several powerful motives. The philosophical and pedagogical motives were perhaps each sufficient on their own. Yet, surprisingly, they were not the most important motive of all. That motive, at least according to Chladenius's own confession, was religious. The importance of this religious motive is as unmistakable as it is powerful. In good Lutheran fashion, in his preface—the true confessional booth of all Protestant authors—Chladenius lays bare the supreme guiding role of his faith. In the very first page he reveals that his work grew out of a sense of religious mission, a divine calling, and he duly gave thanks for the divine grace that allowed him to finish it (xi). It was his “chief aim” in all his writings, he confessed, “to explain and defend revealed truths” (xxvii). But this mission could be fulfilled, he eventually recognized, only if he had a better understanding of history. While working on his systematic theology, he realized that the greater part of sacred doctrine consists in a kind of historical knowledge (xvii). Since Scripture was chiefly about actions in the past, whether divine or human, the truths of revealed religion should be seen as historical. Hence only knowledge of history—its subject matter, methods and epistemic status—would explain the basis for these truths and resolve doubts about them. Acquiring such knowledge was all the more necessary, Chladenius added, to counter the growing sect of free-thinkers and “naturalists” who scorned the truths of revealed religion (xxiv). Such, indeed, was the religious motivation behind his historicism that Chladenius first pondered whether to subordinate it to divinity, i.e., whether to make it a chapter of his systematic theology; it was only his realization that it could be of use to other disciplines, and still lose none of its value for theology, that made him write a profane book (xvii–xviii).

Here we see plainly the profound role Chladenius's Protestant faith would play in his historicism and hermeneutics. As an orthodox Lutheran, Chladenius held that the sole rule of faith was Scripture, and that Scripture had to be understood in his simple historical sense. If, then, the historical record of Scripture were doubtful, faith itself would rest on a shaky foundation. Avoiding that consequence was the ultimate motive for all Chladenius's efforts to establish the possibility of hermeneutic certainty about the immediate sense of an author, and for all his struggles to defend the unadulterated transmission of historical truth over the centuries.³⁷

Yet, however frank and sincere, Chladenius religious confession too raises questions. How, for one, are we to understand Chladenius's claim in behalf of the autonomy of history? We have seen that, at least in some places, Chladenius wants history to be a new science, having its own rules independent of the traditional logic. It is indeed for just this reason that he has been seen as the father of historicism. Yet we have just seen: Chladenius pondered making historicism a virtual handmaiden of theology. It was only the concern to make his work more widely useful—and no respect for the autonomy of history as such—that made him write a work independent of his theology. We must be careful, then, in how we understand Chladenius's attempt to make history an independent science (or an independent part of a science). Although history had indeed its own *rules* independent of logic, it did not have its own *ends* independent of theology.

Chladenius's confession poses another problem. Namely, what were the limits of *profane* history and hermeneutics? In the preface to the *Einleitung* Chladenius was careful to exempt Scripture from his general hermeneutics on the grounds that its truths were so special they could not be understood according to the normal rules of interpretation. While the rules of general hermeneutics indeed apply to Scripture, they are only a necessary, not a sufficient guide to its interpretation. The truths of Scripture have a special supernatural origin and significance incomprehensible by the rules of general hermeneutics alone, which are sufficient only for books having a natural origin and significance. Yet in the preface to the *Allgemeine Geschichtswissenschaft* Chladenius moves in the opposing direction. He now admits that the truths of the Bible are straightforward historical truths, and that they rest upon the same kind of grounds as all historical truths. Like any historical claim, we must weigh those in behalf of divine revelation strictly according to the evidence for them. If this were not the case—if the truths of revelation completely transcend rational assessment and understanding—there would have been no need to write an historicism in the first place. So, when it came to the status of Scripture, Chladenius swithered yet again. He wanted it to be both beyond and within the domain of rational criticism and interpretation. Here again we see the tension between Chladenius's Lutheranism and Wolffianism. While his Protestant heritage placed Scripture beyond criticism, following Luther's doctrine of the two kingdoms, his Wolffian loyalties brought it back under the domain of criticism.

4. The concept of history

The starting point, indeed the foundation, of Chladenius's historicism is his attempt to define the subject matter of history. What, precisely, is history? How do we know it?

And how does its domain differ from that of other disciplines? Chladenius was deeply concerned with these questions, and he went to great pains to answer them in the first chapters of his *Allgemeine Geschichtswissenschaft*.

In chapter 1 Chladenius attempts to explain the specific nature of historical knowledge. Following Wolff,³⁸ he defines historical knowledge (*Historische Erkenntniß*) as knowledge of things which *are (sind)* or which happen (*geschehen*) (C1§2; 2). Things which are persist (*fortdauern*), and things which happen change or pass away (*vergehen*). This definition is much broader than the ordinary conception of historical knowledge, which limits such knowledge to what happened in the past. Chladenius deliberately makes his definition wider than that conception, and he does so in two respects. First, he argues that knowledge of change presupposes knowledge of something that changes, a persisting subject or enduring substance (C1§18; 11). We must first know the subject of change, or what changes, before we can know change itself (C1§21; 12). Hence historical knowledge covers not only happenings or changes but persisting substances or subjects. Second, he includes among changes not only the past but also the future (C1§§25–6; 14–15, 17). History is about not only events that have happened but events that will happen. It is not about present events, however, for the simple reason that the present is so fleeting that it disappears before we can know anything about it (C1§25; 14). In making such a broad definition of historical knowledge, Chladenius again follows Wolff, who, following a long tradition, equates historical with empirical knowledge.³⁹ Since whatever we know through the senses changes, Wolff reasons, all empirical knowledge is historical.

Although his official definition is very broad, Chladenius also has a more narrow conception of historical knowledge, one that comes closer to the ordinary conception. This more narrow conception comes to the surface in his definition of history. Chladenius distinguishes history in the sense of “*Geschichte*” from history in the Greek sense of “*Historie*” (C1§17; 10). History in the sense of *Geschichte* concerns what happens (*was geschieht*); and what happens consists in a series of events having some connection between them (C1§13; 7). History in the sense of *Historie* is ambiguous: it denotes not only what happens but also the narrative or description about what happens. Chladenius prefers the narrow, less ambiguous German term. It is this more narrow conception of history, history in the sense of *Geschichte*, that is the specific object of his science, “*Geschichtswissenschaft*”.

Chladenius's more narrow conception also appears in his account of the specific kind of proposition in which historical knowledge consists, what he calls an “historical proposition”. He defines an “historical proposition” (*historischen Satz*) as a judgment

about an event (*Begebenheit*) (C1§4; 3). An event is some change that is considered in itself or on its own, i.e., apart from its connection with other events (C1§3; 2). Events are for Chladenius the basic building blocks of the world of change. They are the simple units of change, that which cannot be further distinguished by the intellect into parts (C1§5; 5). Examples of events would be a lightning strike or the fall of a tile from a roof. Ideally, each historical proposition would express one event, so that there would be a perfect one–one correspondence between such propositions and events (C1§5; 3). But Chladenius realizes that our actual historical knowledge falls far short of this ideal. Rather than distinguishing precisely between events, we often talk of many events as if they were one. There are many different ways in which we treat a complex or aggregate of events as if they were a single event: when there is a series of many similar changes (C1§6; 4); when there are many similar but simultaneous events (C1§7; 5); when many events follow in a specific order (C1§8; 5); when many events occur for one purpose (C1§9; 5); when many events can be described according to one concept (C1§10; 6); and when events are interconnected (C1§11; 6). In all these cases we treat many distinct events as one, either because we cannot immediately distinguish them or because we do not want to do so (C1§12; 7). The subject matter of history is usually one of these common abstractions or fictions. What we are talking about is not some simple event but a complex of events which we treat as one, in different ways and for different reasons (C1§18; 11).

In his *Allgemeine Geschichtswissenschaft* Chladenius is especially concerned with human rather than natural history, and so he goes to great trouble in chapters 3 and 4 to define the specific subject matter of human history. We learn immediately in the very first paragraph of chapter 3 that history is about human thoughts and intentions; but it is not about them in general or as such. This is for the simple reason that not all thoughts and intentions can be known; some remain secret, unexpressed in words or deeds. History therefore deals with thoughts and intentions only insofar as they can be known, or only insofar as they are expressed in words and deeds (C3§2; 59). Although distinguishable in principle, thoughts and words, intentions and actions are treated in history as if they were one and the same (C3§2; 60). There we judge a person's thoughts by his words, his intentions by his actions; since secret thoughts and intentions have no external effects, they have no influence on history, and so they fall outside its sphere (C3§3; 60–1).

Despite his belief in secret thoughts and intentions, and despite his Christian faith, Chladenius so stresses the unity of soul and body that it is difficult to regard him as a dualist. He tells us in the very beginning of chapter 4 that body and soul are so intimately connected that they can be regarded as one (C4§1; 76–7). The soul participates in all actions of the body, the body in all actions of the soul, so that it is only an artificial abstraction to talk about mental or physical events; we do so only because sometimes the activity of one preponderates over the other. Ultimately, there is really only one person whose activities we regard as mental or physical depending on our perspective. These anti-dualist remarks should make us pause before attributing to

Chladenius the common distinction between mind and nature, *Geisteswissenschaften* and *Naturwissenschaften*.⁴⁰

Chladenius fully realizes that the thoughts and intentions that make up the subject matter of history are essentially social or cultural, taking place in a social or cultural context. They are not intelligible on their own, independent of others, but only insofar as they are part of a common or public world. Accordingly, one of the most interesting concepts in the *Allgemeine Geschichtswissenschaft* is that of “a moral being” (*ein moralisches Wesen*). The purpose of this concept is to define the social context of human action. With this concept Chladenius attempts to express the now commonplace view that human thoughts and actions are governed by, and only comprehensible in the context of, roles, norms and institutions. His theory of moral beings is the ancestor of Hegel's theory of “objective spirit,” of Droysen's doctrine of “the ethical world,” of Lazarus's concept of the *Volksgeist*.

Chladenius defines a moral being as the known constant will of human beings around which people direct their actions (C3§4; 61). He gives as examples a professor, a manufacturer and a publican. People who perform these roles have a constant will to engage in these activities, and others adjust their activities according to them. But it soon becomes clear from the context that Chladenius thinks moral beings are not the particular people who engage in these activities or perform these roles but the activities or roles themselves. Hence the moral being is not a particular professor, manufacturer and publican, but the professorship, the factory and the inn. We learn that the existence of the moral being is distinct from particular persons, and that many individual human beings participate in the life of the moral being (C3§7; 64). Moral beings come into existence when they are established or instituted by the wills of several individuals (C3§8; 64–5); but they are created so that they continue to exist beyond the lives of the particular people who create and participate in them (C§11; 66–7). Chladenius writes of the existence and the actions of moral beings as if they were living agents themselves; but it is clear that, true to his nominalism, he regards them as abstractions, indeed as reifications. For Chladenius, no less than Vico, the social world is a creation of our own making.

Along with the concept of a moral being, Chladenius formulates two more concepts in the *Allgemeine Geschichtswissenschaft* to describe the subject matter of human history: the concept of a person's state or condition (*Zustand*) (C4§4; 78–9), and the concept of a deed (*That*) (C4§9; 81). He introduces the first concept by distinguishing between two kinds of change that a person undergoes in life: some are natural and necessary, such that all people undergo them, viz., eating and drinking, becoming an adult; others are contingent and accidental, depending upon particular circumstances, viz., whether one is rich or poor, healthy or sick (C3§3; 78). The person's condition or state consists in these latter kinds of change. Sometimes Chladenius describes the condition in terms

of a particular state of being, viz., whether one is rich or poor, healthy or ill; but at other times it is the particular social role a person performs, viz., being a citizen, husband or neighbor. In either case, the condition describes some particular or contingent way in which someone exists or lives in his or her social world. It should be clear that one person can be in many conditions, viz., he can be a citizen, husband, neighbor, church elder, father (C4§5; 79). If we know a person's condition, we can infer many facts about him. If, for example, a person is a soldier, we know that he will be on parade, take orders, serve on watch, and so on. These are among the everyday activities of a given role or profession, and we expect a person to engage in them often. They are not, therefore, of special interest to the historian. In addition to these general activities, however, there are other actions a person performs, actions that do not follow from his general condition and that we can know only by experience: these are a person's deeds (*Thaten*). It is a person's deeds that are the special interest of history (C4§10; 82). The historian does not pay attention to the everyday activities because they are expected and repeat themselves; his interest is directed more toward changes in condition, or the causes of someone's deeds (C4§10; 82).

Although Chladenius states that a person's deeds are the special interest of the historian, he is far from confining the historian's enquiries to these alone. We learn at the close of chapter 4 that the historian is interested not just in the actions of particular people but in the actions of moral beings. Thus the historian is interested in the histories of cloisters, cities, countries or even general concepts or themes (C4§16; 86). He does not confine himself to the realm of particularity—the particular deeds of particular people at particular times—but extends his interests to the general classes of actions characteristic of moral beings. It is necessary, he explains, to make a distinction between two kinds of history: the history of particular human beings; and the history of moral beings (C4§20; 88–9). The history of moral beings are of great importance to the historian because they are the essential parts of world history.

5. Perspectivalism

Chladenius's historicism is best known for its "perspectivalism," i.e., the theory that historical knowledge is relative to a spectator's "viewpoint" (*Sehe-punct*). This theory has been seen as Chladenius's major contribution to historicism on the grounds that it marks a fundamental break with the classical ideal of history as a mirror of events.⁴¹ With Chladenius a new tradition is said to begin, one which stresses the importance of the spectator's own standpoint in writing history. While this is perhaps an accurate account of Chladenius's historical significance, the question remains whether his theory had the idealistic and relativistic intentions and implications sometimes

read into it.⁴² To assess this issue, we shall examine closely Chladenius's theory in its original context: chapter 8 of the *Einleitung* and chapters 5–6 of the *Allgemeine Geschichtswissenschaft*.

Chladenius first expounded his viewpoint theory in chapter 8 of his *Einleitung*, which treats the interpretation of historical books. He introduces it by correcting one very common assumption about historical facts: that there is only one correct narrative about them, so that if there are different narratives one must be right and the other wrong (§308; 185). This assumption does not accord, he remarks, with “common truths” or “our knowledge of the soul.” One and the same event can be viewed from many different perspectives, so that there can be very different, even conflicting, narratives about it (§308; 186–7). If, for example, different observers view the same battle from different perspectives, each will see something different about it, something the other observers do not see at all, or something they will even deny to have taken place. The same happens with more complex and abstract events. A rebellion, for example, is seen from different perspectives by a loyal subject, a rebel, a foreigner, a courtesan, a citizen or a peasant. Who is to say that one perspective alone is correct? Although each perspective gives a different account of the same event, each account is true from its perspective. Such a result is perfectly natural, Chladenius insists. Each perspective or viewpoint is the *necessary* result of the particular circumstances in which a spectator finds himself, so that he cannot view it otherwise, and so that two people never see the same event (§310; 189). Thus Chladenius defines the viewpoint (*Sehe-Punckt*) as “those circumstances of our soul, body and whole person that are the cause that we see something so, and in no other way” (§309; 187). Chladenius is ready to tolerate great epistemic incommensurability between standpoints, so that one standpoint might seem astonishing, absurd or incredible to the others (§§311–15; 190–4).

Nevertheless, despite such epistemic tolerance, a profound note of realism appears even in this early version of the doctrine. According to Chladenius, there is only one historical reality seen from different perspectives (§§318–19; 195–6). Reality itself remains one and the same; only the representations of it are contradictory. It turns out that it is not history itself, but the *representation* of history that is the matter of interpretation (§318; 218). The ultimate epistemic ideal is that all different viewpoints should be made consistent with one another:

It is indeed certain that all true narratives of a history in certain respects agree with one another, because, even when we find ourselves to some extent in different circumstances and therefore do not see some parts of history in the same way, we still agree with one another in general according to the rules of human knowledge. (§308; 187)

In the same vein, Chladenius insists that we should see each narrative as only one extract from a much larger universal narrative (§421; 305).

Chladenius's account of his theory is much more elaborate and involved in the *Allgemeine Geschichtswissenschaft*. He begins to expound his doctrine in chapter 5 with an analogy from sense perception. In the physical world, the viewpoint is the place or position from which the observer sees things (C5§3; 93). It is a commonplace that the content of sensation, i.e., what we see, depends on the place from which we view it (C5§2; 92–3). This content depends no less on the eye, general physical condition, and state of mind of the observer (C5§§3–5; 93–5). The same happens in the historical world, i.e., with moral beings and human actions. Here too what is seen depends on the viewpoint of the spectator (C5§6; 95–6). More specifically, his viewpoint depends on such variables as social position (C5§8; 98), place in the social hierarchy (C5§9; 98–9), and state of mind (C5§10; 99). After explaining these variables in detail, Chladenius provides another very different definition of the viewpoint: “The viewpoint is the inner and outer condition of a spectator, insofar as there flows from it a certain and particular manner to see and reflect upon things coming before us.” (C5§12; 100). Chladenius credits Leibniz with creating this concept.⁴³ He complains that it is insufficiently recognized in current philosophy, which is a terrible omission because “almost everything in historical knowledge depends on it.”

Much of the foundation for Chladenius's theory comes from his general account of sense perception, which he outlines in chapter 2 of the *Allgemeine Geschichtswissenschaft*. There he had argued that the perception of a physical body has an infinite number of “sides”, not just a determinate number following the concepts of geometry (C2§32; 46–7). A side of a body is that part of its surface that one views from a certain angle at any one moment, so that one sees a new side with each change of viewpoint. There are, then, as many sides to a body as there are perspectives upon it. Similarly, historical things have their “sides”, just like physical ones (C5§13; 101). Just as the content of the sides of a physical body depends on the viewpoint of the observer, so the content of the sides of an historical body (i.e., an action or moral entity) depends on the viewpoint of its observer. Chladenius had argued extensively in chapter 2 that the content of perception in the physical world depends on our past experience and general concepts; distance, for example, is not something just given to us but something we read into experience, the result of past judgments and inferences about the proximity of other bodies to our own (C2§21; 40). Likewise, what we see in human actions and moral things is not given but depends on the concepts we bring to bear upon it (C5§24; 111).

In chapter 6 of *Allgemeine Geschichtswissenschaft* Chladenius extends his viewpoint theory in a radical, apparently idealistic direction. The very title of the chapter—“The Transformation of History through Narrative”—suggests idealism. The transformation of history means, Chladenius explains, that we do not see historical things as in a mirror, as if a narrative simply replicated the content of sensation; rather, we see them according to the image or concept (*Bild*) that we form of them (C6§1; 115–16).

Historical things are never wholly given to us in sensation, then, but structured by our image or concept of them. Chladenius's rejection of the mirror metaphor is noteworthy, not least because he has been often interpreted as an adherent of the old theory of imitation.⁴⁴ Such an interpretation is flatly at odds with Chladenius's intentions and texts, which make clear a self-conscious departure from the classical tradition.

Chladenius explains that the transformation of history takes place especially in narrative, which alters the material given to us in sensation according to images or concepts. Not content with vague generalizations, he carefully spells out the many specific ways narrative transforms the material of history: by omitting detail and leaving out many circumstances (§3; 117–18); by saying in distinct times what happened at the same time; by confusing terms that describe our reaction to phenomena with phenomena themselves (§5; 119); by making things seem smaller or larger than they really are (§6; 120–1); and by formulating a whole series of events into a single generalization or phrase (§10; 125–6). Any narrative, Chladenius later writes in chapter 8, is the product of a twofold abridgment: first by the reports of witnesses, who condense the raw material of history; and then by narrators, who condense these reports into a single story (C8§47; 268). As we know it, therefore, all history is nothing more than a patchwork (*Stückwerck*).

In stressing the variety of viewpoints in understanding history, and in emphasizing the contribution of the knowing subject in creating it, Chladenius seems to be pushing his theory in not only an idealist but also a relativistic direction. Such relativism seems to remove the possibility that there is a single reality the many viewpoints attempt to see; reality now seems, at least in great part, a construction of the viewpoint itself. Chladenius himself seems bent on advancing relativism when he states at the close of chapter 6 that there really cannot be any such thing as an impartial or neutral standpoint in history (C6§33; 150–2). We cannot demand, he argues, that the historian lay aside the personal qualities that go into his perspective, viz., whether he is a friend or enemy, an interested party or outsider, learned or unlearned. We also cannot require that the spectator abstracts from his own background, viz., his religion, country or family. Such demands are impossible to satisfy because they abolish the very concept of a spectator or perspective, upon which all historical explanation depends. It is as natural as it is necessary that narrative be from some partial perspective, and so it is absurd to attempt to abolish or escape from them. In the end, all that we can prevent, Chladenius says, is intentional distortion. We distort history not when we faithfully report it from our standpoint but when we deliberately misrepresent what is seen from that standpoint. There are several ways of distorting history: (1) by not emphasizing important factors and placing them in a lesser light; (2) by using general words when more exact ones are necessary; (3) by writing from a different standpoint or perspective from that expected or required (C6§§22–4; 139–41).

So far, then, the general result of Chladenius's theory would seem to be an idealistic and relativistic conception of historical truth, according to which truth in history is a construct, depending on the viewpoint of the spectator. It seems Chladenius holds that there is not one truth in history, seen from different viewpoints, but as many truths as there are viewpoints. It is important to recognize, however, that Chladenius expressly repudiates such a conception of historical truth. We have already noted the realistic element in the *Einleitung* that counters such a conception; the same realistic element now returns in the *Allgemeine Geschichtswissenschaft*. The very first paragraph of chapter 5 seems intended to thwart the apparent idealistic or relativistic implications of his theory, for here Chladenius firmly states a realistic conception of historical truth, according to which events in history take place even when there is no observer of them (C5§1; 92). We must distinguish between events and knowledge of them, he advises, and then recognize that while *knowledge* of events depends on the perspective we take on them, events themselves exist whether we know them or not. As if to stress the importance of such realism, Chladenius states the same distinction in chapter 1. There he writes that just as we distinguish representation of an event from the event itself, so we must distinguish between history and knowledge of it (C1§14; 8). Knowledge of history consists in a narrative; and while we cannot have a narrative without history, we can have history without a narrative.

The crucial question remains, of course, how such a steadfast realism coheres with perspectivalism. Upon closer examination, much of what Chladenius writes about viewpoints in chapters 5 and 6 is perfectly consistent with such realism, and indeed presupposes it. For we learn there that not all perspectives are epistemically equal, and that some provide more insight into history than others (C5§§14–15; 102, 103). There are insiders and outsiders regarding moral entities, and the insiders give us more knowledge of the inner affairs of a government and business than the outsiders. Furthermore, what one sees depends on how often one sees something, because the first time one does not know what to look for (C5§17; 105); and the learned see more than the novice, because they have studied the object for a long time and are more familiar with it (C5§20; 107). No less realist in implication is Chladenius' statement that all viewpoints are limited; they do not represent the whole truth but are by their very nature partial, only one aspect of the whole truth, one perspective on it that leaves out much of the detail necessary for its full understanding (C5§26; 113–14).

Chladenius realism is especially apparent in chapter 7 of the *Allgemeine Geschichtswissenschaft*, where he discusses the transmission of history. Despite his awareness of the many perspectives in writing and understanding history, and despite his recognition of the many difficulties in preserving historical documents, Chladenius is confident that the historical record can be handed down through the generations without any fundamental change of meaning. In other words, there is one and the same historical truth which can be grasped from different viewpoints at different times. The motives for this view are, of course, Chladenius's Protestant faith, which wants the gospel story, upon which salvation depends, to be preserved over the generations. This faith in an

unchanging historical record appears time and again in the *Allgemeine Geschichtswissenschaft*. Hence Chladenius writes in chapter 7, which deals with the transmission of historical truth, that, provided later generations do not alter the wording of original documents and simply faithfully report what is written, an historical record can be handed down and understood with no change of meaning. We learn that a report (*Nachricht*) has the same sense in all times (C7§17; 173). If we only understand the language in which it is written, it must have the same sense for all readers. A source remains the same insofar as it is faithfully copied from one generation to the next (C7§18;174). The same faith in a single historical truth appears in chapter 11, which deals with ancient history. Here Chladenius says that when we read ancient documents it is as if the author were speaking to us; we are immediately set back into the past, so that it is as if we were living in that ancient time (C11§6; 356–7). As long as we understand the language of the author, the passage of time cannot change the sense and meaning of his words. In all these passages from the *Allgemeine Geschichtswissenschaft* Chladenius reaffirms the doctrine of hermeneutic certainty that he had formulated at the end of the *Einleitung*: that, provided he observes certain basic rules, the reader can know with certainty the immediate sense of an author.

These realistic elements in Chladenius's perspectivalism still do not solve the problem of consistency, however. Granted that there are such elements, we still need to know what justifies them, i.e., how they cohere with the apparent idealistic and relativistic implications of perspectivalism. According to some, the contradiction is insuperable on general *a priori* grounds.⁴⁵ Chladenius cannot justify the assumption that there is a single reality behind all the different perspectives, because there is no way to know of its existence apart from having just another perspective upon it. We cannot determine that a specific perspective is deficient or inaccurate except by making some other perspective our standard, which only begs the question of its objective truth.

Although Chladenius does not explicitly address this objection, he has in principle a line of reply to it: that although any specific standpoint is indeed partial and perspectival, reality is represented by the whole of all standpoints, the coherent totality of all perspectives, where each complements the other. Although we cannot ever attain this holistic standpoint, it is a goal that we can gradually strive to approach by adjusting partial standpoints to one another and attempting to make them coherent. Thus the implausible demand of a correspondence theory—that we get outside perspectives to compare them against reality itself—is replaced by the plausible demand of a coherence theory—that we strive for wholeness and unity among perspectives.

We can better address the question of consistency if we take into account Chladenius's own attempt to provide a basis for his realism.⁴⁶ This appears partly in

chapter 6 and partly in chapter 2 of *Allgemeine Geschichtswissenschaft*. In chapter 6 Chladenius seems his most idealistic because he writes about how history is transformed by the concepts with which we approach it. Yet it is noteworthy that even here Chladenius does not think that these images or concepts are entirely constructs, the products of mental activity alone; for he also holds that they are partly the product of experience, the result of sensations that are given to us. They are, as he puts it, “stamped into our soul through sensation” (C6§1; 116). These images or concepts therefore have a double origin, arising partly from sensation and partly from our own mental activities, specifically memory and abstraction (C6§§3–4; 117–19). In chapter 2 Chladenius's realism becomes apparent from his general theory of sense perception. According to this theory, there is a given material to sensation, and various perspectives are only so many ways of organizing it. That there is a reality independent of our representations Chladenius finds indubitable. When we feel or touch something it must be really there (C2§36; 50). Feeling or tactual sensation is the most basic of all our senses, i.e., that which corrects others and which is uncorrectable itself (C2§2; 28). It is through touch or feeling that we correct what we see through our eyes. Something acts upon us through feeling; and what acts upon us must be real, for we are passive, having no power to create through our will and imagination what appears to us. We are not complete master of the content of our experience, because what we sense is not entirely in our own control (C6§8; 123).

Taking into account these passages, it seems that Chladenius could make his realism consistent with his perspectivalism with something like a distinction between the matter and form of experience, where the matter is given to the senses and the form created by the understanding. That he has something like this distinction in mind appears from an important passage in chapter 8. After again stressing his distinction between history and knowledge of it, he tells us that what makes knowledge of history dependent on the spectator is that it is “the work of the understanding” (C8§43; 263). In other words, it is the understanding that structures the given material of sensation; the events themselves, however, are given to us. The way in which we know about the events themselves is through intuition, through singular judgments about what we immediately experience (C8§52; 275).

This simple distinction between the matter and form of experience goes some of the way toward resolving the tension between perspectivalism and realism. It does not, however, go all the way. The tension takes other forms, and it is especially acute in Chladenius's views about the transmission of history. In so confidently assuming that the historical record could be understood in its original or immediate sense, Chladenius was arbitrarily limiting the application of his own viewpoint theory. According to that theory, it would seem that each new age, each new generation, gives a different perspective on history, so that there is not one and same truth over the ages. But Chladenius never makes this inference, or at least he does not address the difficulty it poses. The immediate reason for this shortcoming is somewhat surprising: that his viewpoints do not really change over time after all! It is noteworthy that he does not list

historical change among the variables that make for different viewpoints. Strangely, while viewpoints vary with different positions *within* one specific age, they do not vary with the ages themselves. Thus we are left with the irony that the viewpoint theory, though designed to teach us about the relativity of historical truth, does not take account of historical change itself. The ultimate reason for this irony, of course, is religious: if Chladenius were to allow historical change among the perspectives themselves, there could be no unadulterated transmission of the gospel.

6. Explanation of action

One of the most original and interesting aspects of Chladenius's historicism is his account of the explanation of human action. One expects Chladenius, as a pioneer of hermeneutics, to put forward something like the theory of *Verstehen* so characteristic of the hermeneutical tradition, i.e., the theory that human actions have to be understood from within, according to the agent's intentions, and that they cannot be explained according to general laws. Yet the very opposite is the case. Chladenius puts forward a theory of explanation that anticipates to a remarkable degree the "nomological" or "hypothetico-deductive" model later advanced by the positivists, and that has been a mainstay of all forms of naturalism. His case shows clearly the anachronism involved in thinking the historicist tradition is opposed to naturalism.

Chladenius had a longstanding concern with the explanation of human actions. He first treats this problem in his *Logica practica* (1742), then in his polemic *Idolum saeculi: probabilitas* (1747) or *Vernünfftige Gedanken von dem Wahrscheinlichen* (1748). His mature treatment of the topic appears in chapters 8 and 12 of the *Allgemeine Geschichtswissenschaft*. Our account of his theory here is based on all these sources.

Chladenius's interest in the explanation of human action arose in the context of the more general problem of causality. From the very beginning he assumed that the explanation of human action is a form of causal explanation; he made no distinction, as later hermeneuticists would do, between reasons and causes. So the first problem Chladenius faced in developing an account of human action was to clarify causal explanation in general. It was a shortcoming of Wolff's logic, he complained, that it had failed to treat causality in any detail.

The essence of Chladenius's account of causality is that causal explanation consists in converting a judgment of intuition (*iudicium intuito, Anschauungsurtheil*) into a discursive judgment or conclusion (*iudicium discursivum, Schlußurtheil*).⁴⁷ In other words, we explain some particular event or action when we derive it from true premises. The major premise is a statement of a general law holding between kinds of events or actions, such that if A then B; the minor premise is a statement that this particular event or action is an instance of A; and the conclusion states that another particular event or

action of kind B will therefore result. Chladenius gives this example from the field of physics: “Everything held before a spherical mirror has an image that appears smaller than the object itself; my face is held before a spherical mirror; therefore, the image of my face is smaller than my face itself” (VG B5§2; 83–4).⁴⁸

Thus Chladenius holds that causal explanation is a form of demonstration, proceeding according to the same syllogistic reasoning described in the general foundations of logic (VG B §4; 69). Causal explanation therefore follows the same structure of reasoning used in all demonstration. He notes, however, one important difference between causal explanation and demonstration. Though there is no difference in the structure of the reasoning, there is a difference in the order. While syllogistic reasoning proceeds from premises to conclusion, causal explanation proceeds from conclusion to premise. In causal explanation the statement of intuition is given and the task is to seek the premises from which it follows.

Chladenius's model of causal explanation had effectively extended and vindicated the guiding principle of Wolff's epistemology: that to know is to demonstrate. This is a remarkable result because, as we shall soon see, Chladenius went to great pains to limit that principle in his reply to skepticism. It was precisely that principle that threw so much of history into doubt. What Chladenius had excluded from the front door of history he now seems to readmit through the back door of causality. Still, Chladenius is more consistent than he first appears. For it turns out that he places severe limits upon the Wolffian principle in the explanation of human action—limits so severe that his model of causal explanation rarely applies to actual human actions.

Chladenius thinks that all explanation of events—whether human actions or processes in nature—is causal in form and shares the same basic syllogistic structure. There is no fundamental difference between history and physics in their form of explanation; both follow the same nomological paradigm. Nevertheless, throughout his account of human action in chapter 8 of *Allgemeine Geschichtswissenschaft*, Chladenius notes some basic differences between the methods of history and physics. Anticipating the principle of individuality of the historicist tradition, Chladenius stresses that the main interest of the physicist is to establish general laws, whereas the central concern of the historian is to explain a particular action at a particular time (AG C8§1; 204). Though the historian, like the physicist, explains particular actions by subsuming them under general laws, the final goal of his enquiry is to explain the particular action; in other words, knowing and applying the general laws is only the means to his end. Chladenius also seems to think that there is a basic difference between historical and physical laws. The causes of the physicist are events in nature, whereas the causes of the historian are ideas, desires and decisions (C8§2; 205–6). The historian will often apply physical laws

to explain things in the historical world, but he must not do more than necessary, Chladenius advises (C8§2; 206).

While Chladenius is certainly not a physicalist or materialist, he does think that human actions are, if only in principle, predictable. In the final chapter of *Allgemeine Geschichtswissenschaft* he upholds the general principles of Leibnizian-Wolffian determinism, according to which all actions have a sufficient reason and fall under some general law. Thus he argues that if we knew the general laws of human conduct, particular circumstances and particular character traits, we could predict with certainty what someone would do on a particular occasion (C12§§1–6; 381–5).

This proves to be, however, a rather big “if”. When Chladenius first put forward his theory of causality he was confident that one could achieve certainty in the causal explanation of human actions. The *Vernünftige Gedanken* of 1748 contends that human conduct is not simply a matter of probability, and that we can be certain that, how and why most human actions occur. The *Allgemeine Geschichtswissenschaft* of 1752, however, marks a retreat from such confidence. While Chladenius still upholds nomological explanation as an ideal, he places such restrictions upon it that it is impossible for such an ideal to be realized. We cannot get any historical narrative or description in a deductive form, he now notes (C8§48; 268). A nomological explanation of a human action can succeed only if its premises are confirmed to be true; but we never know enough about any particular action to see if this is the case (C8§49; 270). Even actions where the explanation seems obvious—cases where a person does an action because of duty or pleasure—does not permit a valid deduction of the conclusion from its premises. This is for the simple reason that motives of duty or pleasure allow us to infer only that a person *ought to do* X (if he is moral or self-interested); but from this we cannot infer that the person *actually does* X (C8§49; 270).

Running hand-in-hand with this growing epistemic modesty was Chladenius’s increasing emphasis in the *Allgemeine Geschichtswissenschaft* on the unbridgeable divide between truths of reason and fact. Although Chladenius’s theory of causal explanation likens it to syllogistic reasoning, he still insists that there is a fundamental difference in kind between the logical order of inferences and the temporal order of events (C8 §48; 268). When two events succeed one another in time, the connection between them is not that of premise and conclusion (C8§51; 273). He is very clear that logical connections hold only between universal propositions, the general concepts by which we understand the world; they do not hold between particular propositions, which refer to events in the world itself. To assume that there are logical connections between events themselves would be a fallacy, the hypostasization of our general concepts (C8§43; 263).

In chapter 8 of the *Allgemeine Geschichtswissenschaft* Chladenius explains in some detail the limits we encounter in trying to explain the causes of human actions. We have little difficulty in explaining human actions when they are done from motives of duty or pleasure (§4; 208–9). Either kind of motive provides a sufficient reason for the action. Where explanation becomes difficult, however, is where there are several

options and the advantages and disadvantages of each have to be weighed against one another (§5; 210–11). We think that we understand actions in these cases if we would have done the same. But sometimes a person does not do what most people would do; and even if we have a complete knowledge of the circumstances, we cannot predict the action. In these cases, the cause of the action depends on personality alone, a person's unique character, so that its source lies “among the secrets of the human heart” (§9; 216). When actions are “new” or “strange”, not falling under normal patterns of behavior, we have to take into account two things: (1) the special circumstances that would have led to the agent's decision; and (2) the special way of thinking of the agent that made him respond to the circumstances in just this way (§11; 218). We should try to formulate general laws for even these kinds of actions by specifying the kind of circumstances and the kind of personality; but sometimes even this proves impossible, because the causes of the action reside in the will, which has its own secret reasons, not knowable even to the agent himself (§16; 224–5).

Though he admits that in these cases it is impossible to know the causes of human actions, Chladenius still insists that they are explicable in principle.⁴⁹ Even if some actions are unpredictable because they depend on unique circumstances or individual personality, there is still a sufficient reason for their happening (§12; 220). There are, however, some remarkable passages in the *Allgemeine Geschichtswissenschaft* where Chladenius does seem to affirm that some actions are in principle inexplicable. These are irrational actions, which are of two kinds: evil actions, where we do something contrary to the good even when we know the good; and confused actions where we do something from muddled thinking or haste (C8§17; 225–6). We cannot make a valid syllogism to explain these actions, Chladenius argues, because their premises will be false or confused, and from such premises no valid conclusion can be derived. Properly speaking and in a strict sense, then, such actions do not have a cause, because they are not formulable as the conclusions of a valid syllogism. Arguably, Chladenius has confused reasons and causes here: it is as if we can explain actions only if there are good reasons for them. Surely, one can argue, there are causes for evil and confused actions, even if there are not good reasons for them. But Chladenius would not have made this distinction. According to Leibnizian–Wolffian optimism, this is the best of all possible worlds, so that the way the world is differs not from how it should be.

Chladenius's swithering about the explicability of human action is again another illustration of the conflict between rationalism and Protestantism that troubles so much of his thought. While his rationalism holds that all actions are in principle explicable, falling under general laws, his Protestantism tells him that the ultimate motives of some human actions are inscrutable, having their source in a sinful will that does irrational deeds just because they are irrational. As we shall soon see, this conflict between

Protestantism and rationalism will resurface often in the historicist tradition. It will continue to trouble Humboldt, Droysen and Dilthey in the nineteenth century.

7. Against historical Pyrrhonism

In the final chapter of his *Einleitung* Chladenius briefly betrayed his concern about skepticism. There are some, he wrote without mentioning names, who question whether there can be certainty about the meaning of historical texts (§734; 579–80). The different interpretations of a text, they argue, give strong reasons to doubt whether one can fully know the meaning of an author. Although revealing nothing of his religious beliefs in the *Einleitung*, Chladenius, as an orthodox Protestant, had to be deeply troubled by such doubt. Luther had established Scripture as the rule of faith, and he had assured the faithful that its meaning lay in its literal, historical sense. If this sense could not be discerned, the most important issue for the believer—eternal salvation—would be cast in doubt. Hence, for Chladenius, the demand for interpretative certainty went hand-in-hand with the needs of religious faith.

Other than in this implicit and indirect manner, Chladenius does not thematize his concern with skepticism in the *Einleitung*. That concern became more explicit and direct, though, as the danger of skepticism grew. The 1740s witnessed the rise of a new skepticism in German philosophy. Two unwitting harbingers of this alarming trend were Peter Ahlwardt in his *Vernunftlehre* (1741), and Crusius in his *Weg zur Gewißheit* (1747). They had argued that, because it is indemonstrable, all historical knowledge is capable only of probability.⁵⁰ No skeptics themselves, Ahlwardt and Crusius were attempting to reply to skepticism, the *Pyrrhonisme historique* coming from France. For Chladenius, however, such answers were more a capitulation to skepticism than a refutation. To claim that historical belief is only probable is to admit that it is, if only in principle, dubitable; and doubt undermines faith as much as science. Determined to arrest the spread of this new doctrine of probability, Chladenius wrote against it his 1747 *Idolum saeculi: probabilitatis*.⁵¹ Quickly translated by a disciple, this tract appeared a year later under the title *Vernünfftige Gedanken von dem Wahrscheinlichen und desselben gefährlichen Mißbrauche*.⁵²

Idolum saeculi or *Vernünfftige Gedanken* is essentially a critique of the thesis that all indemonstrable knowledge is only probable and therefore falls below the standards of strict science. Chladenius's central concern in this tract is to defend the possibility of certainty in all non-mathematical and non-logical disciplines, and so he considers physics, ethics and hermeneutics as well as history; only chapter 3 is devoted to

historical knowledge in particular. Most of *Vernünfftige Gedanken* is a polemic against one version of the doctrine of probability, that found in Peter Ahlwardt's *Vernunftlehre*.⁵³ Rather than a frontal assault on all forms of Pyrrhonism, Chladenius's tract really amounts to a squabble within the Wolffian school. It shows especially clearly that the greatest challenge to Chladenius came from Wolff rather than the skeptics themselves.

Polemics are fine to quell immediate dangers; but they are no adequate response to deeper issues. To address the challenge posed by skepticism, Chladenius resolved to investigate the problem of historical knowledge in a more general and systematic manner. It was no longer sufficient just to attack the new doctrine of probability; it was also necessary to raise the question how, and indeed whether, we can have knowledge of the past. And so Chladenius embarked upon writing his *chef-d'œuvre*, his 1750 *Allgemeine Geschichtswissenschaft*. Its preface plainly reveals his intent to reply to "the emerging historical *Scepticismo*" (xxii). Among these skeptics Chladenius mentions Pierre Bayle, Père Daniel and the Marquis d'Argens (C10§26; 352), though he never loses sight of his two German contemporaries, Ahlwardt and Crusius.

To defeat the skeptics, Chladenius set his bar especially high. He had to defend the possibility of historical knowledge in a very strict sense, a sense in which knowledge means not just probability but certainty. If religious faith demanded nothing less, so did science. The standard of science in the eighteenth century was certainty; probability, no matter how high, did not suffice because it allowed for the possibility of doubt, which it was the very purpose of science to remove. Science, Wolff insisted, required demonstration from true premises, all of which are incontrovertible, based on immediate sense experience or the law of contradiction.⁵⁴ Plainly, though, no demonstration in history could meet such high standards. No matter how tightly and strictly the conclusion followed from the premises, the premises themselves are not incontrovertible, i.e., it is possible to deny them without contradiction, or there is no immediate experience to confirm them. In laying down such a severe standard of science, Wolff had opened the door for historical Pyrrhonism, which only needed to apply his standard of demonstrative certainty to history.

Chladenius's defense of historical knowledge against skepticism appears chiefly in chapters 9 and 10 of his *Allgemeine Geschichtswissenschaft*. Here an essential part of his strategy is to question the universal applicability and appropriateness of Wolff's standard of knowledge, especially with regard to history. This strategy marks a shift away from the 1742 *Einleitung*, where Chladenius believed, through the concept of an hermeneutic demonstration, that he could still achieve certainty by following the Wolffian standard. Sometime in the 1740s, however, Chladenius realized that his earlier strategy could not work; rather than attempting to meet the demand for demonstration, he now realized that he had to show that the demand is misconceived in the first place. And so chapter 9 begins by pointing out some of the general

difficulties with generalizing the Wolffian standard (AGC9§3; 286). We cannot make demonstration into the sole standard of knowledge, Chladenius argues, because it simply excludes too much. Although it is indeed the case that all demonstrable propositions are certain, the converse does not hold, because there are some certain propositions that are not demonstrable. One cannot deny certainty to axioms, for example, though they are by their very nature indemonstrable. And, however much one can doubt that sensations give us knowledge of the external world, we cannot doubt that we are having sensations. Demonstration cannot be the sole form of achieving certainty because we also get it from *consequentia immediata* and the non-syllogistic calculations of addition and subtraction (C9§9; 290).

In both the *Vernünftige Gedanken* and *Allgemeine Geschichtswissenschaft* Chladenius argues that the appropriate standard of certainty to measure historical truth is that of everyday life. According to common sense, many historical judgments are certain and indubitable, viz., that Charlemagne had a great empire in the Middle Ages, that Caesar crossed the Rubicon, and so on. Unless we find some specific reason to doubt them, we normally accept on good faith the reports and testimony of others. More significantly, we treat a historical belief as certain if we have evidence for it and no reason to doubt it (AG C9§§6–7; 287–8). We regard probability as less than certainty, because it implies the possibility of error. Assuming we have evidence for a proposition and no specific reason to doubt it, we see no such possibility, and so regard it as certain and not merely probable. Our common-sense attitude is entirely warranted, Chladenius believes, because there must be some reason for doubt to regard historical beliefs as merely probable, and in most cases there is no such reason at all.

Of course, the skeptic would reply that we do have reason to doubt after all, and just because historical propositions are indemonstrable. Since their denial does not result in a contradiction, and since we cannot base them on immediate experience, we *ipso facto* have reason to doubt them. But to this kind of challenge Chladenius has a response: namely, that these are poor or inappropriate reasons for judging the truth of any historical proposition. By its very nature an historical proposition is contingent, so that it is absurd to expect its denial to be contradictory; and by its very nature an historical proposition is about the past, so that it is absurd to expect some immediate experience in the present to confirm it. We have to judge historical propositions by the kind of evidence appropriate for them, viz., the reliability of witnesses, their number, the coherence of testimony with other beliefs, and so on. It makes sense to doubt such a proposition if there are problems with this kind of evidence, but not if the proposition cannot be established by an axiomatic proof or by immediate experience.

The heart of Chladenius's defense of history, and indeed all empirical knowledge, is that each empirical discipline has its own specific standards and rules for acquiring truth appropriate for its subject matter, and that it should be judged according to them alone. We should regard a belief as uncertain not in a generic but only in a specific way, i.e., if it cannot be confirmed by following the specific rules for acquiring knowledge in that particular discipline (AG C10§1; 317). In each discipline there are definite ways for

arriving at knowledge about a specific subject matter; and the rules of a discipline formulate these ways, i.e., they specify the most efficient and reliable means by which we attain the end of knowledge. Now it is these rules, Chladenius contends, that are the best medicine against skepticism, for they show that there is a rigorous and strict means of gaining knowledge in a discipline (AG C10§26; 352). It might indeed be the case that, by strictly following these rules, we cannot acquire knowledge in a specific field; but whether we do or do not succeed in acquiring knowledge has to be measured by these rules, not by some ideal or utopian standard (viz., logical self-evidence) that makes no sense in the discipline. There really is no such ideal, Chladenius believes, and it is only by surrendering it, by recognizing the plurality of standards in different fields and by measuring knowledge in each field according to them, that we escape the snares of skepticism.

Although Chladenius thinks that we can attain certainty in history, he is under no illusion that this is often not the case and that many historical beliefs are uncertain. We often have good reasons to doubt an historical proposition, reasons specific to history itself and according to its own definite rules. He goes to great pains in chapter 10 of the *Allgemeine Geschichtswissenschaft* to lay out the different kinds of reasons. We have reasons to doubt an historical proposition in any of the following cases: if there is a contradiction in the sources of evidence (§3; 322); if a generalization is unreliable, having argued from only a few cases (§17; 339); if some effect in the present could have different causes in the past (§§9, 19; 329–30, 341); if there is a dispute where each side has proofs on its side (§20; 342–3); and if a history is written from a specific motive that makes us suspect that they have not considered all the evidence (§18; 340).

If the historian finds reasons to doubt a proposition, he must attempt to remove the doubt so that he can achieve certainty. For each kind of reason, there are precise rules of enquiry about how to remove the source of doubt. Chladenius does not list these rules for all the cases, but he does show what he means by a rule by specifying all the ways to resolve doubts in the first kind of case, i.e., that where the historian finds conflicting testimony. In chapter 10 of *Allgemeine Geschichtswissenschaft* he gives five different rules about how this kind of problem can be resolved. First, investigate if there really is a conflict in the testimony; see whether, by a closer specification of the content of each report, they can be made consistent (§3; 322). Second, if the contradiction cannot be resolved, determine if both reports come from spectators or eye-witnesses; if one is only a second-hand witness, one must consider the sources of his information (§4; 323). Third, determine if the contradiction lies simply in the manner of exposition, by one having left out details, or by one highlighting some factors and underestimating others (§5; 324–5). Fourth, if a contradiction cannot be resolved by the above three rules, and if both sources are reliable, then one must consider their different perspectives. Many contradictions arise simply because people have different ways of seeing the truth (§6; 325–6). Fifth, if all these means of removing the contradiction fail, then one has to consider the claims to authority of the witnesses themselves (§7; 318). In

chapter 9 of *Allgemeine Geschichtswissenschaft* Chladenius had already provided clear rules for determining authority in history (§§23–31; 302–10).

Whatever the ultimate merits of Chladenius's argument against skepticism, its net result is that history could be a science in its own right. Chladenius had shown that history had its own *sui generis* rules, rules that laid down effective means for acquiring and assessing evidence, and thus for gaining knowledge. Even if knowledge could not be attained in the end, these rules provided strict standards, and they set goals which a discipline could approach even if not attain. This was sufficient to make history a science, at least in principle if not in reality. It is chiefly for this reason that we can see Chladenius's *Allgemeine Geschichtswissenschaft* as the founding document of the historicist tradition.

Notes:

- (1) H.E. Barnes, *A History of Historical Writing* (New York: Dover, 1962), p. 245; and James Westfall Thompson, *A History of Historical Writing* (New York: Macmillan, 1942), II, p. 124.
- (2) *The Hermeneutics Reader*, ed. Kurt Mueller-Vollmer (New York: Continuum, 1994), pp. 54–71.
- (3) Ludwig Wachler, *Geschichte der historischen Forschung und Kunst seit der Wiederherstellung der literarischen Kultur in Europa* (Göttingen: Röwer, 1812–20), II, p. 825.
- (4) Dilthey's account of Chladenius is a disappointment. In his history of hermeneutics before Schleiermacher, which he first published in 1883, he devotes but a paragraph to Chladenius. See *Leben Schleiermachers* in *Gesammelte Schriften*, eds. Karlfried Gründer and Frithhof Rode (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1961), XIV, p. 621. He praises Chladenius for moving beyond Wolff's hermeneutics; but, generally, he sees Chladenius as only a predecessor of Schleiermacher's psychological hermeutics. It is questionable that Dilthey studied Chladenius with any care. He claims that Chladenius does not mention Wolff in his *Einleitung*, though even a superficial reading quickly shows this to be false.
- (5) Ernst Bernheim, *Lehrbuch der historischen Methode* (Leipzig: Duncker & Humblot, 1914), Fifth and Sixth edition, p. 183. Cf. p. 233.
- (6) Hans Müller, *Johann Martin Chladenius (1710–59)* (Berlin: Emil Ebering, 1917).
- (7) Meta Scheele, *Wissen und Glaube in der Geschichtswissenschaft. Studien zum historischen Pyrrhonismus in Frankreich und Deutschland* (Heidelberg: Winter, 1930), pp. 126–31.
- (8) Joachim Wach, *Das Verstehen* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1926–33), III, pp. 21–2.
- (9) Peter Hanns Reill, *The German Enlightenment and the Rise of Historicism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), pp. 105–12, 132–4.
- (10) “Standortbindung und Zeitlichkeit. Ein Beitrag zur historiographischen Erschließung der geschichtlichen Welt,” in *Objektivität und Parteilichkeit in der Geschichtswissenschaft*, eds. Reinhart Koselleck, Wolfgang Mommsen and Jörn Rüsen (Munich: Deutscher-Taschenbuch Verlag, 1977), pp. 17–46. Koselleck's views were anticipated to some extent by Rudolf Unger, “Zur Entwicklung des Problems der historischen Objektivität bis Hegel,” in *Deutsche Vierteljahrschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte* I (1923), 104–38.
- (11) Christian Wolff, *Vernünfftige Gedanken von den Kräften des menschlichen Verstandes und ihrem richtigen Gebrauche in Erkenntnis der Wahrheit*, §2, in *Gesammelte Werke*, ed. Hans Werner Arndt (Hildesheim: Olms, 1965), I/1, p. 115.
- (12) Pace Unger, “Zur Entwicklung,” p. 118.
- (13) There are several excellent accounts of Chladenius's hermeneutics. See Peter Szondi, *Einführung in die literarische Hermeneutik* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1975), pp. 27–97; Claudia Henn, “Sinnreiche Gedanken”: Zur Hermeneutik des Chladenius's, *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 58 (1976), 240–64; and Christoph Friederich, *Sprache und Geschichte: Untersuchungen zur Hermeneutik von Johann Martin Chladenius* (Meisenheim am Glan: Anton Hain, 1978).
- (14) *Einleitung zur richtigen Auslegung vernünfftiger Reden und Schriften* (Leipzig: Friedrich Lanckischens Erben, 1742). This work will be cited according to paragraph (§) and page number.
- (15) *Wahrheit und Methode*, in *Gesammelte Werke* I, 186. Gadamer was writing against Joachim Wach, who saw Chladenius's hermeneutics as “the first sketch” of his historicis. See Wach, *Das Verstehen*, III, 6.

(16) Chladenius wrote in the preface to the *Allgemeine Geschichtswissenschaft* that the problems he discovered in writing this chapter was one of his reasons for writing the book (xv).

(17) See, for example, *Allgemeine Geschichtswissenschaft*, C7§16; 172. Here Chladenius refers the reader to the *Einleitung* because it provides a more extensive account of the understanding of historical works.

(18) See J.K. Dannhauer *Idea boni interpretis* (Argentorati: Mülbius, 1642); J.H. Ernesti, *Compendium hermeneuticae profane* (Leipzig: Lankisch, 1699); J.G. Meister, *Dissertatio de historica-philologica de insignibus eorumque interpretatione* (Leipzig: Wittigau, 1693). On these works and others that preceded Chladenius, see Lutz Geldsetzer's valuable introduction to the reprint of the *Einleitung* (Düsseldorf: Stern-Verlag Janssen & Co, 1969), pp. viii–xix.

(19) As Kurt Mueller-Vollmer puts it in his introduction to his selection on Chladenius in *The Hermeneutics Reader*, p. 54. Henn, “Zur Hermeneutik Chladenius” p. 240, claims that Thomasius was the first to write a hermeneutics in German. But Thomasius's 1691 *Ausübung der Vernunftlehre* is only partially devoted to the art of interpretation, which he places within the domain of logic.

(20) Pace Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, I, 186.

(21) References to the preface will use follow the eighteenth-century convention used there, letters for sheets and numbers for parts of sheets.

(22) For this notion of art, see Wolff, *Vernünfftige Gedancken von der Menschen Thun und Lassen*, §366, *Werke* I/4, 242–3.

(23) See Wolff, *Vernünfftige Gedancken von den Kräften des menschlichen Verstandes*, Capiteln 11–12, *Werke* I/1, 226–31. To be fair to Wolff, he develops these topics far more extensively in his Latin logic, which contains nearly 200 pages on writing, judging and reading historical and dogmatic texts. See *Philosophiae rationalis sive Logicae*, *Werke* I/3, 537–706. Chladenius's objection, however, was less against the length of Wolff's treatment than its systematic place.

(24) Chladenius makes this crucial point not in the preface but in chapter 4, §177; 96–7, and chapter 10 of the *Einleitung* itself, §738; 584. Geldsetzer, “Einleitung,” p. xxviii, maintains that Chladenius would perhaps have done better to have left hermeneutics as part of logic. But given that the rules of hermeneutics cannot be derived from the laws of formal logic, Chladenius's declaration of independence seems fully justified.

(25) See Wolff, *Philosophiae rationalis sive Logicae*, §§3–4, *Werke* I/3, 108.

(26) Following the distinction between truths of reason and fact, Wolff maintains that there are two basic kinds of book, the dogmatic and historical. See *Logicae* §§743–52, *Werke* II/1.3, 537–41.

(27) Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, *Werke* I, 299–300.

(28) Chladenius treats universal terms as names for many individual things. See §§126–7; 70–1.

(29) Wolff saw the rules of logic as not only norms but also as mental powers, knowledge of which is provided by psychology. See *Logica* §§89–90, *Werke* II/1.1, 39–40.

(30) Szondi, *Einführung*, p. 72, is much too quick in preferring modern views.

(31) See Wolff, *Deutsche Logik* C2§1, *Werke* I/1, 151.

(32) This theory too was essentially Wolffian. See Wolff, *Psychologia empirica* §273; *Werke* II/5, 196.

(33) Szondi reads Chladenius in this manner, *Einführung*, p. 77.

(34) Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, Werke I, 187.

(35) Pace Friederich, *Sprache und Geschichte*, pp. 140, 142.

(36) *Allgemeine Geschichtswissenschaft* (Leipzig: Friedrich Lanckischens Erben, 1752). Reprint: Vienna: Hermann Böhlhaus Nachfolger, 1985). All references to this work cite first the chapter number (designated “C”), the paragraph number (these begin anew with each chapter) and the page number.

(37) Why, one might ask, does faith in the Bible require certainty? Why does not mere belief suffice for what is after all a matter of faith? Here Chladenius was only keeping with his Protestant heritage. We must keep in mind that Luther's faith required not just belief but certainty. Luther understood faith as a form of intuitive or immediate certainty, which he opposed to not knowledge as such but *discursive* knowledge, i.e., that established through the medium of concepts, judgments and demonstration. Faith as mere belief involved trust in authority, which was the Catholic concept of faith he opposed. See Luther, *Werke, Kritische Gesamtausgabe, Weimarer Ausgabe* (Weimar: Hermann Böhlhaus Nachfolger, 1883), III, 99, 155, 400, 548. For a more detailed discussion of this aspect of Luther's concept of faith, see B. Lohse, *Ratio und Fides: Eine Untersuchung über die Ratio in der Theologie Luthers* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1958), pp. 38–40; and E. Seeberg, *Luthers Theologie* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1937), II, 16–22. It is noteworthy, however, that in insisting that faith be established by texts and evidence, Chladenius was less true to his Protestant heritage; for this involved transforming faith from an intuitive into a discursive concept. To make faith a matter of rational examination is to violate Luther's distinction between the earthly and heavenly realms.

(38) See Wolff, *Discursus praeliminaris de philosophia in genere* §2: “*Cognitio eorum, quae sunt atque fiunt...historica a nobis appellatur.*” *Werke* II/1.1, 2.

(39) *Ibid.*, §§1–3, *Werke* II/1.1, 1–2. On the tradition identifying empirical with historical knowledge, see Arno Seifert, *Cognitio historica: Die Geschichte als Namengeberin die frühzeitliche Empirie* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1976).

(40) Pace Henn, “Zur Hermeneutik des Chladenius,” p. 240.

(41) See section 1, note 10.

(42) Reill, *The German Enlightenment and the Rise of Historicism*, p. 110, sees Chladenius's views as the ancestor of Karl Mannheim's and the sociology of knowledge.

(43) See Leibniz, *Monadologie* §57 and *Théodicée* §147, in *Die philosophischen Schriften*, ed., C.I. Gerhardt (Berlin: Weidmann, 1875–90) VI, 616, 197.

(44) See Szondi, *Einführung*, pp. 85–6; Friederich, *Sprache und Geschichte*, pp. 214, 219.

(45) Friederich, *Sprache und Geschichte*, p. 211.

(46) Szondi, *Einführung*, pp. 82–3, regards the contradiction as irresolvable, and finds its source in Chladenius's “pre-critical” realism. Such a heavy Kantian bias is unnecessary and unfair. It is necessary to reconstruct the reasons for Chladenius's realism.

(47) Johann Martin Chladni, *Logica practica sive Problemata logica* (Leipzig: Lanckisius, 1742), Problem XXX, §43, Schol I, p. 35; *Vernünftige Gedanken* B4 §4; 69; and *Allgemeine Geschichtswissenschaft* C8§1; 202–5.

(48) All references to Chladenius's *Vernünftige Gedanken* will be designated VG. The book is divided into “Meditations” or “*Betrachtungen*” designated B. § designates a paragraph number, an Arabic numeral a page number.

(⁴⁹) This point is confused by Reill, *The German Enlightenment and the Rise of Historicism*, pp. 106, 107, who thinks Chladenius holds that human actions are in principle inexplicable. Reill does not consider Chladenius's model of causal explanation developed in the *Vernünfftige Gedanken*.

(⁵⁰) Peter Ahlwardt, *Vernünfftige und gründliche Gedancken von den Kräfften des menschlichen Verstandes und deren Gebrauch in der Erkenntniß der Wahrheit* (Greifswald: Weitbrecht, 1741); and Christian August Crusius, *Weg zur Gewißheit und Zuverlässigkeit der menschlichen Erkenntniß* (Leipzig: Gleditsch 1747).

(⁵¹) Chladenius, *Idolum saeculi: probabilitas* (Koburg: 1747).

(⁵²) *Vernünfftige Gedanken von dem Wahrscheinlichen und desselben gefährlichen Mißbrauche*, translated by U.G. Thorschmid (Greifswald: Weitbrecht, 1748). Reprint: Waltrop: Spenner, 1989.

(⁵³) For a brief account of Ahlwardt's tract, see Müller, *Chladenius*, pp. 114–16.

(⁵⁴) Wolff, *Deutsche Logik*, §2, *Werke I/1*, 115. Cf. *Discursus praeliminaris* §30, *Werke II/1.1*, 14.

Justus Möser and the Roots of Historicism

1. Möser and the historicist tradition

After Chladenius, the most important thinker in the historicist tradition is Justus Möser (1720–94). There has never been any controversy about Möser's central role in this tradition, and never did he suffer the neglect that befell Chladenius. Since the late nineteenth century, several prominent scholars—among them Dilthey, Fueter, von Below and von Srbik—have stressed Möser's contribution to historicism.¹ In his *Entstehung des Historismus* Meinecke gave Möser pride of place alongside Herder in the formation of the historicist tradition, and even dubbed Möser “the first pathfinder of historicism.”²

In the Anglophone world, however, Möser is scarcely known. Few, if any, of his writings have been translated into English. Even the name creates problems. Drop the umlaut dots above the “o”, the common practice of American and English libraries, and you are in trouble: Möser is confused with Moser, Johann Jakob Moser or his son Friedrich Moser, two prominent contemporaries with whom he quarreled.³ Given his obscurity, we do well to address the question: Who was Justus Möser?

For fifty years, Justus Möser was an administrator in the government of Osnabrück, a small ecclesiastical state or “prince-bishopric” (*Fürstbistum*) in northwestern Germany, which consisted in some forty-five square miles and 125,000 inhabitants. In 1744, while still a student, Möser was appointed secretary to the *Ritterschaft*, the corporate organization of the local nobility. A few years later the *Ritterschaft* gave him the title

advocatus patriae, making him chief defender of their financial interests. In 1762 he was appointed *Justarius beym Kriminalgericht*, head investigator in criminal cases. Finally, he became the *Consulent* (1764) and *Referender* (1768) of the Protestant government of Osnabrück. By holding all these positions, Möser made himself the indispensable chief administrator of his tiny principality. He was the leading negotiator and advocate for the government in all its treaties and businesses.

Osnabrück, the principality Möser served, was an oddity in the Holy Roman Empire. By a clause in the Peace of Westphalia (1648), the government had to alternate between Protestant and Roman Catholic. This curious arrangement would often lead to succession struggles and legal wrangles, during which Möser was called upon to defend the Protestant party. Although officially a theocracy, Osnabrück had in practice a mixed constitution: the top of the administrative hierarchies were in the hands of aristocrats; but the capital city of Osnabrück had an elected council, though the franchise was strictly limited to citizens owning substantial property. This odd principality set the context for almost all Möser's mature literary activity. For sixteen years, from 1766 to 1782, he edited a weekly local newspaper, the *Wöchentliche Osnabrückische Anzeigen*, for which he wrote many articles discussing local affairs. Some of these articles were collected by Möser's daughter, J.W.J. von Voigt, who published them in four volumes from 1774 to 1786 under the title *Patriotische Phantasien*. This work was the basis for Möser's literary fame.

Such was Möser the person, and such was Osnabrück, his place. But this brief account of both is likely only to increase the mystery: How could a bureaucrat from such a tiny principality, and one whose main writings concerned its provincial affairs, become so important? How indeed could he become a founder of historicism? The irony is that Möser became famous not despite but because of his locality. Locality was the main theme, the essential secret of his authorship. There is a great paradox behind all his writings: the universal significance of locality.

One explanation of the paradox is that Osnabrück was simply the vehicle for, and symbol of, Möser's political conservatism. Osnabrück represents the *Kleinstaat* of the Holy Roman Empire, the good old days of the old corporate order, before it was struck down by the modernizing forces of enlightened despotism and the French Revolution. The most recent, and best known, account of Möser's historical significance sees him as a conservative publicist, indeed as "the father of German conservatism," as the founder of a self-conscious conservative tradition in German intellectual life. We owe this portrait of Möser to two influential studies, one by Klaus Epstein and another by Karl Mannheim.⁴ It is unfortunate, however, that Möser acquired this

reputation, because the interpretation behind it is anachronistic and misleading. The main evidence for it rests on Möser's later opposition to the ideology of the French Revolution, and specifically his critique of natural right theory. But Möser's politics were to the left of some of the most staunch opponents of the Revolution, viz., Haller and the eudemionists; and his motivation for attacking natural rights was to defend local rights and self-government, not the enlightened absolutism of the *ancien régime*. No one would have been more surprised about his later reputation than Möser himself. For, during his long political career, he often advocated all kinds of reforms. His attitude toward change was pragmatic: fix the broken; leave alone the unbroken. To be sure, Möser admired the past, which he looked upon with profound nostalgia; but it is *what* he saw in the past, or *why* he felt nostalgia, that should define his political affiliation. And in this regard Möser was more a father of German liberalism than conservatism. What he saw in the past was his own political ideal: the freedom and equality of property-owning farmers. It was a vision comparable to that of Jefferson, Rousseau or Harrington. For just this reason, nineteenth-century German liberals made Möser their *spiritus rector*.⁵

Long before anyone ever heard of “conservatism,” Möser was a literary celebrity in Germany. Even before his death, he was widely acclaimed by his contemporaries. Among his admirers were Goethe, Hamann, Herder, Friedrich Schlegel, Thomas Abbt and Friedrich Nicolai.⁶ During the late eighteenth century, Möser's reputation rested partly on his advocacy of German literature against the Francophilia of Friedrich II,⁷ partly on his apology for the grotesque comic against the strictures of neo-classicism,⁸ and partly on his portrait of the mores of the German *Kleinstaat* in the *Patriotsiche Phantasien*. Möser's fame was also based on his historical work. It is no exaggeration to say: before Ranke, Möser was the most influential historian in Germany. J.S. Pütter, L.T. Spittler, A.L. Schlözer, Johannes von Müller, Niebuhr, Eichhorn, Jacob Grimm, Friedrich Waitz and Savigny all had great debts to him.⁹ Möser's chief claim to fame rested on his *Osnabrückische Geschichte*, which was widely hailed as the first holistic history of medieval Germany, the first work to combine the study of the culture, economics and politics of the German Middle Ages.

What makes Möser so important as a cultural figure—what makes him transcend his age and place—is his profound awareness of a basic problem of modernity: the rise of

rootlessness, the loss of belonging, the decline of attachment to time and place. Long before the romantics, Möser saw the need for, and the significance of, rootedness, belonging, attachment, feeling at home in the world. Hence the great importance of locality for him. This was the point behind his loving portraits of his hometown, his sympathetic account of the ancient Saxons in his *Osnabrückische Geschichte*, his spirited defense of local liberties and traditions. Möser deplored that these values were being steadily eroded by the main forces of the modern world—by increasing technology, enlightenment, and political centralization. In this respect Möser, for all his love of the past, was far ahead of his time. The reaction to modernity that we find in *Frühromantik* in the late 1790s is already fully present in Möser in the 1750s.

What makes Möser the father of historicism is precisely his recognition of the importance of rootedness, attachment and belonging. These would become fundamental values for the whole historicist tradition; but their first formulation appears clearly in Möser, who spearheaded its reaction against modernity. It is these values that are behind Möser's adoption of one fundamental and characteristic theme of historicism: the principle of individuality.¹⁰ The reason this principle became so important to him is precisely because it was the seat or locus of rootedness, attachment and belonging. What we are rooted in, attached to, or belong in, is *per necessitatem* unique and individual, this particular time and place. Hence the principle of individuality was for Möser the logical expression of, and sublimation for, his ideal of feeling at home in the world.

We are now able to take a stand on the most controversial question of Möser scholarship: whether Möser belongs to the Enlightenment.¹¹ If, as we have argued, Möser was committed to the value of rootedness, attachment and belonging, then to

just that extent he was opposed to the *Aufklärung*. For the *Aufklärung* stood for the very opposite of these values: its ideal man was the cosmopolitan, the *Weltbürger* whose critical reason detached him from time and place. More significantly, the *Aufklärung* stood for those very forces of modernity that were behind the erosion of Möser's fundamental values. It championed political centralization, the increasing use of technology, and the value of radical criticism. As we shall soon see, Möser was opposed to just these forces, especially political centralization and radical criticism.

Recognizing the significance of Möser's critique of the Enlightenment does not mean, of course, that he was against the Enlightenment *tout court*. Möser was indeed committed to central ideals of the *Aufklärung*: toleration, liberty of press, separation of church and state, the value of education, the cultivation of good taste. However, it is also plain that these points are not enough to make Möser pro-Enlightenment *tout court*. Those scholars who have stressed Möser's affinity with the *Aufklärung* have rightly insisted on placing him in his broader cultural context; but in doing so they have often missed what is distinctive, significant and innovative about him: namely, his stand against the forces of modernity for the sake of rootedness and belonging. The task of the following chapter will be to explore and explain this side of Möser, the side that makes him the founder of historicism and critic of the *Aufklärung*. We will trace the sources of Möser's belief in the value of roots and belonging, which we will find not in any anti-intellectualism conservatism but in his skepticism and ethics.¹²

2. Early education

Möser began the historical studies that made him famous only in the 1760s, when he was more than forty years old. He informs us in the preface to the *Osnabrückische Geschichte* that he formed his intention to write the history of his homeland only late in his life.¹³ The person best qualified for that task, he believed, was his close friend, Carl Lodtmann. But Lodtmann had died young; and Möser had access to special sources about the last century that had been unavailable to his friend. In the attempt to explain these sources, Möser said, he was forced to do further research into the past, until in the end he found himself writing a completely new history.

Möser's account of the genesis of his work makes it seem like an accident, the result of his friend's untimely death and his own good fortune in having access to special sources. Yet hindsight tells a different story. The more we examine the facts behind Möser's intellectual development, the more his historical work appears a necessity. After all, it was not mere chance driving Möser down that historical labyrinth. There

was an inner demon at work. What made it tick? To answer that question, we must consider Möser's background and education.¹⁴

Möser was born into a burgher family, one having old and deep roots in Osnabrück history. His great-grandfather, grandfather and father had been government officials, so Justus only followed the family tradition. The Möser family was very self-conscious of its bourgeois status. They were proud of owing their place in the world to their education, talents and efforts, not to any accident of birth.¹⁵ Möser's official position as secretary to the Osnabrück nobility was, however, a daily reminder of his humble birth. The repressed humiliation led to resentment,¹⁶ whose outlet was his published work. It was no accident that Möser would later write the *Osnabrückische Geschichte* to vindicate the role of the burgher in Osnabrück history.¹⁷

Since, for generations, Osnabrück had been the seat of the Möser family, it was only natural for Justus to identify strongly with his local roots. It was also only natural that Möser would later want to write the history of Osnabrück: that would be a study of his own roots, a means of self-awareness. It was indeed in this family context that Möser first thought of writing about the history of Osnabrück. His family was well-educated—grandfather and father were *Magistern*—and father and son would often discuss intellectual and legal issues at home. When Justus asked his father's advice about dissertation topics, Johann suggested themes from Osnabrück history.¹⁸ And so it has been wisely said: “The seed for the *Osnabrückische Geschichte*, although slow in growing, was planted at home in Möser's youth.”¹⁹

Möser's early schooling was typical of eighteenth-century Germany. He attended the local Gymnasium, where he learned Latin and the classics. However, one fact about his early education stands out: a strong foreign influence. One part of this influence was

French. Though it had no court, Osnabrück still clung to the old bilingual courtly ideal, so that learning French was a prerequisite for social advancement. It was probably for this reason that Möser's mother, who loved French literature, made a point of teaching her son that language. He learned to speak and write fluent French—nearly half of his correspondence is in French—and he later conducted much of his daily business in it. Möser's first intellectual passions were for French authors. He admired Voltaire and Rousseau; but his great loves were Pierre Marivaux (1688–1763) and Charles Saint Evremont (1613–1703). Both writers left their mark. Marivaux's *Le Spectateur français* (1722–23) was a model for his later moral weeklies; and Saint Evremont's *Reflexions sur les divers génies du peuple Romain* would have been invaluable for his growth as an historian.²⁰ Saint Evremont had stressed the importance of studying the whole culture of a nation, and the great difference between cultures of the past and those of the present.

The other part of the foreign influence was English. Since, beginning in 1761, Osnabrück had a Protestant bishop, and since that bishopric traditionally belonged to the House of Hannover, which stood under the British crown, the sovereign of Osnabrück was officially British, and no less than the second son of King George III, Frederick, Duke of York. Since Frederick was still in his minority when he inherited this title, Möser was his official representative and spokesman. And so Möser was officially a British subject; indeed, he proudly and happily regarded himself as his majesty's most loyal and obedient servant. And so it happened that the *advocatus patriae*, the self-styled German patriot, really worked for the British crown! Möser admired British culture no less than French. He read English, even spoke it some; and he went to London on official business for several months in the winter of 1763–64, culminating in a meeting with the King himself. After his trip to London he became somewhat disillusioned with English life and politics;²¹ still, the influence remained with him all his life.

The strong French and English influence on Möser is worth noting, not least because generations of German scholars loved to stress his nationalist credentials. The truth of the matter is more complicated: Justus Möser, despite himself, was a very cosmopolitan man. It would take such a cosmopolitan to appreciate the value of locality.

Möser's university education began late, when he was already twenty years old. He first went to the University of Jena, which he attended from 1740 to 1742. Jena was then an intellectual backwater, deserving none of the renown it later won in the 1790s. Möser's main interest there was philosophy, which he studied with zeal. He went to J.G. Darjes' lectures on *Naturrecht*, the Institutes and Pandects, giving him his first

exposure to the natural and Roman law traditions.²² He also spent much time and energy reading the writings of Christian Wolff, who then dominated the philosophical scene in Germany. Wolff represented for Möser, appropriately enough, the epitome of enlightened rationalism. In his early letters to Lodtmann, Möser describes some discussions surrounding Wolff's philosophy and examines the details of some of his arguments.²³ These letters demonstrate intense involvement in philosophical issues and complete familiarity with philosophical methods.²⁴ They are noteworthy because they show that his later skepticism about systematic and technical philosophy came from an insider's disillusionment rather than an outsider's distaste. There was a time in the 1740s—a precise dating is impossible—when Möser became a skeptic, mistrustful of Wolff's scholastic methodology and its attempt to solve problems by *a priori* reasoning. Some of Möser's early essays, which we will consider below, show his familiarity with the Pyrrhonian tradition, which he perhaps acquired from Saint-Evremond, Hume or Montaigne.

At Jena Möser studied not only philosophy but also law. While he pursued philosophy with passion and from personal interest, he read law out of duty and as preparation for a career. He learned law from one of the standard textbooks of the day, Wilhelm Lauterbach's *Compendium juris*, on which he wrote reams of notes. Since history in the early eighteenth century was the handmaiden of jurisprudence, Möser inevitably came into contact with history too. He went to the lectures of C.G. Buder (1693–1763), who used as a textbook G.C. Gebauer's *Grundriss zu einer umständlichen Historie der vornehmste Europäische Staaten* (Leipzig, 1738). Möser owned a copy of Gebauer's work and took copious notes on it. There is some dispute, however, whether Möser could have learned anything from Gebauer. According to some scholars,²⁵ Gebauer had nothing to offer, because he treated history in the customary fashion as a chronology of kings, dynasties and battles and as a matter of memorizing names and dates. Notoriously, he said history is a past-time, best read in the afternoon after a large lunch. According to others, however, Gebauer was a decisive influence on Möser.²⁶ They claim that he was one of the first Göttingen historians to give history a status equal to jurisprudence, and that his methodology and conception of history were far ahead of the day, viz., he stressed the importance of a careful study of primary sources, and the need to investigate causes instead of just narrating the course of events.

After two years in Jena, Möser enrolled at the University of Göttingen in the autumn of 1742, where he would study until the end of 1743. Göttingen was then a

very new university, having formally established itself only in 1737. Under the innovative leadership of Adolf von Münchhausen, and with the sponsorship of King George II of England, Elector of Hannover, Göttingen was rapidly becoming the most progressive university in Germany. In the attempt to educate capable administrators, the university placed greater emphasis on law, economics and politics than theology. It was later in Göttingen that history first become a discipline in its own right in Germany, though in the 1740s it was still subordinate to jurisprudence. Dutifully, Möser continued his legal and historical studies in Göttingen. There he attended the lectures of Gebauer, whose textbook he had already used in Jena, and those of J.J. Schmauß (1690–1757), professor of history, *Naturrecht* and international law.²⁷ Schmauß was a master of *Reichsgeschichte*, a peculiar German genre, the study of the political and legal history of a German state. Though the genre often degenerated into chronology and genealogy, Schmauß pursued it in an innovative way, stressing the value of having a master narrative and weaving together all the different strands of history into an organic whole. These too were perhaps important lessons for the young Möser.

Whatever Möser learned from Gebauer and Schmauß—and we can only conjecture about it—was of little immediate importance to him. For the passion of his Göttingen days was not history, and not even philosophy, but poetry. The young Möser began to write verse, and he soon gained a reputation for his mastery of the art. He became a member of the *Deutsche Gesellschaft in Göttingen*, a literary society modeled after the one founded by Gottsched in Leipzig. The purpose of these societies was to cultivate German literature and poetry. For their meetings, members would read verse in High German or essays on the history of German literature. It was probably in the *Deutsche Gesellschaft* in Göttingen that Möser met Albrecht von Haller (1708–77), the Swiss poet and physiologist. Möser was a great admirer of Haller, whom he later called Germany's “first poet”.²⁸ It has been suggested that Haller's depiction of the idyllic Swiss life in *Die Alpen* was the model for Möser's account of the early Anglo-Saxons in the *Osnabrückische Geschichte*.²⁹

The early 1740s was an especially exciting time for German literature, and a very controversial one for the literary societies. For it was in these years that the *Dichterkrieg* exploded between Gottsched and his Swiss critics, J.J. Bodmer and J.J. Breitinger. The dispute between Gottsched and the Swiss dwelt on many issues, but it was fundamentally about the role and limits of reason in literature.³⁰ Gottsched represented the standpoint of an uncompromising rationalism. He insisted that good poetry is perfectly intelligible, consisting in clear and distinct concepts, and that it should be governed by

definite rules. Bodmer and Breitinger, however, defended a more limited rationalism, stressing the *sui generis* status of feeling and imagination. They argued that there are qualities of poetry—the new, mysterious and wonderful—that have aesthetic merit precisely because they are *not* perfectly intelligible or reducible to definite rules.

What was the young Möser's stand on these issues? Given the issue at stake in the dispute—the sovereignty of reason in the aesthetic realm—the question is of some importance for determining his relation to the *Aufklärung*. Unfortunately, there is no simple answer to it. There has been a sharp difference of opinion about Möser's position in this controversy. One view is that Möser was a *Gottschedianer* in his Göttingen days.³¹ The style of his verse, and his membership in the *Deutsche Gesellschaft*, seemed to be sufficient evidence to place him among this party. But this was later sharply contested by others,³² who insisted that Möser was really sympathetic to the Swiss. The real truth of the matter is that Möser, like Lessing, Nicolai and Mendelssohn, tried to walk a middle path between the warring parties. Möser had indeed much sympathy for the Swiss, whom he defended for their efforts on behalf of “true German art.”³³ Nevertheless, he was not entirely on the Swiss side. For he questioned the current fashion for the novel and wonderful in poetry, and he argued along classical rationalist lines that all aesthetic qualities are ultimately governed by rules.³⁴ Although Möser wrote in 1781 that Germany would not have a poetic language if Gottsched had won his battle against the Swiss,³⁵ we must be careful not to read Möser's later opinions into his Göttingen years.

At the end of 1743 Möser left Göttingen without having completed his academic degree. Waiting for him in Osnabrück was his position as secretary to the *Ritterschaft*. During his university years, Möser developed a strong interest in history—he had contemplated writing a dissertation on Osnabrück in the Middle Ages—and he had learned much about the methods and standards of writing it. It is striking, however, that he never actually wrote history or engaged in research. This would soon change, however, in his position as secretary. Research into history now became a regular part of his profession. Möser often had to do research regarding the rights and genealogies of noble families; and in legal cases he would have to study the history of a dispute and the origins of contested rights and claims. Apart from research for legal cases, Möser wrote short essays on historical themes, and he even started with some friends a journal

devoted to Osnabrück history.³⁶ The decision to write a history of Osnabrück was still in the distant future; but the inclination and aptitude for it was already fully in place.

3. A young Aufklärer?

Möser's first prose writings were fifty articles he wrote for his own "moral weekly", appropriately entitled *Wochenblätter*.³⁷ These articles, which appeared from January to December 1746, were eventually published in a single volume in 1747 under the title *Versuch einiger Gemälde von den Sitten unsrer Zeit*. With collaborators, Möser began a new moral weekly in January 1747, which he entitled *Die deutsche Zuschauerin*.³⁸ This journal, conceived as a continuation of the *Wochenblätter*, folded in July 1747.

The moral weekly was a favorite genre of the *Aufklärung*. Its aim was to enlighten the general public: to expose prejudice, superstition and folly, to encourage good taste, and to instruct people how to live well. It was not a newspaper but a journal containing articles on a wide variety of subjects. The articles appeared weekly, and were usually very short, rarely more than seven pages. Since they were addressed to a broad audience, their style was literary rather than academic. The first models for the moral weeklies were British: Addison's and Steele's *Tatler* (1709–11), *Spectator* (1711–12) and *Guardian* (1713). These had many French and German imitators. The genre flourished especially in Germany, where more than 180 moral weeklies appeared between 1713 and 1761.³⁹ The most important precedents for Möser were Bodmer's and Breitinger's *Die Discourse der Mahlern* (1721), and Gottsched's *Der Biedermann* (1727–29) and *Die Vernünftigen Tadlerinnen* (1725–27).

True to form, Möser's moral weeklies shared the general goal of enlightenment. Many of his articles expound typical Enlightenment values: thinking for oneself (315–16), mistrust of religious zealotry and enthusiasm (152), cosmopolitanism (9, 153, 296–7), philanthropy (191), the value of entrepreneurship and the creation of wealth (302). Although Möser embraced the general ideal of enlightenment, he also set definite limits to it. His weeklies never treated religion, perhaps to avoid controversy. It was also Möser's express policy in the *Wochenblätter* not to discuss politics. He justified this on the grounds that matters of state were beyond the ken of a private man (104). Politicians rarely gave the true reasons for their actions; and, because these reasons were concealed in the cabinet room, judgments about their actions were often wrong. A citizen does best, Möser advises, to refrain from judging matters of state and to trust his sovereign to do what is best for his subjects (108). Such self-imposed restrictions were commonplace among *Aufklärer* in the 1740s.

Given that Möser's moral weeklies were early and popular publications, they might seem of little importance for his later philosophy. For just this reason, Möser's first articles have often been passed over by scholars.⁴⁰ But this is a serious mistake. These articles contain *in nuce* Möser's general philosophical outlook, laying down the foundation for his ethics and belief in the importance of belonging and having a place in the world.

A central interest of these early articles is human happiness, what it consists in and how it is attained. Möser reflects much on the classical question of the highest good, and strives to find a reasonable compromise to the ancient conflict between epicureanism and stoicism. It is striking how close Möser's views come to classical Epicureanism. He accepts one of its cardinal tenets: that happiness consists in pleasure. Hence we learn that we have a natural drive for pleasure (209); that the task of the understanding is to seek the greatest pleasure (209); that the end of providence is for us to achieve pleasure in this life (144); and that pleasure is the motive for even our most benevolent actions (336). Möser also praises Epicurus's view that friendship is the greatest of all the virtues (14). In some respects, though, he is very critical of Epicurus. He is especially critical of Epicurus's teaching that true happiness comes from retiring from social and political life (28). Although Möser concedes to Epicurus that everyone has the right to pursue happiness, he denies that this also gives them the right to avoid duty and responsibility. Acceptance of one's place in society, and participation in one's role in political life, are essential constituents of happiness. The whole idea that we should retire from the social and political world sounds like so much sour grapes: because we think we did not get the recognition we deserve, we take our revenge by turning our back on the world and depriving it of our services (26–7).

In stressing the importance of life in society and state, Möser was siding with the classical critics of the Epicureans: the stoics. Much of his ethics is heavily indebted to the stoic ideal of civic responsibility, according to which we have a duty to participate in social and political life. He did not endorse, however, other aspects of the stoic ethic. The stoic view that the highest good consists in virtue alone he rejects as too idealistic, because the average person cannot forget his misery simply through contemplating his virtue (35). Möser also questions whether the stoic sages really were so virtuous after all. When one examines their motives, it turns out they love virtue only for the sake of honor (215).

As these criticisms of Epicureanism and stoicism suggest, Möser's own ethic is eclectic, a synthesis of Epicureanism and stoicism. His ethical ideal combines Epicurean pleasure with stoic duty. Thus the highest good is realized when we find pleasure in doing our duties, when we enjoy fulfilling our social and political commitments (29). True happiness, Möser teaches, consists in contentment with one's station and lot in

life (34). There is no more tranquil and pleasant life, he writes, than to fulfill your vocation in a dignified manner (144). Here, then, in the young Möser's account of the highest good, we find the basis for his belief in the importance of having roots, of identifying with and accepting one's world. This belief arises from no conservative or patriotic sentiment but from a reasoned account of the good life.

This ethic takes on more concrete shape when we consider Möser's specific guidelines for achieving the highest good. There are three such guidelines. First, we should realize that what makes us happy is not things themselves but the attitude we have toward them. So if we train our minds to have the right attitude, we can be as happy in a hut as in a palace (34–5). Second, we should accept our lot and stop whining. A person who is unsatisfied with his place in life would also be unsatisfied in all other places (321). We love to complain about things only because it flatters our vanity: it is our way of saying that we deserve so much better than what we have (121). Third, we should avoid chasing after honor, riches and power. These pursuits are doomed to frustration because there is no limit to these things: the more we get, the more we want to have. The secret of happiness is to learn to limit our desires to what we have within our power to achieve; and this means that we have to learn to control our imagination, which makes us restless by holding out the prospect of more honor, riches and power. All these guidelines have a clear classical provenance: they are commonplaces from the writings of Epicurus and the stoics.

These early articles are interesting not only because they expound Möser's theory of the highest good, but also because they set forth his early skepticism, the foundation for so much of his later political and historical views. This skepticism comes clearly to the fore when Möser bluntly declares—*pace* all the ambitions and efforts of Christian Wolff—that we finite human beings will never achieve the ideal of a perfect science (82). We are warned that knowledge, if we ever attain it, is not the great good it is made out to be. Often in this life it is better to be ignorant, because the truth can be unbearable (81–2). Möser illustrates this point with the story of Sextus, a young skeptic, who lives a contented life because he knows only what he needs to satisfy his modest desires (83). Unfortunately, though, Sextus grows weary of simplicity and contentment; he wants to know more so that he can find new and greater pleasures. A wise old magician grants his wish; but the gift of greater insight proves unbearable: Sextus sees through all the selfish motives of people, and no longer trusts his wife or friends. He suffers terribly because he is no longer content in his world. The story ends with Sextus begging to be rid of the gift he once so longed to have.

As this parable suggests, there was a close connection between Möser's skepticism and ethics. The *ataraxia* of the ancient skeptics, their peace of mind and self-possession, came straight from their method of doubt. If we cannot know anything—if the search for reasons goes on *ad infinitum*—then *a fortiori* we should not trouble ourselves about knowing the ultimate explanation of things. We should not bother ourselves about knowing what the gods want, or what reason or the law demands of us. All such efforts end in the morass of doubt, so that it is better to accept things just as they are. We

should learn to reconcile ourselves to the world as it stands and find our place within it. Thus Möser's skepticism was another potent source of his ethic of acceptance and belonging. In the venerable tradition of Montaigne and Hume, Möser made doubt the defender of custom and tradition.

In tune with his defense of skepticism, Möser's articles often preach the value of deception and illusion. He thinks not only that we should place limits on the attempt to know, but that we should also accept illusions even when we know that they are false. The happiness of most people comes from their allowing themselves to be deceived (31, 82, 149–51). What is the secret of marital happiness? It is what Möser calls “honest deception” (*Ehrliche Verstellung*), which happens when a couple practice mutual flattery. Each partner knows that he or she is not the most desirable person in the world; but they say that anyway, because it tickles their vanity (68). Deception is most important in politics, Möser thinks, because here we cannot survive if we are honest. How successful we are in the political world depends on how well we play “the art of deception” (109–11). Those who insist on taking the moral high ground in politics pay a great penalty: they step into their enemy's minefield and get exploded along with all their moral honor. Here, in the young Möser's defense of deception, we find clearly stated the *Realpolitik* that will guide much of his later thinking.⁴¹

Another side to Möser's skepticism in these early articles is his doubts about morality. Möser questions whether people ever act on strictly moral motives, and whether there is such a thing in this world as pure virtue. He has nothing but contempt for those moral idealists who complain about the lack of real virtue in the world (164–5). If we demand pure virtue, we end with nothing, because it is only human nature that vanity and selfishness enter as motives into all moral actions. An examination of the causes of human actions—the non-moral factors promoting virtue and hindering vice—show that there is no element in them that is the result of moral motives alone (124–6). All people are virtuous for a reason, Möser argues, and the reason has nothing to do with virtue itself; they are virtuous because it is the best way for them to attain honor, pleasure or wealth. To prove his point that the belief in pure virtue is an illusion, Möser tells the story of five “moral transformations” where a person who believes he has pure virtue ends out engaging in *immoral* actions to vindicate this very belief (209–29). The stoic who claims to find complete satisfaction in virtue alone, for example, shows that he is really driven by the need for honor, because when someone slanders his reputation he resorts to all kinds of immoral means to uphold it.

Despite his self-imposed embargo, Möser did occasionally discuss politics in the *Wochenblätter*. The most important of these contraband articles is a defense of serfdom.⁴² This later became the most notorious aspect of Möser's politics; but it is already

fully stated in this early article. When foreigners discover that people in Westphalia often pay 20,000 Reichsthaler to become serfs, Möser writes, they are utterly amazed; but that is simply because they do not know the specific context or history of the institution. The serf in Westphalia, he explains, does not simply rent the land, for the land “in a certain sense” (*gewissermaßen*) belongs to him. He is the master of the land, which he makes use of as he wishes; and he has rights of tenure. Without the serf’s consent, the lord cannot change anything on the land; and if the lord does not observe such rights, the serf can take him to court. Just as the serf inherits the land, so he has the right to bequeath it to his children, which gives the family great security. Of course, the lord has the right to sell the land, and in doing so he sells the serf along with it. This is what people find so objectionable about serfdom: the serf is sold just as if he were a piece of property. But, Möser notes, this does not trouble the serf, who still has the right to stay on the land; and it is no worse than what princes do when they sell whole territories with all the inhabitants in them. Whatever its drawbacks, the whole system of serfdom is much better than modern systems of leasing the land, where the leaser has no right to stay on the land when the owner sells it, and where the leaser has no motivation to improve the land for his progeny. If there is crop failure on leased land, the leaser will simply go elsewhere and leave the problem to the owner. The defense Möser provides of serfdom is reasonable enough; but this leaves aside the question whether serfdom, as he portrays it, corresponded to real Westphalian conditions.⁴³ But we will leave aside these issues here. The article is more significant because it anticipates a favorite historicist theme: that one should not judge the customs and institutions of one country by those of another; before making such judgments, it is important to examine the history and context of local customs and institutions. So, already in this early article, we can detect Möser’s defense of localism, his mistrust of general moral principles in judging concrete political arrangements.

When we consider all these themes of Möser’s early articles, one underlying attitude clearly emerges: the need to accept the world and to mistrust moral idealism. The two themes go hand-in-hand: we need to accept the world on its own terms because moral idealism, which would attempt to change it, proves hollow and hypocritical. Möser doubts that the political world is governed by moral principles, that people act for moral reasons, or that moral principles are a reliable guide to judging human institutions. The subversive message behind this mistrust is that there is an insurmountable gap between theory and practice, between moral principles and action in the real world. This shows that the young Möser, if only implicitly and latently, was profoundly skeptical of the *Aufklärung*. For the *Aufklärung* was above all a movement for reform, i.e., its aim was to overcome the gap between ideal and reality. In one form or another, all *Aufklärer* wanted to make the social and political world a more rational, a more moral, place. The thrust of Möser’s early articles, though, is that that this program could

not, and indeed should not, be achieved. For it undermines the one value of which we can be sure: attachment to place, acceptance of one's lot, feeling at home in the world.

The standard wisdom about the young Möser is that he was an *Aufklärer* during his early moral weekly phase.⁴⁴ Though this has some truth to it, it is also simplistic. For the very content of his early articles show that the young Möser was also already moving beyond the *Aufklärung*. These articles state themes that Möser will later *self-consciously* and *explicitly* deploy against it. That reason cannot know the truth, that it cannot guide human action, that prejudice and superstition are valuable guides to human action, that general principles are misleading in judging institutions and traditions—all these themes, so important for Möser's later critique of the *Aufklärung*, are already present in his moral weeklies. Running throughout Möser's early philosophy there was indeed a deep tension. The aim of his moral weeklies is undermined by their content. Their aim was to spread enlightenment; their content taught that this is impossible, indeed dangerous. The irony is at its richest when Möser attempts to enlighten us by arguing for the value of illusion and deception.

4. Moral theory

Sometime in the early 1750s, Möser wrote the first draft of his most substantial philosophical tract, *Der Wert wohlgezogener Neigungen und Leidenschaften*, which he polished and published only in 1757.⁴⁵ This short work, which is only some fifty pages, is Möser's best statement of his general moral theory, which brings together many of the scattered reflections in the moral weeklies. The ideas formulated here are fundamental for his later philosophy, especially for his critique of rationalism and the *Aufklärung*.⁴⁶ It also reveals a central influence behind Möser's thought: Anthony Ashley Cooper, Third Earl of Shaftesbury. Shaftesbury's writings had become well known in Germany by the 1740s, and Möser was only one of many thinkers who fell under their spell. Since, as a loyal British subject, Möser admired all things British, he would have felt a special affinity with the thought of the Third Earl.⁴⁷

Möser's tract is essentially an apology for Shaftesbury's moral theory in *An Inquiry concerning Virtue or Merit* (1699). In this work Shaftesbury had undertaken a fundamental reevaluation of the role of the passions in moral life. Rather than seeing them as the source of original sin, as the Calvinists had done, he made them the mainspring and criterion of virtue itself. He argued that the goodness or evil of an action had to stem from "the natural Temper or Bent of the Affections", and that whatever we do has to be ultimately motivated by passion.⁴⁸ Virtue, for Shaftesbury, is not the product of the intellect or reason. He concedes to reason a vital role in moral life: it makes us aware of our passions; it restrains them; and it determines the best means to ends. However, he denies that reason alone determines ends themselves, which ultimately have to be set by the inclinations and executed by the passions.

The young Möser wholeheartedly endorses Shaftesbury's argument, which he finds a potent battering ram against the pretenses of Wolffian rationalism. In the preface to his tract he explains that he had planned for a long time to vindicate the role of the inclinations and passions in all forms of virtue, and thus to counteract "the prejudice"—i.e., the Wolffian dogma—that virtue is only the fruit of the intellect (223). Though the Earl of Shaftesbury had already put these ideas into "a beautiful moral system," his system had been severely criticized on the grounds that it undermines virtue to make it depend so much on the passions. It was Möser's aim to defend Shaftesbury against this criticism. To do so, he planned to demonstrate that the inclinations and passions are necessary not only for *moral* virtue but all forms of virtue, where "virtue" is understood in a broad sense as whatever makes something good.

Unfortunately, Möser does not explain precisely the objection he intends to answer, still less his strategy for dealing with it. However, we can reconstruct both objection and answer in the light of his other writings.⁴⁹ The objection that troubles Möser is proto-Kantian: if all virtue depends on inclination and passion, then it loses its moral stature, because moral duty requires that we act selflessly and impartially, whereas inclination and passion makes action selfish and partial. Alternatively, moral virtue requires that we act for the sake of duty alone; but if our actions spring from inclination and passion, they are also motivated for reasons other than duty. Möser's response to this objection is to admit the point that, in this strict sense, there is indeed no moral virtue; for psychology teaches us that inclination always figures into the motives for our actions. However, he does not conclude from this that there is no such thing as virtue at all; he proposes instead a different way of measuring virtue. We should measure virtue not by its motives, but by its *application* or *consequences*. Just as we measure the virtue of all things—the virtue of a horse or iron—by its effectiveness and application, so we should measure moral virtue in the same way.

This argument is problematic, however, because it seems to endorse a crude kind of consequentialism, i.e., it makes moral merit depend entirely on the *effects* of an action alone. Such a position casts aside the voluntary element involved in moral virtue, allowing no moral difference between the actions of an egoist and those of a philanthropist as long as they have the same effects. Although this seems the direct consequence of Möser's argument, there is reason to think that it is not his full or considered position. For he clearly does think that there should be a voluntary element involved in moral virtue, and that this voluntary element makes a difference to the moral status of an action. Hence he makes a distinction between inclinations (*Neigungen*) and passions (*Leidenschaften*), where inclinations involve a direction of will and where passions themselves are morally neutral, their good or evil depending on the use one makes of them (237). Möser's more considered position therefore seems to be that a morally good action is one that proceeds from the right inclinations and not simply one that has beneficial consequences. Since having the right inclinations is for him also a matter of having a certain character, i.e., a steady disposition to act on certain inclinations, he also holds that moral worth rests on the character of the agent. There is a voluntary element involved in character, viz., the constant inclination to do the good. Reformulated along these lines, Möser's theory still remains controversial. It is the very reverse of Kant's famous thesis that an action done for the sake of duty has more moral worth than one done from benevolence. Möser's theory rests on a conflicting intuition: that it is morally better to be moved by benevolent inclinations than a sense of duty alone.

Though Möser's tract was greatly indebted to Shaftesbury, it was highly innovative in Germany in the 1750s. It was in the vanguard of the *Sturm und Drang* movement of the 1760s, which would later proclaim the independence of the passions from the hegemony of reason. The *Stürmer und Dränger* rebelled against Wolff's rationalist psychology, which made the passions nothing more than confused perceptions of the good. When Möser complained against "the prejudice" that virtue is the result of the understanding alone he most probably already had in mind Wolff's psychology, which he would have studied during his Jena years. According to Wolff's *Deutsche Ethik*, affects are conscious appetites and aversions, where appetites and aversions arise of necessity from the representation of good or evil.⁵⁰ Knowledge of good or evil is a sufficient determining ground of the will, such that we *must* will what we clearly and distinctly perceive to be good.⁵¹ Hence Wolff's psychology makes the passions functions of the power of representation, which is *the* fundamental power of the soul. Regarding virtue, Wolff makes it too a function of our intellectual powers. Virtue is nothing more than the steady habit or aptitude to act according to representations of natural law, where natural law is the means to achieve human perfection and

happiness.⁵² In making all these powers of the soul—*affect*, *volition* and *virtue*—depend on our intellectual powers, specifically our capacity to know the good, Wolff had provided a psychological foundation for enlightenment: if we only use our reason to know the good, we will also want it and act upon it.

Boldly, Möser reversed the Wolffian scheme. He makes appetites or aversions themselves the sufficient source of good or evil; they are not the results of representations of good and evil; on the contrary, these representations are the result of the appetites and aversions themselves. Möser therefore champions the famous Humean view regarding the relationship between reason and passion: “Reason is, and ought to be, the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them.”⁵³ As Möser himself formulated the point: reason is “the eternal pimp of the human passions.”⁵⁴

Why was Möser so attracted to Shaftesbury's theory? For the same reason, I would suggest, as the young Francis Hutcheson and David Hume: it seemed to provide a foundation for morals immune to skepticism. The skeptic could doubt the reasoning given for moral principles; he could always find holes in the philosopher's deduction of the principles of natural law. What he could not doubt, however, is moral feeling. Feeling arises spontaneously and naturally, so that we cannot question or repress it. While I can doubt the general principle that I should help someone in need, I cannot doubt the fact that I feel pity for them and an urge to help them. There is a striking passage in Shaftesbury's *Moralists* where Theocles argues against Philocles, who has fallen into a fit of despair about the value of life, that he can cure himself of skepticism if he only reflects on his inner feelings.⁵⁵ Although we can doubt abstract reasoning, Theocles argues, we cannot doubt the simple fact that we take pleasure in helping our friends. This feeling alone suffices to show that we value friendship. It was from this passage that Möser took his cue. Hence he explicitly follows Shaftesbury in arguing that the voice of feeling trumps all the doubts of the intellect (244), and in making the feeling of friendship his paradigm for moral feeling (249–51).

Prima facie it seems odd to find Möser attracted to Shaftesbury's theory of virtue on these grounds. For we have already seen how in *Die Wochenblätter* Möser loved to play the skeptic, and how this led him to question whether there is such a thing as pure moral motivation. But Möser, like Hume, was willing to take his skepticism only so far. He was always troubled that, if taken to an extreme, it could undermine moral motives and sanction selfishness. Hence in the very beginning of his tract he declares that it is “a very sad business” when one attempts to expose “the falsehood of human motivations” (223). No less than Shaftesbury, Hutcheson and Hume, Möser disputed the thesis of

Hobbes, Mandeville and the French moral skeptics that the *sole* motivation for human action is self-interest. Shaftesbury's theory of virtue attracted Möser, then, not least because it provided a limit to *his own* skepticism.

Now, though, a question of consistency arises. How could Möser question the existence of pure moral motivation, independent of self-interest, and deny that self-interest is the sole motivation for human action? The answer lies in Möser's advocacy of another characteristic Shaftesburyian doctrine: that there is a complete harmony between self-interest and morality.⁵⁶ Möser followed the Third Earl in thinking that the greatest pleasures in life come from performing our moral duties, from treating others as if they were ourselves. Because of the close connection between self-interest and moral action, it becomes impossible to distinguish between them (242, 243). Both are involved inextricably as motives for all moral actions. If there is no such thing as pure moral motivation apart from self-interest, neither is there such a thing as pure pleasure detached from moral motivation. Of course, there are those odd people who are utter egoists; but their very oddity shows that they are not paradigms of human nature or happiness.

Shaftesbury's philosophy was crucial for Möser in another respect: it was most probably the ultimate source of his organic view of the state and society, which is central to his historicism. This organic doctrine appears fully explicitly in Shaftesbury, who espouses a social and political holism, according to which the identity and welfare of each individual depends on state and society as a whole. Since each individual is inseparable from the whole, he benefits himself in serving the whole, and he harms himself in acting against it. This moral holism appears in the very first pages of the *Inquiry* where Shaftesbury assesses virtue or vice according to whether a person's character is a functioning part of the social organism.⁵⁷ Shaftesbury developed his holism in the *Moralists*, arguing that the *principium individuationis* consists in the ideas of a purpose and organic form, i.e., a whole that precedes its parts and makes them possible.⁵⁸ He insisted that this idea could be applied not only to each individual, but to nature as a whole, "the All in One."⁵⁹ That Möser accepted and applied Shaftesbury's own holism there cannot be any doubt. In his tract he stresses how each individual is part of the social whole, and how the virtue of his actions depend on his contributing to it (242–3). Though the source of Möser's organicism is usually held to be Leibniz's monadology,⁶⁰ there is no historical evidence for this view. All the evidence points instead to Shaftesbury.

There is still one final respect in which Shaftesbury might have been important for Möser. Fundamental to Möser's whole moral outlook, as we have seen, was his patriotism, his ethic of civic responsibility, according to which the end of life, the

highest good, comes from fulfilling one's place in society and state. This moral outlook already appears fully and firmly in Shaftesbury's writings. In his *Inquiry* Shaftesbury had argued that we must be completely devoted to the good of society—we must have what he calls “*Intire Affection*”—if we are to have the benefit of the great pleasures of social life.⁶¹ If we are only half-hearted in our devotion, we do not receive the esteem of others, nor do we enjoy the full pleasures of participating with them in some common enterprise. Of all human affections, Shaftesbury wrote elsewhere, the most becoming human nature is “love of country.”⁶² We are social and political animals, and therefore find our happiness only from participating in civil and social life. Love of country is the very pinnacle of our moral virtue, the clearest proof of devotion to communal ends.

Such, in crude summary, were the leading ideas, and influences upon, Möser's early moral psychology. Needless to say, such a psychology has profound implications regarding the powers of reason and limits of enlightenment. It means *pace* Wolff that reason cannot set the goals of our action; that it cannot by itself motivate the will to act; that people cannot be expected to desire and act on the good even if they are made aware of it. This creates a gap, therefore, between theory and practice, reason and action. However rational the plans of an *Aufklärer* for social and political reform, he cannot expect that people can act on them, or even be willing to act on them. Möser did not hesitate to draw these conclusions in some of his later writings. In his “Sendschreiben an den Herrn Vikar in Savoyen,”⁶³ for example, he argued that the natural religion of Rousseau's Savoyard vicar would never be sufficient for a public religion for the simple reason that people do not act according to principles of reason. Their sensibility is a much stronger force behind their actions than their reason. “What is man?” Möser asks. And he answers: “An animal, who should be tied to the chains of its imagination.”

5. Opposition to the Enlightenment

Möser's opposition to the Enlightenment is partly implicit, the consequence of some of his leading themes or principles. But it is also to an important extent explicit, i.e., fully recognized by Möser himself as a break with the Enlightenment. Möser's intellectual development from the 1760s onwards is indeed characterized by a growing *self-conscious* opposition to the Enlightenment. In other words, Möser began to see himself as a *critic* of the *Aufklärung*. Though he rarely mentioned the *Aufklärung* by name, his words leave little doubt that he has in mind some of its chief representatives. They are called “intellectuals” (*Gelehrten*), “theorists” (*Theoretiker*), or “philosophers” (*Philosophen*).

Möser's turn against the *Aufklärung* was no dramatic *volte face*. It did not involve acquiring new values and beliefs, still less renouncing older ones. To a large degree, it was only a matter of his developing and applying the skeptical and anti-idealistic views he had held since the 1740s. There was, however, a change in attitude, a shift in how he understood himself in relation to his contemporaries and the intellectual currents of his age. Beginning in the 1760s, Möser saw himself more and more as an untimely writer, a voice in the wilderness, who was leading a protest against some of the major philosophical trends of his day. Slowly but surely, his historical work on the history of Osnabrück made him identify with the values and ideals of an older age, and to be more critical of a modern age intent on sweeping them away in the name of reason.

Möser's critical attitude has to be set against two modernizing and rationalizing tendencies of the *Aufklärung* in the last quarter of the eighteenth century. First, the attempt to centralize government, to place all legislation and administration in the hands of a single authority, the prince and his bureaucracy. This goal usually went hand-in-hand with the attempt to establish a new written constitution, based on a few general principles, and to impose it upon all parts of a country. These new codes of law were intended to abolish the welter of local laws and customs, and to simplify the mixture of Roman, canon and customary law that had prevailed in most parts of the Holy Roman Empire. Second, the campaign to eradicate superstition, prejudice and enthusiasm through radical criticism. The *Aufklärung* was the age of criticism, and to criticism all beliefs had to submit; neither religion in its holiness, nor the state in its majesty, could exempt themselves from the tribunal of critique.⁶⁴ All beliefs were to be accepted or rejected strictly according to the evidence for or against them.

Möser had profound misgivings about both tendencies. He saw the first as the source of tyranny, as a threat to the traditional liberties of the estates and regions. Against centralization, Möser stood for local autonomy, the rights of cities and provinces to conduct their own affairs according to laws and customs evolved in and adapted to their region. One of his most revealing writings in this respect is an article he wrote in July 1772 for the *Osnabrück Intelligenz Blätter* with the pointed title "Der jetzige Hang zu allgemeinen Gesetzen und Verordnungen ist der gemeinen Freiheit gefährlich."⁶⁵ This article is a defense of local autonomy, a protest against the centralizing and rationalizing tendency of the *Aufklärung*. Möser's explicit target is "the people from the *General-department*," viz., local bureaucrats who want to govern everything according to general rules; but it is clear that Möser is really aiming against the philosophers who justify such general policies of reform. Hence he explicitly mentions and criticizes Voltaire, who made the famous quip that, in the Holy Roman Empire, a person could be found guilty in one village and innocent in another for one and the same crime. Möser complains that the bureaucrats from the *General-department* intend to rule the state according to a general theory, which will prescribe everything that is to be done

right down to the local level (22). He objects that such efforts ultimately lead to despotism, leaving no room for local initiative or judgment. Thus he lays down his own general rule: "...the more simple the laws and the more universal the rules, the most despotism, dry and impoverished a state becomes." (23). Möser finds such high-handed policies a source of injustice. If people and circumstances differ, it is unfair to treat the unlike as if they were alike. Thus he protests against Voltaire that the same laws need not apply to all people living under the same roof, let alone between different towns or provinces. If, say, there are two different couples living in the same house, one married and the other unmarried, the laws involving the rights of the mothers, the children and the inheritances would be very different (25). Möser does not deny that some branches of the state require general rules, viz., formal procedures in courts of law, legal documents, regulations for the economy, weights and measures; but he insists that general laws governing trade, agriculture and conduct for very different provinces are problematic, indeed nothing less than "violations of freedom and property" (24). Every forest, city and farm will often need its own special rules and should not be forced to conform to general laws (26). The advice of an honest and insightful official often deserves more attention than the grand theorists who hold sway in the *General-department*. In its opposition to general norms in the name of local autonomy, this essay is *alocus classicus* of historicism; for it expresses very clearly the principle of individuality so central to that tradition. It is one of the first stands in the name of the individual against the universalizing tendencies of the *Aufklärung*.⁶⁶

Möser was troubled by the radical criticism of the *Aufklärung* no less than political centralization. A skeptic since the mid-1740s, he was convinced that criticism, if it is only thorough and consistent, ends in complete doubt. Because such doubt is a danger to morality and religion, Möser believed that it is necessary to place some constraints upon free inquiry. While free inquiry is fine for intellectuals, it troubles the common man, who needs faith to act and to soften the hard blows of life. A statesman who permits complete freedom of press undermines religion, which is the chief source of obedience. Möser's concern about the social and political consequences of radical criticism began in the 1760s. It is apparent from his reaction to Rousseau's *Emile* and Voltaire's *Candide*.⁶⁷ Both Rousseau and Voltaire made the same mistake: they assumed that because a belief is irrational—whether it is belief in revelation or the best of all possible worlds—that it should be rejected. In fact, both beliefs are essential to the common man.

Möser's most revealing writings regarding radical criticism are some unpublished sketches he composed in 1780 that discuss a question set by the Berlin Academy of

Sciences: “Is it useful for the people to be deceived through new errors or by entertaining older ones?”⁶⁸ Finding the question confused, Möser suggested several ways to answer it. He first asks himself what “truth” means. If it means conformity of representations with an object, then truth can be harmful and falsehood useful. But if “truth” is defined simply in terms of what is useful, the people would not be deceived if it were useful for them to believe something. What clearly emerges from all these sketches is Möser's firm belief that the free inquiry of the Enlightenment can be extremely dangerous in morality, politics and religion. It is often necessary for us to hold beliefs for which there is no evidence, or indeed which might even be contrary to the evidence. If we follow the principle of sufficient reason, regulating assent strictly according to the degree of evidence for it, we will have to forfeit almost all our fundamental beliefs. We must therefore learn to accept and live by beliefs we know are illusions. So troubled was Möser by the consequences of unlimited free inquiry that he questioned the right of self-thought that is so central to the Enlightenment: “Man is an animal who through his opinions should be led for his own good and for that of society; and everything is truth that leads to this end.” (202). He complains bitterly that the *Aufklärung* has not limited its own questioning and has undermined the beliefs of the people. His animadversions against the *Aufklärer* reach a crescendo in the following passage:

Everything in the world is illusion, from the threefold crown to the English prime minister's great wig...I remain firm that everything in the world is more or less illusion, and even the Enlightenment, which now draws up so many curtains, is an illusion. Our present times attempt to show everything bare and naked, just like it is behind the curtain. But our ancestors knew the truth as much as we do; they understood the art of governing human beings but they never betrayed the master. (203–4)

6. Osnabrückische Geschichte

Möser's fame as an historian rests chiefly on his *Osnabrückische Geschichte*, which was published between 1768 and 1780. Its parochial theme—a history of tiny Osnabrück—belies its significance. For in this work Möser develops a new approach to German history, one which broke with the historiographical tradition of the *Aufklärung*. The book became widely influential. The leading historians of the next generation—Herder, Abbt, Goethe, Savigny, Niebuhr, Rehberg, Eichhorn and Jacob Grimm—were among its many admirers.

Möser began writing the *Osnabrückische Geschichte* in the early 1760s. He tells us in its preface that he set to work on it during the Seven Years War.⁶⁹ As a deputy for Osnabrück, he was obliged to travel around with the army, which did not make for ideal working conditions. Many a paragraph was thought out in a coach, then written

down at the station. Parts of it were published in installments in 1765; then the first four parts, which were called the “Allgemeine Einleitung,” appeared together as a single volume in 1768. It was only twelve years later, in February 1780, that Möser began to publish the work proper. The first volume included the four sections of the earlier “Allgemeine Einleitung,” now much revised, and an added fifth section. It treats the history of Osnabrück from pre-Roman times until the formation of the first bishoprics in Carolingian times. The second volume tells the history of the bishoprics from 918 until 1250. But with volume II the history ends in *media res*. Möser had planned to treat the history of Osnabrück up to modern times; but he fell five centuries short! The *Osnabrückische Geschichte* is therefore a two-volume fragment.

Despite its incomplete, fragmentary state, all historians agree *that* Möser's work is significant. They disagree greatly, however, about *why* it is so. Dilthey saw it as the birthplace of national economics.⁷⁰ Eduard Fueter, the early twentieth-century historian of historiography, regarded it as the first great “social history”, which examined for the first time the connection between the economics and political organization of a people.⁷¹ Meinecke deemed it the first proper national history, the first history to have as its subject matter the whole body politic.⁷² Heinrich von Srbik, reflecting the nationalism often read into Möser's work, looked upon it as the source for the concept of the German *Volk*.⁷³ More recently, Jonathan Knudsen has argued that all these interpretations have underestimated Möser's dependence on older historiographical traditions—those of imperial reform (*Reichspublizistik*), imperial history (*Reichshistorie*) and Latin humanism—and that they have neglected his own local context. When read more in context, Knudsen argues, Möser's work proves to be an attempt to justify Protestant rule in Osnabrück.⁷⁴

What are we to make of such opposing assessments? The best way to assess them is to go back in history, back to the origins and genesis of the work. We need to know Möser's intentions, and how he viewed his work in relation to contemporaries and predecessors. Not that Möser's self-assessment is infallible; but it is much closer to his context than many later interpretations, which are often anachronistic.

It is noteworthy that, when he began writing the work, Möser himself believed that he was setting out in a new and important direction. He was convinced that he had made important discoveries, and that his theory would be novel and innovative, a complete break from the histories of the past. Hence he wrote his benefactor, K.A. von dem Bussche-Hünnefeld, in October 1763:

I have fallen in love with the history of the bishophric and have discovered a completely new exciting theory, one which overthrows all previous theories of imperial and territorial history, and one which limits imperial and princely rights from completely new principles. I restore to Germany the nobles and commons that have survived in England, Sweden and Poland, and I show convincingly that the Franks suppressed both imperial Estates, although they survived until the Westphalian Peace.⁷⁵

Möser's letter clearly shows that he believed his work to have an essentially political significance. His theory will be new because it will attempt to limit imperial and princely rights and show how rights were originally based in nobles and commons. This makes it unlike the common imperial and territorial histories, which had attempted only to buttress the claims of the emperors and princes. According to Möser himself, then, the novelty of his work does not lie in being the *first* constitutional history—a well-established genre before he wrote⁷⁶—but in being *anew* kind of constitutional history. Namely, it will be one written from the standpoint of nobles and commons rather than that of monarchs and princes. As such, Möser was perfectly correct to stress the (at least relative) novelty of his work. It broke with two traditions of Enlightenment historiography: (1) the use of *Reichs- und Landesgeschichte* to apprise princes of their rights, powers and titles; and (2) the method of organizing universal history according to kings and dynasties. Möser dismissed both traditions in a single line when he wrote to Thomas Abbt, May 12, 1764: "...our German historians dabble with the genealogies of imperial officials and believe that they have supplied us with history."⁷⁷

Though very revealing, Möser's letter to Bussche-Hünnefeld is still only half of the story. Möser concealed from his aristocratic benefactor his more radical intentions. For he believed that the ultimate agent of Osnabrück history was really the commoner alone. Originally, the nobles were not a genuine part of the nation at all and only servants of the commoners. This more radical conception appears in Möser's even more revealing August 10, 1765, letter to Abbt, his friend and fellow burgher:

The aristocracy in Germany did not properly belong to the nation. It had no vote, either for war or for peace, as little as it had in Rome...It was the servant of the nation and a public servant, not a *patricius* like that in Sparta, which came to the common assembly and had *votum consultativum et decisivum*[the consultive and decisive vote]... Nothing of all that existed in Germany, nothing of all that existed in Rome. *Quirites*, in German *die Wehren*, in Gothic *vairs, jubebant et volebant*[ratified and ordained]. They were the *communs, propriétair* of the right to speak (*Wortstätte*), but not the nobles, who had at best *suadendi potestatem* [power to advise] and who were *non votant* [non-voting] in the public assembly. We commoners have long stood under the oppressive

assumption that we have a helot origin. That should not be any more. *Ego quiris volo, jubeo!* [I will to be a citizen, so be it]⁷⁸

That Möser wants this to be the deeper message behind the history he was now writing is clear; for he closes the letter by saying that he will say all this in “my historical logic”, which, God willing, would appear in the next Leipzig fair. This was, of course, an allusion to the forthcoming instalments of his book.

Judging from this letter, then, Möser's aim in writing his history was to vindicate not nobles and commons against royalty, but commons against nobles and royalty. His thesis is that it was not the aristocracy, let alone the kings and royal families, but the common man who made the history of Osnabrück.⁷⁹ Hence Möser's work was to be a popular history, one whose central theme is the common man. This was its chief novelty and innovation. Möser stressed the importance of this new perspective in another letter to Thomas Abbt, June 16, 1765: “I cannot demand a history organized according to the order of the rulers. I demand the history of the people and its form of government.”⁸⁰ This popular dimension was indeed the chief reason for the extraordinary success of Möser's work in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. It expressed and justified a nascent nationalism, the growing self-confidence and self-consciousness of the modern burgher. It was Möser's way of saying that the burghers, not nobles and royalty, made their own history and had the right to govern.

Throughout the *Osnabrückische Geschichte* Möser says little or nothing about his political intentions in writing the work. A careful reading of its contents reveals, however, that his aim was to vindicate the burgher's claims to govern his world. In the preface to the first part of the first edition, Möser writes that the history of Germany can be given “a completely new turn” if we take the common landowners as the central element of the nation, and follow them through all the twists and turns of fate. If we only make this our common theme, he says, we will be able to give German history “the unity, action and power of an epic” (48). Following this theme, Möser then outlines the main chapters of his book (49–54). Though Möser did not keep to this plan in his later narrative, it still tells us much about his original conception of the work.

Möser's epic consists in four stages or periods, which are not assigned specific dates but organized thematically. (1) The first period, which was pre-Charlemagne, was the golden age. Everyone was his own master, and he owned the land. He served in the

military for the common defense; but he did so simply as a matter of honor. (2) The second period came after Charlemagne, who, through constant battles, wore down the Saxons and forced them to surrender on unfavorable terms. Their lands fell into the hands of his bishops and counts, who served as his administrators. (3) The third period, which is the high Middle Ages, shows the growth of the cities, the replacement of an agricultural with a money economy. Imperial power is at its height at this period, and each citizen has rights only insofar as he is a subject to the king. All land is owned by the sovereign, who rents it out to his servants. The commoner's concept of honor, which rested on pride in individual freedom, now disappears entirely; honor now means being a loyal servant to the crown. (4) The fourth period, which takes us up to modern times, is marked by the rise of the territorial state. The imperial power waned because, after the abolition of the old voluntary army, it could not pay for the common defense. The Reformation only gave greater power to the princes when it gave them control over religion.

It is clear from Möser's sketch that his theory of history gives no place to redemption. Paradise is lost but never regained. The innocence–fall–redemption drama, which was so loved by the *Aufklärer* and romantics, has no place in his epic, which is tragedy, pure and simple. Paradise is lost forever, despite the best efforts of its inhabitants to keep it and through no fault of their own. Möser's story is also no morality tale about the need to defend freedom in order to retain it. His ancient Saxons defend themselves to the last ounce of strength; and if they eventually accede to Charlemagne's harsh terms, it is simply because they are too exhausted to fight any longer. Möser's narrative is basically a story about military might, the efforts to acquire or resist it. The actors within it are either victors or vanquished, regardless of their moral qualities. And so in his preface Möser wrote that "*Sittenlehre*" had little place in his history (47). The events would have to speak for themselves, and it was not for him to judge whether they were good or bad. Historical actions should be portrayed like those on stage: they move us most when the dramatist does not moralize about them.

This last statement should not blind us, however, to the moral values and intentions behind the *Osnabrückische Geschichte*. Though Möser refused to moralize, his moral and political ideals determined the very structure and content of the work. These ideals are especially apparent in the first section, a sketch of the way of life of the early Saxons. This sketch is meant to be history, a conjectural reconstruction of how life must have been among the early Saxons. Möser duly cites Roman sources, Tacitus and Caesar, appending to each paragraph a rich tapestry of footnotes. He admits, however, that these sources tell us little about the early Saxons *before* the Romans came into contact with them, and that to understand their dark and distant past it is necessary to speculate (§1; 63). It is evident that these speculations are guided more by Möser's political ideals than his scanty sources. Like Rousseau, Möser was seized by the myth of a golden age, a past paradise, now lost forever with the development of modern culture. His account

of early Saxon life resembles nothing more than Rousseau's account of primitive society in the second *Discours*.⁸¹

Möser's sketch is a portrait of arcadia. Pre-Roman Saxony consists in a countryside populated by self-sufficient, self-governing yeoman farmers. We learn that the first inhabitants of this land, like all early Germans, did not tolerate life in cities or villages (§1; 63). They lived apart from one another in separate farms (§2; 63–4). Each took as much land, wood and water as he needed according to “the original disposition of nature” (*die erste Anlage der Natur*) (§2; 64). And so the early Saxon farmers lived happily in anarchy. Each man was sovereign, king in his own home, answerable to no one (§8; 69). His farm was an independent state, which had full rights to make peace or war with other farms. No one had a right against another (§13; 77). The house of each farmer was his sacred domain; even the God of a public religion had no authority over it (§8f; 70). To settle conflicts, and to ensure fair use of common lands, the farmers would elect one person to serve as their common judge; but he had no regular office and no authority other than what the people invested in him (§12; 75). The judge had no right to punish someone by taking life or property; all that he could do was banish someone (§14a; 78). Wary of entering into any social contract to form a state, these Saxon yeomen could see no point in surrendering their rights; to allow an authority to punish them would make them no better off than they were in the state of nature (§14; 77). Despite their love of independence, there was one reason farmers did have to come together and act as a whole: sheer self-preservation (§14; 77). Without banding together for their common defense, they would fall prey to their enemies. Everyone had to share part of the burden of the general defense, so each had to pay a special tax, *Wehrgeld*, for a common defense fund (§15; 79). Those who refused to pay were not punished; but they also could not reckon on common protection. They would elect a common leader, who would command them only for the duration of conflict (§21; 87). All served without an oath, and without reward. Each fought for his own home, brother next to brother, neighbor next to neighbor. No one would send a servant to represent himself, because it was a matter of pride and honor to serve oneself (§21; 87–8). They would march under the banner of their god, not according to the commands of a lord; their leader in war was elected among their own ranks.

So far Möser's Saxons seem much like Rousseau's savages: they are healthy, solitary, self-sufficient, independent. But they differ from them in one important respect: they own property. They possess the land from which they live. Möser seems to think that property is natural, as if all people should own land. For he writes of the Saxons' Arcadian life: “*Die Natur liebt Eigentum...*” (§6; 67). By making property natural, an integral feature of arcadia, Möser *seems to be* taking issue with Rousseau, who had made it the source of injustice. A closer look reveals, however, that Möser does not think that

property is natural after all. Whether property is right or not, it turns out, depends on circumstances, first and foremost the condition of the land. When Möser says that nature loves property he is referring to the poor soil available to the Saxons, who had to settle their land and cultivate it for years before it was productive. Nature loved property for the Saxons, because it was only by owning the land, by settling on it and cultivating it for years, that they could live from it. But what was good for the Saxons was not necessarily good for the Swabians. Since the Swabians were not limited to poor soil, and since they had to move constantly from their enemies, they valued swords and horses more than farms and lands. This means that “*Schwabenrecht*” had to develop in a completely different way than “*Sachsenrecht...*” (§7; 68). Möser is not, then, taking issue with Rousseau, at least not directly contradicting him. While property is not necessarily good for all, neither is it necessarily bad for all.

The more one ponders the first section of the *Osnabrückische Geschichte* the more it seems that Möser has conflated history and right. The whole structure of his argument seems circular. He constructs his history according to the demands of right; but then turns around and derives rights from history. Thus he reasons *per non sequitur* that because rights and duties were first determined according to one's property, they should still be determined that way now. It is important to recognize, however, that what seems to be a confusion on Möser's part was really integral to his entire way of thinking. A true eighteenth century lawyer, Möser could never distinguish claims about rights from claims about origins. Rights could not be determined *a priori* but had to be historically grounded. To justify a claim to the privileges of aristocracy, for example, one had to undergo an *Ahnenprobe*, i.e., a test of one's ancestry by showing that one had descended from so many generations. This way of thinking appears explicitly in the second section of the *Osnabrückische Geschichte* where Möser attempts to explain the constitution of a country on the basis of its “natural history”, i.e., its soil, geography and atmosphere (§1; XII, 129).⁸² All this raises questions about Möser's attitude toward the natural law tradition, a controversial subject, to which we must now turn.

7. Allegiance to natural law

One of the more imponderable sides of Möser's legacy is his ambivalent attitude toward natural law. Möser seemed to both embrace and reject the concept. While in his own theory of the state he made heavy use of it, in his critique of absolutism and the French Revolution he attacked it. Naturally, this raises a question of consistency. More significantly, there is the issue of Möser's place in history. Meinecke made Möser a founder of historicism chiefly because of his break with the natural law tradition. But such an assessment begs the question whether Möser broke from that tradition at all.

No one saw more clearly than Meinecke Möser's ambivalence about natural law. Still, because it better fit his larger narrative, he tended to stress the negative side of Möser's attitude. If we consider carefully the full implications of Möser's position, Meinecke argued, we see that he replaced the concept of a universal natural law, which held for all peoples in all times and places, with his own historical concept of law, which held only under specific circumstances.⁸³ Rather than giving laws a universal authority by basing them on a timeless reason or a static human nature, Möser made the authority of law depend on what he famously called its *Lokalvernunft*, i.e., what it is necessary or appropriate to do under specific circumstances. Since these circumstances differ and change constantly, there is no universal or constant content to law whatsoever. In this respect Meinecke thought that Möser was only developing the relativism already implicit in Montesquieu's *Esprit des lois*.⁸⁴ Meinecke carefully noted, however, the remnants of natural law theory still implicit in Möser's writings, viz., the golden age of Saxon farmers in the *Osnabrückische Geschichte*, and the use of contract theory to justify the right of property.⁸⁵ Still, Meinecke emphasized that the real tendency and direction of Möser's thinking, its chief originality and contribution, lay with its departures from the natural law tradition. In his view, Möser was more the predecessor of Ranke and Hegel than the contemporary of Rousseau or Wolff.

Running parallel with this emphasis on Möser's break with the natural law tradition was Meinecke's focus on another strand in his thinking: *Realpolitik*. Sticking closely to his prototype of historicism, Meinecke claimed that Möser's political thinking was suffused with the idea of *Realpolitik*, i.e., that the necessities of state take precedence over moral principle.⁸⁶ He pointed out that Möser could be even inhumanitarian in giving preference to reasons of state over moral interests; hence, for political reasons, he opposed equal schooling for bastard children, churchyard burials for suicides, and smallpox inoculations. More significantly, Möser recognized that history is about the exigencies of politics and that moral considerations have no place in it. It was Möser's greatness as an historicist, Meinecke declared, that he preached resignation in the face of fate or historical necessity.⁸⁷

However tendentious,⁸⁸ there is much to be said in favor of Meinecke's reading. Even if Möser does not formulate it as such, there is indeed a principle of individuality at work in much of his thinking, according to which value depends on locality and particular circumstances. This was the reason for his opposition to the reform plans of absolutism, and it was the basis for his belief in the value of local roots. Möser was indeed deeply suspicious of the natural-law doctrines of the Enlightenment because

they would impose an artificial uniformity upon the variety of local customs and cultures. There were also deep strands of *Realpolitik* in Möser's writings. We have already seen how in the *Wochenblätter* the young Möser was critical of moral idealism in the political world, and how in the *Osnabrückische Geschichte* he refused to make moral judgments about history and advised acceptance of necessity. Just as Meinecke said, Möser did see history as a woeful tale of violence, where necessities of state crushed moral values.

Still, there is also much to be said against Meinecke's reading. Though accurate about some fundamentals, it is also inaccurate about others. Meinecke greatly underestimated the extent to which Möser's entire way of thinking is indebted to the natural law tradition. However much he was inclined toward *Realpolitik*, Möser never accepted an equation of right with might or the command of a sovereign power. Right was for him determined by nature, independent of command or power. The more closely we examine Möser's attitude toward natural law, the more it appears that the true innovations in his thinking lie in his attempt to reformulate the concept.

The persistence of the natural law tradition in Möser's thinking is apparent in many ways. Not the least of them is his use of history itself. It is precisely here that we would expect Möser to be his most relativist; but the opposite is really the case. For, when he wrote about "the wisdom of our ancestors" it was not merely to demonstrate their differences from us, or to show that they too were rational beings in a very different context. Rather, it was to show that our ancestors are *wiser* than ourselves, or to prove that they did things in a *better* way than we. Hence Möser wrote that our ancestors had a more effective system of punishment, that they were more effective businessmen because they did not use middle men, that their legal system was more efficient because it did not have layers of bureaucracy, and so on. Most strikingly, he insisted that the ancient Saxons had a far superior concept of citizenship than moderns, because they wisely limited it to those who made a contribution to the state rather than extending it to anyone living within a territory. In all these respects Möser was claiming that our ancestors were in fact superior to us. He was therefore committed to a normative claim whose validity transcends specific historical circumstances.

Another respect in which the concept of natural law persists in Möser's thinking is in his moral philosophy. We have seen how, in his *Der Wert wohlgeogener Neigungen und Leidenschaften*, Möser wanted to base morality upon natural sentiments rather than general principles or reasoning. *Prima facie* this would seem to be a complete rejection of the natural-law tradition, which attempted to base morality on just such principles and reasoning. Meinecke certainly read Möser's treatise along just these lines.⁸⁹ However, it is evident on closer inspection that Möser was not rejecting but revising the concept of natural law. Rather than basing universal principles on reason, he was basing them on nature itself, which speaks through our passions. Like Hutcheson and

Hume, Möser saw the passions as a bulwark against relativism. Although opposing systems of natural law could be constructed by reason, the passions spoke with a clear and constant voice, whose testimony no amount of reasoning could gainsay or distort. All people would feel sympathy for the suffering of the innocent, even if they could never agree about the basic principles of natural law. Implicit in Möser's appeal to the passions to avoid the problems of rationality we find an important distinction between nature and reason. One of his chief complaints against the old natural-law tradition is that it coupled the concept of nature too closely to reason, so that it abandoned nature when it could not sustain its claims in behalf of reason. Möser wanted to detach nature from reason so that the voice of nature could still be fully heard in our heart and passions when it was obscured by reason. In pursuing this strategy, in making a fundamental distinction between nature and reason, he was going down the same path as Hume and Rousseau, who were also skeptical of the claims of reason to establish a system of natural law.

Möser's abiding adherence to the concept of natural law is sometimes evident precisely in those places where one expects it least, namely, those where he appears to subvert it. It appears unmistakably, for example, in those passages from the *Osnabrücksche Geschichte* where he seems to insist on a more historical concept of law. When he stressed the importance of local circumstances in determining the proper laws for a state, he always had in mind specifically its *natural* conditions, viz., its geography, climate, soil. His aim was to reconstruct what he called "the natural history" of the state.⁹⁰ He wanted to show, in other words, how the laws of the state grew of necessity out of these conditions, or how they were a necessary response to them. Here, then, the concept of natural law re-emerges—not, of course, as a general normative principle, but as the necessity of nature itself. *Pace* Meinecke, then, the appeal to necessity of state never meant a break with natural law, for necessity of state was really a form of *natural* necessity.

The concept of natural history that appears here is important because it shows another respect in which Möser was a heir of the Enlightenment. For the eighteenth-century science of man, there was no distinction between historical and natural explanation; the goal was to show how history too could be a science by its conformity to the paradigms of explanation of the natural sciences. Möser was in this tradition—and to just that extent not a predecessor of Ranke, who insisted on separating the historical and natural worlds.

Another unlikely place where Möser demonstrates his continuing allegiance to natural law is his important 1772 essay "Der jetzige Hang zu allgemeinen Gesetzen und Verordnungen ist der gemeinen Freiheit gefährlich."⁹¹ This essay, which we examined above, seems to give striking evidence for Möser's opposition to the natural-law doctrine of the Enlightenment, because here he protests against the uniformity and

homogeneity that would result in imposing universal laws upon all localities within a principality. It is of the first interest to note, however, that Möser justifies his protest against this use of natural law by appealing to a very different conception of natural law. He stresses that “the true plan of nature” is to develop variety rather than uniformity (22), and he implies that treating unlike cases alike is a violation of reason (25). Although Möser stresses the priority of custom, contracts and agreements over common rights and provincial ordinances (25), he does so not because he prefers tradition to principle but because of a very plausible higher principle of his own: that one has an obligation to honor commitments and covenants made; to undo these whenever they seem to violate common rights or provincial ordinances would be to undermine the entire fabric of civil order. It becomes clear from a close reading of this essay, then, that Möser's objection is not to the idea of natural law as such but simply to a faulty conception and application of it. The law of nature, he proposes, is not a unity opposed to multiplicity but one that grows out of multiplicity.

Möser's retention of natural-law ways of thinking is most evident from his general theory of the state. This theory, which Möser first sketched in his 1774 essay “Der Bauernhof als eine Aktie betrachtet,”⁹² generalizes from his portrait of the original Saxon constitution in his *Osnabrückische Geschichte*. While Meinecke admits that this portrait is another natural law relic, he fails to recognize that it is the inspiration for Möser's theory of the state. The guiding metaphor behind his theory is that a state should be like a joint stock company: only someone who owns a share in it deserves to receive dividends and has a right to vote. More literally, citizenship in the state should be based upon ownership of property or a contribution to the common defense. We confuse citizenship and humanity if we demand that everyone who lives within a territory deserves an equal title to the benefits and co-direction of the state. This would be like insisting that someone who has no shares in a company should have a right to its dividends and a say in its policy. We need not bother here with the further details of Möser's theory. It suffices for our purposes to note that the intuitive plausibility of Möser's theory clearly rests on its implicit appeal to a principle of distributive justice: that only he who contributes to the state should receive its benefits; in other words, rewards should be in direct proportion to effort, merit or sacrifice. This principle was regarded as so self-evident that it was generally taken to be a natural law.

This theory of the state was the basis for Möser's later critique in the 1790s of the doctrine of the rights of man.⁹³ Often taken as evidence for his rejection of natural law

and the heritage of Enlightenment,⁹⁴ this critique is really based on Möser's own conception of natural law, specifically his view that citizenship should be earned rather than given, or that it should be subject to a principle of distributive justice that gives benefits in proportion to sacrifices. Möser's objection to the rights of man is not that there are no such rights but simply that they cannot be the basis for citizenship in a state. Möser accepted that people do have rights simply insofar as they are human beings, viz., the state has a humanitarian obligation to treat well foreigners who happen to live within its domains. His only point against such rights is that they should not be treated as entitlements to citizenship. This would mean everyone living within a territory would deserve to enjoy its benefits without having made a contribution of his own.

For all these reasons, it should be clear that Meinecke underestimated the depth and breadth of the concept of natural law in Möser's thinking. The concept was not a mere hangover, remnant or residue of the past but a vital part of his moral and political theory. In this respect Möser was indeed very much a thinker within the Enlightenment tradition. Still, as we have seen, this was only one half of Möser, and not the most original half, as Meinecke always insisted. For Möser also self-consciously placed himself outside the Enlightenment tradition in his opposition to its political centralization and radical criticism. The ultimate motive for that opposition was Möser's desire to protect rootedness, belonging and attachment. It is chiefly in this respect that Möser was a father and founder of the historicist tradition.

Notes:

- (1) See Dilthey, *Das Achtzehnte Jahrhundert und die Geschichtliche Welt*, in *Gesammelte Schriften* (Stuttgart: Tübingen, 1964), III, 393–7; Eduard Fueter, *Geschichte der neueren Historiographie* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1911), pp. 393–7; Georg von Below, *Die deutsche Geschichtsschreibung von den Befreiungskriegen bis zu unsern Tagen* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1924), p. 3; and Heinrich von Sribk, *Geist und Geschichte vom deutschen Humanismus bis zur Gegenwart* (Salzburg: Otto Müller Verlag, 1950), I, 135–8.
- (2) Meinecke, *Die Entstehung des Historismus*, in *Werke*, eds. Hans Herzfeld, Carl Hinrichs and Walther Hofer (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1965), p. 354.
- (3) Johann Jakob Moser (1701–85) was the legal historian of the Holy Roman Empire. His son, Friedrich Karl Moser (1723–95), was a political theorist and critic of absolutism. Möser wrote critical reviews of the works of both. See Möser, *Sämtliche Werke, Historisch-Kritische Ausgabe*, ed. Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Göttingen (Osnabrück: Wenner, 1943–81), III, 247–9, 285–91, 298–9. (Henceforth this edition will be designated SW).
- (4) Klaus Epstein, *The Genesis of German Conservatism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966), pp. 297–338; and Karl Mannheim, *Konservatismus: Ein Beitrag zur Soziologie des Wissens* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1984). Mannheim's work has been translated into English. *Conservatism: A Contribution to the Sociology of Knowledge*, trans. David Kettler and Volker Mega (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986). I followed this interpretation in my *Enlightenment, Revolution & Romanticism* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1992), pp. 288–302.
- (5) On the nineteenth-century reception of Möser, see Karl Welker, *Rechtsgeschichte als Rechtspolitik: Justus Möser als Jurist und Staatsmann* (Osnabrück: Verein für Geschichte und Landeskunde von Osnabrück, 1996), pp. 597–622.
- (6) On the eighteenth-century reception of Möser's work, see Welker, *Rechtsgeschichte als Rechtspolitik*, II, 580–97.
- (7) See especially Möser's 1781 essay "Über die deutsche Sprache und Literatur," SW III, 71–91.
- (8) See Möser's 1761 essay "Harlekin oder Verteidigung des Groteske-Komischen," SW II, 306–42.
- (9) On the reception of Möser's work among these historians, see Welker, *Rechtsgeschichte als Rechtspolitik*, II, 597–621; and Ernst Hempel, "Justus Möser's Wirkung auf seine Zeitgenossen und auf die deutsche Geschichtsschreibung," in *Mitteilungen des Vereins für Geschichte und Landeskunde von Osnabrück*, 54 (1933), 1–76.
- (10) On the importance of this principle for Möser, see Hans Baron, "Justus Möser's Individualitätsprinzip in seiner geistesgeschichtlichen Bedeutung," *Historische Zeitschrift* CXXX (1924), 31–57.
- (11) This question has had a long and tumultuous history. The battle goes back to the eighteenth century. Friedrich Nicolai, Möser's first biographer, saw Möser as a fellow *Aufklärer*. However, the young Goethe, Herder and Hamann claimed Möser for their own *Sturm und Drang*, a movement which rebelled against the rationalism of the *Aufklärung*. These opposing interpretations, which were largely dormant during the nineteenth century, have had twentieth-century counterparts. Scholars of German historicism tended to stress Möser's opposition to the *Aufklärung*. Wilhelm Dilthey, Eduard Fueter and Georg von Below, for example, saw Möser's theory of history as a reaction against the historiography of the Enlightenment. See Dilthey, *Das Achtzehnte Jahrhundert* III, 248–57; Eduard Fueter, *Geschichte* p. 393; and von Below, *Die deutsche Geschichtsschreibung*, p. 3. It was primarily Meinecke, though, who was responsible for promulgating and solidifying the Counter-Enlightenment interpretation of Möser. This interpretation was then taken to extremes in the late 1930s and early 1940s by scholars sympathetic to national-socialism. See especially Werner Pleister's "Einleitung" to his edition of Möser's *Briefe* (Hannover: Kommissionsverlag Ferdinand Schönigh, 1939), xiii–xxxi; and Peter Klassen, *Justus Möser* (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1936). Chiefly because of its unfortunate associations with national-socialism, the anti-*Aufklärung* interpretation came under heavy criticism in the post-War years. See especially Joachim Streisand, *Geschichtliches Denken von der deutschen Aufklärung bis zur Klassik* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1964), pp. 68,

71; Jonathan Knudsen, *Möser & German Enlightenment*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986) pp. 1–30; and William Sheldon, *The Intellectual Development of Justus Möser: The Growth of a German Patriot* (Osnabrück: Wenner, 1970), pp. 63, 82. According to his critics, Meinecke had failed to consider Möser in his historical context, which makes plain his many debts to the tradition of the Enlightenment.

(12) Epstein, *Genesis*, p. 66, goes astray when he endorses the common view that Möser's conservatism, like all conservatism, has its source in irrationalism, condemnation of argument and criticism. Whatever their ultimate emotive source, Möser's views were based on a sophisticated philosophical view about the limits of knowledge and the source of the good life.

(13) SW XII, 31.

(14) There are several valuable studies of Möser's intellectual development. See Heinrich Shierbaum, "Justus Möser's Stellung in den deutsche Literaturströmungen während der ersten Hälfte des 18. Jahrhunderts," in *Mitteilungen des Vereins für Geschichte und Landeskunde von Osnabrück*, 33 (1908), 167–216; Werner Pleister, *Die geistige Entwicklung Justus Möser's*, *Mitteilungen des Vereins für Geschichte und Landeskunde von Osnabrück*, 50 (1929), 1–89; William Sheldon, *The Intellectual Development of Justus Möser: The Growth of a German Patriot* (Osnabrück: Verlag Thomas Wenner, 1970); and Peter Schmidt, *Studien über Justus Möser als Historiker: Zur Genesis und Struktur der historischen Methode* (Göppingen: Verlag Alfred Kümmerle, 1975). The account here is indebted to all these works.

(15) This is how the Möser family perceived itself. Of course, self-perception did not entirely agree with reality. As Knudsen argues, *Möser and the Enlightenment*, pp. 46–7, the Osnabrück notables owed much of their place in the world to family connections and marriages. Möser's own position was arranged for him by his father. Equality of opportunity was not the ideal or reality of Osnabrück notables.

(16) It is a great mistake to say, with Knudsen *Möser & the German Enlightenment*, p. 33, that Möser "did not resist or resent the inherited structure of institutions and power." This leads Knudsen to see Möser as a spokesman for the aristocracy and to overlook his critique of the nobility in the *Osnabrückische Geschichte*. Möser deeply resented the aristocracy, who were his masters, and who earned much more than him for doing much less. Publicly, he would defend the aristocracy; but privately he deeply resented their inherited privileges. See his August 10, 1765, letter to Thomas Abbt, *Briefe*, p. 197. Also indicative of Möser's attitude is his caustic review of Friedrich Karl von Moser's *Von dem deutschen Nationalgeiste*, SW III, 247–9.

(17) See below, section 6.

(18) See Johannes Zacharias to Justus Möser, June 18, 1743, *Briefe*, p. 11.

(19) Sheldon, *Intellectual Development*, p. 15.

(20) On the influence of Saint Evremond, see Schmidt, *Studien*, pp. 31–2.

(21) See Möser to Thomas Abbt, May 12, 1764, *Briefe*, pp. 141–9. On Möser's London experience and diplomatic mission, see Sheldon, *Intellectual Development*, pp. 51–4.

(22) Shierbaum, *Möser's Stellung*, p. 172.

(23) See to Lodtmann, August 21, 1740, and March 6, 1742, *Briefe*, pp. 2–5, 7–9.

(24) In his biography Nicolai wrote that Möser would have acquired a distaste for "dürrer Schulweisheit" already in his family environment. See his *Leben Justus Möser's*, in *Justus Möser: Anwalt des Vaterlands* (Leipzig: Kiepenheuer Verlag, 1978), p. 507. This is the likely source of the common view of Möser as averse to technical philosophy. However, Möser's early letters to Lodtmann are evidence against Nicolai's views.

(25) Sheldon, *Intellectual Development*, p. 20; Pleister, *Entwicklung*, p. 7.

(26) Schmidt, *Studien*, pp. 7–8.

(27) On Schmauß's importance for Möser, see Schmidt, *Studien*, pp. 9–10.

(28) *Über die deutsche Sprache und Literatur*, SW III, 87.

(29) Schmidt, *Studien*, p. 12.

(30) For this analysis of the famous dispute, see my *Diotima's Children: German Aesthetic Rationalism from Leibniz to Lessing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 101–17.

(31) See Schierman, *Mösers Stellung*, pp. 177, 185.

(32) Klassen, *Möser*, pp. 25, 427n68. Klassen's attempt to make the young Möser a *Sturmer und Dränger avant la lettre* is grotesquely implausible and rides roughshod over the evidence cited above. Unwisely, Epstein, *Genesis*, p. 314n35, explicitly endorses Klassen's argument. Sheldon claims that Möser's sympathies were with the Swiss, *Intellectual Development*, p. 23, though he ignores crucial texts and much of the evidence he cites is ambiguous.

(33) See his November 9, 1746, article for the *Wochenblätter*, SW I, 248.

(34) See his November 10, 1746, article for the *Wochenblätter*, SW I, 254–5; and his March 29, 1747, article for the *Deutsche Zuschauerin*, SW I, 342–4.

(35) *Über die deutsche Sprache und Literatur*, SW III, 87.

(36) These early essays are in SW XIV/1, 33–49.

(37) SW I, 1–289. All references in parentheses are to this edition.

(38) *Ibid.*, I, 290–364.

(39) See W.H. Bruford, *Germany in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1935), p. 282.

(40) Meinecke, Knudsen and Epstein ignore them entirely; Klassen and Welker do not analyze their contents in detail or see their general significance. An important exception is Sheldon, *Intellectual Development*, pp. 27–42, who gives a detailed account of them, one very different from that provided here.

(41) Meinecke stressed the importance of *Realpolitik* for Möser. See *Entstehung des Historismus*, pp. 339–41. Remarkably, however, he does not cite this early article, which gives the strongest evidence for his interpretation. We will see below that his interpretation requires qualification.

(42) Stück 44, November 9, 1746, SW I, 248–54.

(43) For a criticism of Möser on these lines, see Welker, *Rechtsgeschichte als Rechtspolitik*, I, 84–8.

(44) Thus Shierbaum, *Mösers Stellung*, p. 168; and Sheldon, *Intellectual Development*, pp. 63, 82.

(45) SW II, 221–65. All references in parentheses are to this edition. On the dating of this work, which is uncertain, see the editorial comment by Oda May in SW III, 363.

(46) Despite its importance, the work has been treated in a stepmotherly fashion by most scholars. Knudsen, Epstein and Meinecke mention it perfunctorily and only *en passant*; Sheldon, *Intellectual Development*, p. 59, even regards the work

as a step backward in Möser's intellectual development. Only Klassen, *Möser*, pp. 71–90, devotes much attention to it; but he makes no real attempt to come to terms with its philosophical content. Some of the difficulties of his tendentious reading are noted below.

(47) Klassen attempts to depreciate the influence of Shaftesbury on Möser's treatise. See his *Möser*, pp. 73, 76–7, 435n195. His arguments, however, are unconvincing. He claims that Möser uses Shaftesbury simply as an illustration of his own ideas, though Möser is clear in his preface that he intends to defend Shaftesbury. There is also no reason to assume, as Klassen does, that Möser's initial reference to Shaftesbury's "*schöne System*" is ironic. Nor is there a shred of evidence for Klassen's racial interpretation that Möser is advocating "*ein bloßer Adel des Geblüts*".

(48) See Shaftesbury, *An Inquiry concerning Virtue or Merit*, in *Characteristicks of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* (London: Purser, 1737–38), II, 22, 26, 86.

(49) See Möser's essays in the *Wochenblätter*, SW I, 121–6, 164–8, 209–15; and "Von dem moralischen Gesichtspunkte," *Patriotsiche Phantasien*, SW IV, 97–8.

(50) Wolff, *Vernünfftige Gedancken von der Menschen Thun und Lassen*, *Gesammelte Werke* I/4, 124–5, §198. Cf. Wolff, *Psychologia empirica*, *Werke* II/5, 440, 457, §§579, 603.

(51) *Vernünfftige Gedancken*, I/4, 7, §6.

(52) *Ibid.*, I/4, 41, 78, §§64, 139.

(53) Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L.A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1888), p. 415.

(54) The German goes: "*die ewige Kullperinnen der menschlichen Leidenschaften*". See SW IV, 250.

(55) Shaftesbury, *Characteristicks*, II, 238–9.

(56) Shaftesbury, *Characteristicks*, II, 80–1, 98.

(57) *Ibid.*, II, 20.

(58) *Ibid.*, II, 348–58.

(59) *Ibid.*, II, 287, 352, 354.

(60) Thus Sheldon, *Intellectual Development*, p. 85; Schmidt, *Studien*, p. 35; and Klassen, *Möser*, p. 73.

(61) *Characteristicks*, II, 110–14.

(62) See "Miscellany III," in *Characteristicks* III, 143.

(63) SW III, 15–33.

(64) Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, A xii.

(65) SW V, 22–7.

(66) On these grounds Meinecke is correct to see Möser as a father of historicism. Knudsen's claim, *Möser and the Enlightenment*, p. 29, that Möser's historical sense was "not rooted in philosophical individualism" has no textual merit.

(67) See Möser's "*Schreiben an den Herrn Vikar in Savoyen, abzugeben bei dem Herrn Johann Jacob Rousseau*," SW III, 15–33; and his "*Anti-Candide*," SW III, 125–35. The first piece was published in 1762/63; the second is an incomplete fragment begun in 1759.

(68) SW X, 201–9, ##117–23.

(69) "Vorrede," SW XII/2, 46. See also *Briefwechsel*, p. 449.

(70) Dilthey, *Das Achtzehnte Jahrhundert und die Geschichtliche Welt*, in GS III, 250.

(71) Fueter, *Geschichte der neueren Historiographie*, p. 395.

(72) Meinecke, *Die Entstehung des Historismus*, p. 315.

(73) von Srbik, *Geist und Geschichte*, I, 135–8.

(74) *Möser & the German Enlightenment*, pp. 94–9. See also his "Justus Möser: Local History as Cosmopolitan History," in *Aufklärung und Geschichte: Studien zur deutschen Geschichtswissenschaft im 18. Jahrhundert*, ed. Hans Bödeker et al. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1986), pp. 324–43.

(75) *Briefe*, p. 424.

(76) On this genre of history, see Notker Hammerstein, "Reichs-Historie," in *Aufklärung und Geschichte*, pp. 82–105. On Möser's debts to this tradition, see Knudsen, *Möser & the German Enlightenment*, pp. 99–109.

(77) *Briefe*, p. 145.

(78) *Ibid*, p. 197.

(79) For this reason, Knudsen's thesis, *Möser & the German Enlightenment*, pp. 94–9, that the *Osnabrückische Geschichte* is supposed to be a secular history of an ecclesiastical state proves insufficient. The work was indeed meant to be, at the very least, a secular history; and part of Möser's argument was indeed directed against the clergy. But the work was also much more than a secular history; it was primarily meant to be a social history, one written from the standpoint of the burgher. Because of his conception of Möser as a conservative with deep interests in preserving the status quo, Knudsen misses Möser's animus and argument against the nobility.

(80) *Ibid*, p. 190.

(81) The extent to which Möser might have been influenced by Rousseau cannot be determined. He was an admirer of Rousseau's writings according to his own testimony. See Möser to Nicolai, December 17, 1785, *Briefe*, p. 390.

(82) See the preface to the second part, SW XIII, 45; and Möser to Nicolai, December 14, 1778, *Briefe*, p. 322.

(83) Meinecke, *Entstehung des Historismus*, pp. 319–20, 322–3.

(84) *Ibid*, pp. 322–3.

(85) *Ibid*, pp. 343, 347.

(86) *Ibid*, p. 341.

(87) *Ibid*, p. 337.

(⁸⁸) This was the objection of Streisand, *Geschichtliches Denken*, pp. 68, 71; and Knudsen, *Möser & German Enlightenment*, pp. 24, 94, 95.

(⁸⁹) *Ibid.*, p. 310.

(⁹⁰) See "Vorrede zu diesem zweiten Teil," SW XIII, 45.

(⁹¹) SW V, 22–7.

(⁹²) SW VI, 255–70.

(⁹³) See especially "Über das Recht der Menschheit als den Grund der neuen französischen Revolution," *Berlinische Monatsschrift* 15 (1790), 499–506, SW IX, 140–4; "Über das Recht der Menschheit, insofern es zur Grundlage eines Staates dienen kann," *Berlinische Monatsschrift* 17 (1791), 496–506, SW IX, 155–61; "Über die gänzliche Aufhebung des *Droit d'Aubain* in Frankreich," *Berlinische Monatsschrift* 17 (1791), 326–30, SW IX, 145–8; and "Wann und wie mag eine Nation ihre Konstitution verändern," *Berlinische Monatsschrift* 18 (1791) 396–401, SW IX 179–82.

(⁹⁴) Remarkably, Knudsen, whose thesis is Möser's affiliation with the Enlightenment, holds that it is accurate to view Möser as opposed to the Enlightenment after the Revolution, and chiefly because of his critique of revolutionary doctrines. See his *Möser & German Enlightenment*, pp. 2, 29, 30. This is an unnecessary concession, a spectacular "own goal." Since Möser's critique of revolutionary ideology is based on ideas he worked out in the 1760s, it would follow that Möser was opposed, at least implicitly, to the Enlightenment much earlier.

Herder's Historicism, its Genesis and Development

1. Herder and the historicist tradition

Reflecting in his later years on his intellectual roots, Wilhelm Dilthey wrote in 1901 a long essay about the origins of historicism, his rough but rich *Das achtzehnte Jahrhundert und die geschichtliche Welt*.¹ Tracing the origins of historicism back to the eighteenth century, Dilthey had no doubts about the thinker who began the historical movement of the nineteenth century. It was Herder. Although Herder's retention of the concept of natural history showed him to be a child of the eighteenth century, his advocacy of the idea of the integrity of each culture—i.e., that each has its own unique worth, its own conception of happiness and perfection—was nothing short of revolutionary and looked forward to the nineteenth century. It was thus Herder, Dilthey believed, who began the historicist tradition, which continued with the romantics, Humboldt, Niebuhr, Schleiermacher and Hegel.

Dilthey's assessment of Herder's role in the formation of historicism has been very influential. It has been reaffirmed by many Herder scholars, among them Rudolf Stadelmann, Josef Nadler, Thomas Litt and Benno von Wiese.² Several eminent scholars of historicism—Erich Rothacker, Friedrich Meinecke, R.G. Collingwood and Georg Iggers—have also endorsed and promulgated it.³ Nevertheless, Dilthey's interpretation has not gone uncontested. It has had its critics, some vocal and potent.

The loudest among them are the Marxists, who have condemned it as the source of “the Herder legend.” According to Claus Träger, for example, Dilthey and his epigone made Herder into a leading spokesman for German nationalism, vitalism and irrationalism. They underrated, therefore, his affinity with the *Aufklärung*, especially the rationalist and progressivist strands of his philosophy of history.⁴ For Träger, it was no accident that some of these scholars later attempted to appropriate Herder for the national-socialist cause.⁵

Another potent critic of Dilthey's interpretation, one from an entirely different perspective, is Hans-Georg Gadamer.⁶ Taking to task Friedrich Meinecke's account of Herder, which was squarely in the Dilthey tradition, Gadamer protested against the anachronistic attempt to see Herder through the lens of nineteenth-century historicism. Herder had to be understood first and foremost in his eighteenth-century context. Meinecke's attempt to read Herder according to the two fundamental principles of historicism—individuality and development—made him into a mere predecessor of Ranke. When Meinecke complained about “still too much transcendence” in Herder's philosophy of history,⁷ he failed to see the importance theology had for Herder and measured him by the more secular standards of the nineteenth century.

Both critics make sound points. They raise legitimate protests against the anachronism of Dilthey's interpretation. Träger is right that Herder's rationalism, naturalism and belief in progress are more characteristic of the *Aufklärung*; and Gadamer is correct to point out that Herder's theology should not be dismissed by secular modern standards. It is important to see, however, that in placing Herder outside the historicist tradition, Träger and Gadamer both presuppose a very narrow conception of that tradition, one which would limit it to nineteenth-century thinkers from Ranke to Dilthey. We have already found reason to reject such a narrow conception.⁸ But even if (for the sake of argument) we allow it, there is still reason to think that, in correcting Dilthey, Träger and Gadamer have gone too far in the opposite direction; for it is necessary to admit that, in fundamental respects, Herder anticipates, and indeed lays the

foundation for, the nineteenth-century tradition. First, he formulates, more explicitly than Chladenius and Möser, the principles of individuality and development so characteristic of nineteenth-century historicism, i.e., he insists that all historical phenomena are unique and that they change drastically over time. Second, he was the most effective and influential critic of the historiography of the *Aufklärung*, anticipating the criticisms of that historiography so prevalent in the nineteenth century. Third, he questions the individualist anthropology of the Enlightenment and develops a more social and historical conception of human nature, one that will reappear constantly in the nineteenth century. Fourth and finally, he begins the historical study of language, helping to bring language, the very medium of human thought, into the historical worldview. In all these respects Herder prepares the ground for the later ideas of Savigny, Humboldt, Ranke, Droysen and Dilthey.

Herder's most important difference from nineteenth-century historicism, as both Träger and Gadamer realize, concerns his naturalism. It was a mainstay of nineteenth-century historicism from Ranke down to Dilthey that the nomological explanation of the natural sciences applies only to material nature, and that there is a fundamental *difference in kind* between explanation in the natural and human sciences. Although these historicists recognized that everything in nature is determined and cannot act otherwise, they claimed that human beings have an internal realm of freedom and individuality that transcends nature, and so remains inexplicable according to natural laws. Ranke, Droysen and Dilthey championed an internal understanding of human beings, not least because they believed in the reality of a Kantian transcendental freedom. To accept naturalism in the human sciences was for them tantamount to a surrender to determinism, indeed materialism. It is a striking fact about Herder, however, that he, like Chladenius and Möser, accepts no fundamental division between nature and history. The guiding idea behind his *Ideen zu einer Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit* is that the laws that govern history are one and the same as those that govern nature. Chladenius, Herder and Möser were all children of the eighteenth century, because they championed the Enlightenment project for a science of man, which modeled the human sciences on the natural sciences. For the nineteenth-century historicists, however, this project was the very source of the positivism they so deeply despised.

Another fundamental difference between Herder and the later historicists concerns their conflicting attitudes toward the *philosophy* of history. For Ranke, Droysen and Dilthey, the philosophy of history became a virtual *Schimpfwort*; it was tantamount to metaphysics, illegitimate speculation beyond the limits of experience. Hence the *philosophy* of history, Herder's chief goal and inspiration, was for them an illusion. In their struggle to make history a science, the later historicists insisted that history would have to renounce speculation and follow the same method of piecemeal empirical research as the natural sciences. The irony is that Herder himself had claimed to follow these very methods in his philosophy of history; he too disapproved of a metaphysics that would attempt to reach its conclusions through *a priori* reasoning alone; and he too

insisted upon the need to make history a science, on par with the natural sciences in its certainty and clarity. Yet the problem was no one was willing to take Herder's word for it. Why? Because they were persuaded by Kant's famous reviews of Herder's *Ideen*, which had argued that Herder's philosophy of history was, *malgré lui*, a metaphysics through and through.⁹ Whatever Herder's principles, Kant claimed, his practice did not follow them.

Kant's 1785 review marks a crucial crossroads in the history of historicism: it divides later anti-naturalistic historicism from early naturalistic historicism. For it was telling that many of the later historicists—Ranke, Droysen, Dilthey—were influenced by, and indeed explicitly reaffirmed, Kant's strictures against metaphysics, his noumenal–phenomenal dualism and his concept of transcendental freedom. There was more rich irony here because Herder too had been a Kantian; but he was “*ein Kantianer vom 1765*,”¹⁰ a loyal devotee of Kant's early naturalism. So, to an extent, the parting in the crossroads mirrors a split in Kant's own intellectual development. What Herder did not realize is that his former teacher, probably sometime in the late 1760s, had come to reject his own early naturalism. For failing to follow his old teacher's new path, Herder would have to be taught a lesson. Hence the severe schoolmasterly tone of Kant's review.

From all the above it should be plain: whatever the nuances of our definition, no history of historicism is complete without Herder. His contributions to historicism were so great that they demand careful investigation. Our task now is to investigate the origins of Herder's own historicism. We will attempt to trace the steps by which Herder forged his own historical worldview. The *terminus ad quem* of our story will be Herder's 1784–91 *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit*, the culmination of all his work as a philosopher of history. The story we need to tell has been told before in masterly fashion by Meinecke. But, for all its many insights, Meinecke's account is remarkably patchy and incomplete.¹¹ We attempt to fill in these gaps here.

2. Anthropology and history

The roots of Herder's historicism go back to his early years in Königsberg (1762–64) and Riga (1764–69). The young Herder's conception of philosophy—its aims and methods—was fundamental for his later historicism. It determined what history meant for him, and why it was so important for him.

Herder's early conception of philosophy was encapsulated in the phrase "*Philosophie der Menschheit*," i.e., philosophy of humanity. According to Rudolf Haym, Herder's great biographer, his fundamental intellectual orientation in his early years came from this philosophy.¹² Whether giving sermons, teaching at the *Domschule*, writing articles for moral weeklies, or participating in masonic meetings, Herder justified his activity by his "*Philosophie der Menschheit*." Hence he wrote Kant in November 1768 that the main reason he assumed an ecclesiastical post was to better serve the people according to his "*menschliche Philosophie*."¹³ And when he gave his final sermon in Riga in 1769, he told his flock that the chief philosophy behind all his sermons had been "*eine Philosophie der Menschheit*."¹⁴

What did the young Herder mean by a "*Philosophie der Menschheit*"? He was invoking a conception of philosophy that went back to the humanist tradition of the Renaissance. According to that tradition, philosophy is *ars vitae*, the art of living well. Humanism opposed the conception of philosophy of the scholastic tradition, which saw the end of life as contemplation and the purpose of philosophy as knowledge for its own sake. Rather than addressing intellectual problems as ends in themselves, the philosophy of humanity would make its chief purpose to serve the ends of life, the needs of human beings. In a fragment from January 1765, "*Wie die Philosophie zum Besten des Volks allgemeiner und nützlicher werden kann*,"¹⁵ Herder described the agenda of his human philosophy as follows: "Instead of logic and morals, it educates people about the feeling of virtue and how to think for themselves; instead of politics, it educates the patriot and citizen to act; instead of the useless science of metaphysics, it gives [people] things that are really instructive." (122).

Herder's conception of philosophy was a response to the challenge of Jean Jacques Rousseau,¹⁶ whose infamous *Discours sur les sciences et les arts* had attacked the arts and sciences for undermining morals and happiness. Herder readily conceded that Rousseau's critique is valid against the *scholastic* conception of philosophy. For if we devote ourselves to philosophy for its own sake, we neglect our practical interests and we fail to heed our feelings and impulses, which are the sources of all moral action (113). He denied, however, that Rousseau's critique holds for his own *humanistic* conception. Philosophy could redeem itself—it could be the antidote to the very evil it inflicts upon

us—if it became an instrument to serve the needs of life and the duties of family and state (122). The inspiration for Herder's response to Rousseau came from his teacher, Kant, who had himself been cured of his intellectual pretensions by Jean Jacques. In the margins of his personal copy of his 1764 *Beobachtungen über das Gefühl des Schönen und Erhabenen*, Kant confessed how Rousseau convinced him that philosophy would be worthless if it did not serve the rights of man.¹⁷ Kant's response to Rousseau was not to abandon philosophy but to reorient it: to make it the means rather than the end of human life. That was just the strategy that Herder applied in his early 1765 fragment.

Herder's *Philosophie der Menschheit* was the product of other influences besides Kant. In demanding that philosophy be practical, Herder was expressing a common concern in the 1760s. It was during this decade that many thinkers in Germany began to react against the scholasticism of Wolff's philosophy, which, since the 1740s, had become the dominant doctrine in Protestant universities. The chief purpose of Wolff's philosophy was to achieve the classical ideal of a *philosophia prima*, a self-evident foundation for all knowledge. Philosophy was for Wolff *scientia*, the search for complete certainty, which required the use of a mathematical method with self-evident axioms, strict definitions, and rigorous syllogistic reasoning.¹⁸ The problem was that the Wolffians' devotion to this ideal—so it seemed to some—was taking them away from a more pressing and fundamental need: enlightenment, the education of the public. Although Wolff himself was a champion of enlightenment, his own philosophy did not seem to serve this end. The Wolffians were engaging in ever more subtle demonstrations, ever more esoteric disputations, much like the schoolmen of the Middle Ages, so that their philosophy had no meaning for the general public. In short, the Wolffians were making philosophy a scholastic exercise, an intellectual pastime removed from everyday life. And so in the 1760s voices of protest could be heard. Among the vanguard of this reaction were thinkers like Feder in Göttingen, Garve in Breslau, or Nicolai in Berlin, who demanded that philosophy descend from its ivory tower and enter into the life of human beings. They insisted that philosophy should become popular, i.e., it should address the needs of human beings, and it should write in a manner comprehensible to the common man. Rather than serving up dry and dreary demonstrations, philosophy should strive for elegance, because only then could it capture the interest of the public. Thus, from the reaction against Wolffian scholasticism, *Popularphilosophie* was born. Herder's *Philosophie der Menschheit* was essentially a form of *Popularphilosophie*, one early episode in this much larger movement.

Although Herder's philosophy of humanity was meant to be first and foremost practical, it also had an important theoretical side. For if philosophy were to serve the

needs of the public, it had to determine what they were and how best to serve them. For Herder, and indeed all the *Popularphilosophen*, there was the closest connection between aiding humanity and studying it: the more we knew about human nature, its needs and aspirations, the better we could aid it. As Herder put it in his 1765 fragment: "If the philosophy of man is to be useful, it should make human beings its middle point..." (125). And so the philosophy of humanity was not only *for* humanity but also *about* humanity. Its special subject would be nothing less than human nature itself.

The Germans had a special word for this new philosophy about humanity: "*Anthropologie*."¹⁹ They defined anthropology in a broad sense: "The doctrine of man, his parts and relations, in a theological as well as a physical and moral sense."²⁰ "*Anthropologie*" was by no means a German fad. If the word was German, the concept was British, indeed Scottish. It was perhaps no accident that Scotland was very popular among Germans in the 1760s, especially for those who resisted and resented French influence on the courts. The chief inspiration for German anthropology was the Scottish ideal of "a science of human nature," a project first formulated in the works of Hume, Smith, Kames and Ferguson. This new science would be, in Hume's memorable phrase, "An Attempt to introduce the experimental Method of Reasoning into Moral Subjects."²¹ It was modeled on the methods of the natural sciences. What Newton had done for the physical cosmos, that the Scottish philosophers now proposed to do for "the moral realm." Following the example of physics, the science of human nature would attempt to formulate precise laws about human nature based on the methods of observation and experiment. In more modern terms, the science of human nature had a "*naturalistic*" agenda. It treated human thoughts and actions like any other natural phenomena, as if they were, at least in principle, explicable according to universal laws.

There was no more enthusiastic champion of this new science than the young Herder. He embraced anthropology as a revolution in philosophy, as a promising new beginning that would free philosophy from the clutches of scholasticism and reorient it around human beings. Such, indeed, was his enthusiasm for this new science that, in his 1765 fragment, he went so far as to collapse philosophy into anthropology (134). The case for this transformation seemed compelling: since philosophy should serve humanity, and since it can do so only if it makes human nature its chief concern, philosophy should become anthropology (134). Now that philosophy should become anthropology, all its traditional parts—logic, ethics, metaphysics—would have to be reformulated along anthropological lines. Hence, in the 1765 fragment, Herder refashions logic

so that it no longer consists in the rules of scholastic disputation but in an art of discovery and exposition (112); and he conceives ethics less as a system of moral principles than as an attempt to clarify and encourage the sentiments and impulses behind moral action (115–16).

Herder's anthropology coalesced with another development in science in the second half of the eighteenth century: natural history. It was then a common theme of the natural philosophers that what at first seems eternal and static in nature—rock formations, species of plants and animals, the orbital structure of the solar system—reveals itself to be the result of a long, slow and gradual process of development. The solar system, for example, was not eternal, a direct product from “the hand of God,” as Newton taught, but the result of natural development, the action of natural laws upon masses of primal dust and gases. No one had stressed this lesson more than the young Kant, who, in his 1755 *Allgemeine Naturgeschichte und Theorie des Himmels*, had argued that the systematic shape of the cosmos is the product of its natural history. Greatly inspired by Kant's book,²² Herder simply applied his teacher's lesson to the human world. What seemed to be static and eternal in the human world—languages, forms of government, religions—prove to be no less the product of a long development. Taking Kant's lesson to heart, Herder would now make his anthropology into a natural history, a natural history of humanity itself.

The synthesis of anthropology and natural history led Herder in the 1760s to develop an exciting new project: a history of humanity. This project first comes to the surface in his 1765 fragment when he sketches the plan for a *Geschichte der Menschheit* (131–2). This would be a completely new kind of history, an anthropological history, whose subject would be not so much the particular deeds, people or works of humanity but human nature itself. The same conception emerges even more forcefully several years later in the *Reisejournal*, when Herder imagines writing a book on the history of humanity, its origins and development. The ultimate fruition of this project will be nothing less than his chief work on history, his 1784–91 *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit*.

Already in the 1760s, then, the young Herder had completely historicized philosophy. Philosophy was for him nothing less than the philosophy of the history of humanity. The steps behind this historical transformation were as simple as they were inevitable: philosophy had to be anthropology, the study of human nature; but, since there is no fixed and eternal human nature, this study has to focus upon the process that brought it into being, its genesis and development. Thus, by the early 1760s, Herder had already formulated an explicitly historicist conception of philosophy; and it was a conception that was entirely and emphatically naturalistic. In Herder, no less than Chladenius and Möser the naturalistic beginnings of historicism are fully apparent.

3. Aesthetics and history

Although Herder's anthropology is fundamental to his historicism, it still does not provide a sufficient account of its origin or meaning. It does explain *one* basic principle of his historicism: the principle of development, i.e., the thesis that everything in the human world, like everything in the natural world, is changing. But there is another no less fundamental principle of Herder's historicism that is not explained by his anthropology: the principle of individuality. According to this principle, everything within the human world is unique, incomparable, irretrievable, having a determinate identity entirely unlike anything else.

If Herder's principle of development came from his anthropology, his principle of individuality derived from another, even more novel, discipline: aesthetics. This new and growing discipline, only recently baptized and inaugurated by A.G. Baumgarten,²³ fascinated the young Herder, who devoted much of his time and energy to it. The real significance of Baumgarten's new science, Herder believed, was to shift criticism away from the work of art toward the soul of the producer.²⁴ Hence he saw aesthetics as one part of psychology, and more specifically as the science of human feeling.²⁵ Since feelings reveal the soul, and since poetry reveals feelings, it was from the study of poetry that one could understand the very heart of a people, the very pulse of its culture.

Though never explicitly articulated as such, the principle of individuality is a central theme of Herder's early aesthetic writings. It first appears, tentatively and implicitly, in his sketches for a treatise on the ode, "Von der Ode," which he wrote sometime between mid-1764 and mid-1765.²⁶ Although such a topic seems very narrow, it was central to Herder's aesthetics and anthropology, and for simple and straightforward reasons. If aesthetics is the study of human feeling, it must concentrate on the ode, which is the genre of poetry that expresses feeling. And if anthropology investigates the origins of humanity, it too must study the ode, which is the *earliest* form of spoken and written expression. Hamann famously wrote that poetry is the mother tongue of the human race; to that Herder adds that the mother tongue of poetry is the ode. It was indeed "the first born child of feeling, the origin of poetry, and the germ of its life" (78).

No sooner does Herder begin to study the ode, however, than he bumps up against an insuperable obstacle: individuality. He finds it difficult to define and classify the ode because it differs and changes so much, and because each form seems so unique. The ode attempts to express our most subtle and delicate feelings; but such feelings, because they are embedded in a particular language and culture, are completely individual (79). Among the various kinds of poetry, the ode proves to be "a proteus", because its spirit, content and style differ according to feeling, subject matter and language (79). "Perhaps

only the magical mirror of the aesthete,” Herder writes, “recognizes the same living thing under so many different shapes.” He does not give up hope that there is “a certain universal unity of feeling, of expression and harmony, which makes possible a parallelism between all of them.” Nevertheless, as his tentative “perhaps” suggests, he is not fully confident that there can be any valid generalization about all the different forms of ode. After we examine its different manifestations in all their individuality, all that will remain, he fears, will be “a big nothing” (*ein großes Nichts*) (80). Here, in his earliest reflections on poetry, we see Herder wrestling with a problem that will trouble him in all his later historical writing: how there can be unity amid variety, constancy amid change.

While the principle of individuality is implicit and inchoate in “Von der Ode,” it is more explicit and developed in Herder's first major publication in aesthetics, his *Über die neuere deutsche Literatur, Fragmente*,²⁷ which appeared in instalments from 1766 to 1768. This principle is the rationale behind two of Herder's central themes: that the genius and character of a people lies in the genius and character of its language; and that the meaning and beauty of literature are untranslatable because they reside in the peculiarities of its language. Throughout the *Fragmente* Herder argues that the meaning and beauty of poetry are irreducibly individual because they depend upon the specific language, culture and stage of development of a people. To separate meaning and beauty from their determinate language, culture and age is to hypostasize mere abstractions. From this argument Herder would draw two conclusions of fundamental importance for his aesthetics. First, that the best author is he who knows how to use and exploit the peculiarities of his own language: “The poet should know how to pair the individuality of his language with the individuality of his wit so that they seem to be made for one another...” (191). Second, that an author should not attempt to imitate literature written in foreign languages, whether it be Greek, Roman, English or French. Since this literature is the product of a specific culture, it has its unique qualities which defy imitation as well as translation.

The main influence and inspiration behind Herder's principle of individuality was his other great teacher from his Königsberg years: the “Magus of the North”, Johann Georg Hamann. What Kant was for Herder's anthropology Hamann was for his aesthetics.²⁸ It was one of Hamann's favorite themes in his 1762 *Kreuzzüge des Philologen* that thinking and meaning embody and express themselves in language, so that they are inseparable from it.²⁹ Without signs to give them shape, thoughts are inchoate, indeterminate, indeed non-existent. To identify a thought or meaning therefore requires *individuating* it, i.e., locating it in a specific language, and indeed in

that language as it was used in a specific culture at a specific time. Failure to individuate thought or meaning was tantamount to “Platonism”, i.e., belief in the reality of abstractions. This Hamannian theme appears explicitly in the *Fragmente* when Herder insists that, in the language of ordinary life, thinking is inseparable from its linguistic expression (177, 402–7). Words are not arbitrary signs for thoughts but their very embodiment, what gives them their existence and determinate meaning. We can always translate a thought from one language into another, of course, but with translation much is always lost. This thesis is especially true of poetry, Herder contends, where it is evident that the aesthetic quality of a poem depends on its specific language. For the poet, thought should relate to expression as soul to body, where the body should be an image of the soul (402, 406).

It is very unclear from the *Fragmente* how far Herder wishes to push his principle of individuality. He thinks that his thesis of the identity of thought and expression holds especially for poetry and the language of ordinary life; but he is sometimes unwilling to extend it to the language of philosophy or science. In the third collection of fragments of the first edition Herder maintains that the method of philosophy would be impracticable if thought and expression were inseparable. Following Kant,³⁰ he maintains that the method of philosophy is analytic, i.e., it analyzes a thought into its more distinct components, and in doing so separates it from its written expression (424). By so limiting the identity of thought and expression to the realm of poetry and ordinary life, Herder does not have to worry about relativistic implications. Although literary and ordinary meaning depend on historical context, the same is not the case for philosophy, whose concepts have a meaning and truth independent of their specific language, time and place. Since discursive thought is neutral about its linguistic form, Herder had no qualms about the continued use of Latin as a language of learning (419). It is striking, however, that in the second edition of the *Fragmente* Herder seems to drop this qualification of his thesis. He now explicitly says that he would be setting too great limits to the affinity of thought and expression if it were confined to literature alone (556). Since we cannot think without words, and since we learn to think through them, language sets the limits of *all* human knowledge (557). Hence Herder draws the bold and troubling conclusion that all thinking is national: “Each nation speaks according to how it thinks, and thinks according to how it speaks” (558). He does not restrict this conclusion to literature alone, because it now turns out that all three goddesses of human knowledge—truth, beauty and virtue—are as national as language itself (559).

Herder's vacillation in the *Fragmente* reveals a growing and broader struggle with relativism. His concern with this issue is especially explicit in an essay he wrote sometime in 1766, “Von der Verschiedenheit des Geschmacks und der Denkart

unter den Menschen.”³¹ Here Herder ponders the facts of *cultural diversity* (i.e., the phenomenon that taste and ways of thinking vary so greatly from one culture to the next) and of *historical change* (i.e., the phenomenon that the same people changes over time, so that its taste and ways of thinking alter with the generations). We are told that the heart of history is ceaseless change, constant flux: “The spirit of change is the core of history...Time changes everything so that one needs a magical mirror to recognize the same creature among so many different forms.” (158–9). Normally, we fail to confront these phenomena, Herder notes, because we live with an implicit ethnocentrism, as if our ways of life here and now were somehow natural, universal and eternal. Although Europeans laugh at the Chinese because they think themselves the center of the universe, they do not really think any differently from them (150). The phenomena of cultural diversity and historical change present us with a dilemma: if we endorse only the values of our own culture, we commit ethnocentrism; but if we accept the values of all cultures, we have to deal with the contradiction between them because these values not only differ but conflict with one another. Referring to Hume, Montaigne and La Motte de Vayer, Herder admits that the inevitable result of these phenomena appears to be skepticism (151); but in this essay he does not propose to answer such doubts. His aim is only to collect examples, to bring them under classes and to explain them. Although he wants to show the greatest differences between peoples, never does he doubt that all people are “*Mitbrüdern*” and that their history reveals a common nature.

There are some passages in the *Fragmente*, however, where Herder does suggest something of a solution to the problem of relativism. The net effect of his argument in that work is that not only works of literature, but also standards of criticism are the product of a specific historical context. But that left the nagging question: How can there be standards of criticism at all? For it would seem that no standard could claim universality, that any would be ethnocentric.³² There is a germ of an answer to this question in the introduction and second collection—a germ fruitful for all Herder's later work. Recognizing that the critic's standards are themselves often partisan and provincial, Herder redefines the task of criticism itself. Rather than judging an author from some presumed universal standard, he demands that the critic should examine him from within, according to the goals and standards the author sets for himself: “As long as one does not know how to trace ideas back to their source in the intention of the author, one writes at best against him; one arouses—if he does not know how to place himself in his position—contradiction rather than conviction.” (172). The critic should be the author's servant, friend and judge. He should place himself in the position of the author and read him in the spirit in which he wrote (267–8). In other words, for Herder, proper criticism is essentially *internal* criticism; or, as he puts it: “The best manner to judge an author is according to his own plan...” (230). As we shall soon see, this method of literary criticism will play a crucial role in Herder's hermeneutics.

4. A crisis of conscience

We have seen how Herder's historicism evolved from his anthropology and aesthetics. While his anthropology gave birth to his principle of development, his aesthetics gave rise to his principle of individuality. But our account of the origins of his historicism is still incomplete. For there was another field that remained of the greatest importance for the genesis of his historicism—a field often neglected in our secular age but still vital to Herder and the entire eighteenth century. That field was, of course, theology.

Theology had the greatest importance for the young Herder. However much he was attracted to anthropology and aesthetics, theology was his first concern, the ministry his chosen profession. Though an autodidact in anthropology and aesthetics, Herder had a professional training in theology. Enrolled in theology as a student at the University of Königsberg, he attended lectures on dogmatics, church history, oriental languages, the Old and New Testament.³³ The theology professors at Königsberg were not leading lights, their lectures not cutting edge. Still, Herder scarcely needed their guidance, for he had a much more inspiring mentor in Hamann. From that rich and vibrant source, Herder would have learned of all the latest developments in theology, not to mention a unique, controversial perspective upon them.

Around the middle of the eighteenth century in Germany, there arose a new direction in theology that would have the greatest importance for Herder's historical thought. This was the historical school of Biblical interpretation begun by Siegmund Jakob Baumgarten (1706–57), the eldest brother of the aesthetician, and then continued by Johann August Ernesti (1707–81), Johann David Michaelis (1717–91) and Johann Salomo Semler (1725–91). Under the influence of the British deists, these theologians stressed that the original message of the Bible was essentially moral, and that it had been corrupted by the dogmatic meanings placed upon it by ecclesiastical and philosophical tradition. Since the original message of the Bible was its plain, historical sense, understanding the Bible required a thorough knowledge of its language, cultural and historical context. The point was to interpret the Bible as it was understood by the first apostles and prophets, and not as it was glossed by later generations, who imposed all kinds of constructions upon it. Hence the guiding maxim of this new historical school ran: dogmatics should not determine the interpretation of the Bible but the interpretation of the Bible should determine dogmatics.

That the young Herder was influenced by this historical school there cannot be any doubt. Haym has drawn our attention to an early essay of Herder's, "Nachricht von einem neuen Erläuterer der H. Dreieinigkeit," written as early as 1766, where he shows his sympathy for the historical school.³⁴ The essay was a review of a recent

anonymous pamphlet which offered a neo-logicist interpretation of the trinity.³⁵ For Herder, this pamphlet provided a perfect example of the kind of rationalist reading the new historical school found so problematic. The basis of the author's interpretation was an hypothesis—that the persons of the holy trinity are intellectual distinctions within God—that he simply read into the text, stressing or ignoring passages according to whether they fit his hypothesis. For Herder, the correct way of proceeding is the very opposite. Rather than beginning with an hypothesis and forcing the text to conform to it, one should begin with real textual evidence and draw inferences from it. The fallacy behind the interpretation was obvious: from what an author *ought to* have meant we cannot infer what he *actually* meant. After exposing these problems, Herder contrasts the pamphlet's approach to “the way theology has happily gone in our day.” The guiding principle of this new theology, he says, is “to determine dogmatics through hermeneutics” (33). As if to endorse the thinkers behind this new approach, Herder mentions names: Ernesti, Semler and Michaelis.

The early date of this essay, which appeared *before* the *Fragmente*,³⁶ raises the question whether Herder's early hermeneutical views came more from theology than literature. Was Herder's demands for an internal and contextual understanding of a text the result of his theological training? Or is the converse the case? Did he first formulate methods of interpreting literature that he later applied to the Bible? On historical grounds it is almost impossible to decide this question. The treatise “Von der Ode,” which was written from mid-1764 to mid-1765, already contains, if only implicitly, the germs of Herder's later literary hermeneutics; but Haym tells us that Herder had already decided upon the new anti-dogmatic theology at the end of his Königsberg years, i.e., 1764.³⁷ The only conclusion the facts permit is that, in the febrile mind of the young Herder, literary and theological hermeneutics were inextricably intertwined. In other words, Herder read a literary text as if it were the Bible, the Bible as if it were a literary text.

Herder's historical approach to the Bible is apparent from two writings begun in the later Riga years, his *Fragmente zu einer Archäologie des Morgenlandes* and his *Über die ersten Urkunden des Menschlichen Geschlechts, Einige Anmerkungen*, which were both composed from 1769 to 1771. The *Archäologie* is a rough draft for *Einige Anmerkungen*, which is a more polished though still incomplete work.³⁸ The *Archäologie* is essentially a radical reading of Genesis according to the new critical methods of the historical school. Herder attempts to interpret Genesis in its original historical context and treats it as a cultural document expressing the values and ways of life of the ancient Jews. His central

thesis is that the purpose of Genesis was to remind the ancient Jews of their work week and Sabbath (45, 58–60, 85). This purpose appears, he argues, from the poetic symmetry of the first Book of Genesis, i.e., its division into six working days and a final day of rest. Concerned that the Jewish people keep to their divinely revealed rituals and routines, the author(s) wrote Genesis to remind them of their eternal obligations. Herder is concerned to refute two opposing interpretations. The first is the orthodox view that Genesis is the result of divine inspiration, an oracle revealing infallible truths. The second is the philosophical view that Genesis contains the basic principles of cosmology and the origins of the universe. Both interpretations fail for the same reason: Genesis is riddled with errors, contradictions and anthropomorphisms (29–31, 33). The more we place the text in context, the more we consider the qualities of its original language, and the more we reflect on the ways of life and values of the people who wrote it, the more we have to admit, Herder argues, that Genesis is a poem, a myth written by a primitive people (35–6, 76). Though many scholars have recognized or admitted that Genesis is really only poetry, they have failed to see the full force of this point and continue to see it as an oracle or a cosmology. Herder's purpose is to take this point to its ultimate conclusion (37). Rejecting the many attempts to read metaphysics and ethics into the text, Herder insists that he will not read more into it than is there (38). He will examine the text as a cultural document, as the myth of a primitive people. The method he employs will be nothing less than sympathy, i.e., feeling his way into the life of another people. This sympathy is worth more than thousands of commentaries (56).

Herder's argument in both the *Archäologie* and *Anmerkungen* rests on three underlying premises. First, that the Bible is poetry. Second, that the Bible is the product of ancient Jewish culture. Third, that the ancient Jews stood on the level of the childhood of the human race. All three premises reflect Hamann's *credo* that poetry is the mother tongue of the human race. These premises are very strategic for Herder because they allow him to defend the integrity of the Bible against both the attacks of free-thinkers and the abuses of metaphysical or neo-logician exegetics. Against both trends Herder contended that, just as we should not judge poetry as if it were prose, and just as we should not judge a child as if it were an adult, so we should not judge Genesis as if it were an attempt to write cosmology or metaphysics. It is absurd to praise or criticize it on such a level. Since the Bible is poetry, its discourse is sensible, imagistic or metaphoric; it attempts to express what we feel on the level of our ordinary experience, and it does not pretend to be better than the results of empirical science, of which the early Jews had no conception.

Clearly, such an argument has disturbing implications for the Christian faith. In defending Genesis because of its poetic qualities, Herder seems to undermine its claim to moral and metaphysical truth. If the Bible is indeed only the myths of the ancient Jews, why should we believe it? These myths have aesthetic qualities, to be sure, but that gives us no grounds to believe in them. Among the first to point out these troubling implications was Hamann. Fearing that historical criticism would undermine

faith in revelation, the Magus went on his “philological crusade” against Michaelis in *Aesthetica in nuce*. Hamann suspected that historical criticism would lead to a kind of Spinozistic naturalism about the Bible, as if it were nothing more than a relic of the myths of the ancient Jews. Against this creeping Spinozism, Hamann had proclaimed his own version of the belief in revelation: the Bible is a translation of the divine word into the human through the inspiration of the poet.³⁹

As a cleric, Herder too was much troubled by this issue. His own solution to the problem first appears in a sermon delivered at Advent 1768, “Über die Göttlichkeit und Gebrauch der Bibel.”⁴⁰ No less than Hamann, Herder declares that belief in divine revelation is essential to Christianity, and that we are Christians only if we believe that the Bible is the revelation of God (19). But how does that belief square with the main conclusion of the new criticism: that the Bible is only the national poetry of the Jews? Herder's answer anticipates Lessing's famous argument in *Die Erziehung des Menschengeschlechts*: that God reveals himself according to the conditions and level of education of a people. In revealing himself to the ancient Jews, God had to adapt himself to their language, beliefs and values; for in no other way could his message be understood and followed (30). Since God's message had to be revealed to a crude and simple people, it is not surprising that it sometimes appears crude and simple, that it contains errors and confusions characteristic of their way of thinking (38). So, for Herder, no less than Lessing, revelation is essentially historical: its precise meaning depends on when and who receives it; it is not fixed and the same for everyone and eternity. This is the reason why the Bible has to be interpreted as an historical document, and why it has to be read according to the culture and climate of a people. Hence Herder was not troubled by Spinoza's doctrine that the Bible is a cultural document of the ancient Jews; that doctrine was perfectly compatible with the historical relativity of revelation. Still less was he worried about the doubt and ridicule of the free-thinkers, who failed to appreciate the historical nature of revelation. Ironically, they laughed at the Bible only because they agreed with the orthodox: revelation had to be fixed and eternal, valid for all times and place; they differed from the orthodox only in denying that such a revelation ever took place. The historical nature of revelation showed, however, that neither the orthodox nor the radicals were correct.

As strategic as Herder's solution was, it created problems all its own. For now that revelation was made historically relative, it seemed to hold only for one time and place, so that it could no longer hold a canon of belief for the modern Christian. Why should a revelation adapted to the ancient Jews be applicable to modern Europeans? The Bible should no more be the canonical text for the modern believer, it seems, than Aristotle's poetics the canonical text for the modern dramatist. Still, true to his calling and Christian faith, Herder never renounced the beliefs in the trinity, incarnation and atonement, holding them to be as valid now for all Christians as they were during the

Council of Nicaea (325 AD). The young Herder, it seems, was still not willing to take the belief in the historicity of revelation to Lessing's radical conclusion: that it is a fiction redeemable only for educational purposes.

At the end of his Riga years, though, Herder felt the tension between his religious faith and the new criticism. The tension grew until it became a crisis of conscience. If he were contemplating going down Lessing's dangerous path, he was constrained by his clerical office, which forbade him to express any heterodox views. Indeed, some of his colleagues had already frowned on his free-thinking ways. Privately, he complained to Nicolai and Hamann about the "wrinkles" and "creases" that arose between his office and his personal views.⁴¹ The tension finally became too much to bear. The solution? Herder took the easiest—and most dramatic—way out: he fled. To the surprise of friends and flock, he abruptly resigned his post in Riga and went on a sea voyage to France.⁴² But, as we shall soon see, the sea journey would prove no escape at all. Herder simply carried his crisis with him, which brewed and stewed, whether on board ship, while in France or upon return to Germany.

We seem to have strayed far here from Herder's historical views. Yet, as we shall soon see, this crisis had a profound effect on Herder's entire intellectual development, not least on his historical writing. His first major historical work, his 1774 *Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit*, is best seen as an attempt to solve this crisis. But we are racing ahead of ourselves; there were other important developments in Herder's historical thinking even before he set sail from Riga.

5. Methods and problems of writing history

By the time Herder published the third collection of his *Fragmente* in the spring of 1767, the foundations of his historicism had been well and truly laid. He had formulated the principle of development in his anthropology and the principle of individuality in his aesthetics. History now had a central place in all his thinking, for he had historicized literary criticism, theology and every part of philosophy. Still, for all the importance Herder gave to history, he had thought little about the methods or problems of writing it. Although he had argued *that* philosophy, theology and criticism should be historical, he had not said much about *how* they could become so.

Of this lacuna Herder was well aware. History was on his agenda. He had originally planned to write a fourth collection for the *Fragmente* that would treat history along with aesthetics and philosophy; but, because the first three collections had grown beyond their planned size and finishing them consumed all his time and energy, the fourth was never written. Even so, the interest in history persisted. After writing the third collection of the *Fragmente* in January 1767, Herder turned to other projects

where he often discussed historical themes. From 1767 to 1769, the final Riga years, Herder wrote about history on sundry occasions. This was indeed one of the most formative and fruitful periods for the development of his historical thought. The writings from these years show that Herder was already developing sophisticated historiographical views.

These same writings also show, however, that Herder's thinking was very much in evolution, filled with doubts and inconsistencies. There is a basic tension running throughout them. On the one hand, Herder wants philosophy to become more historical, to adopt the methods of the empirical sciences and to explain things from their place in nature; yet, on the other hand, he also has grave doubts whether history can become a science at all. Herder's grand ideal of a scientific history of humanity, which he stated in the Königsberg years, seems undermined by his own methodological scruples.

The first glimmering of Herder's methodological views appears sometime in the summer of 1767 when he began to rewrite the first collection of his *Fragmente* for a second edition. There is a remarkable passage from these revisions which state his new historical method, and which reveal the extraordinary extent to which he had historicized philosophy and criticism. Herder now declares that the proper method to explain any human artifact or activity is historical or genetic, so that to understand them requires reconstructing the process by which they came into being. He recommends that the critic trace cultural artifacts—language, art, science, religion and philosophy—back to their origins.⁴³ The task of the critic is to write, as it were, the natural history of these phenomena, to show that they are not static or eternal but the result of history, the product of a specific time and place. The proper method of criticism is therefore “*genetic*” because it goes back to the origins of a thing and shows its genesis, how it came into being from its original circumstances. As Herder explained:

With the origin of a fact escapes us one part of its history, which can explain so much and usually the most important part. Like a tree from its root, so grows art, language and science from their origin. In the germ lies the plant with all its parts; and in the origin of a phenomenon all treasure of explanation, by which the explanation of the thing is genetic. (602)

Yet, around the same time, Herder was filled with doubts whether such a method is practicable. Sometime in 1766 or 1767, he began to write a new draft for his treatise on the ode, which was now entitled *Versuch einer Geschichte der lyrischen Dichtkunst*.⁴⁴ The introduction to this draft is his first treatment of historiographical issues. Following his interest in the origins of poetry, Herder discusses the problem of determining origins in history. He now recognizes, however, the severe challenges in knowing the origins of things. The problems he raises are indeed so severe that one wonders how, and indeed

whether, his genetic method is practicable at all. The first difficulty is the sheer lack of written sources. Since no one could write at the dawn of humanity, we have no record of what happened back then (88). But even when people began to write, rarely did they record the origins of things, and for all too understandable reasons: when an activity or institution began, it did not seem important at all. If we want to investigate certain origins now, we do so with the benefit of hindsight, because things become important to us only when we know their full consequences. But by then it is too late: the original events have disappeared into the mists of the past and no one has recorded them. Still, even assuming that there are written records, there is the problem of their reliability, which we cannot take for granted. The historian must regard written records not as the literal truth but as mere clues whose reliability can be determined only by analogy with other records known to be more reliable (92).

Another writing from the later Riga years, *Über Thomas Abbts Schriften. Der Torso von einem Denkmal, an seinem Grabe errichtet*, also discusses the difficulty of doing history. This piece, which was written in summer 1767 and published in early 1768,⁴⁵ considers a very different historiographical problem from that discussed in *Versuch*. In pondering what would be a fitting tribute to his friend Thomas Abbt, who had died young, Herder discusses the question what makes a good biography. We quickly learn that a good biography is more than a chronology or narrative of events. A good biography should be a paradoxical mixture of empathy and detachment. Though the biographer must learn to stand back from his subject and judge it impartially, he must also have enthusiasm and sympathy for it (574). The biographer should never reduce a writer down to his ideas and doctrines; for his interest is in the person, and therefore not so much in *what* he says but in *how* he says it (577). The foremost task of the biographer, Herder declares, is to know the individual person; but it is precisely this that makes writing biography so difficult. For to capture the singular and unique is the most difficult problem in writing all history. To know a person is to grasp their spirit, the very core of their individuality; but the spirit cannot be reduced to words. What we know of it is fleeting and indefinable; and, in the end, such phenomena have to be intuited rather than described (572). The biographer has done enough if, through a few hints and choice words, he shows the individuality of his subject; he should then leave the reader to his own imagination (578). Thus, in the face of the individual personality, the characteristic subject matter of biography, Herder seems to abandon all hopes of writing a definitive or final history.

Herder's doubts about a scientific history reached a crescendo sometime near the end of 1767 or in early 1768. His latest doubts appeared in the draft of a remarkable letter he wrote at that time to Johann Christoph Gatterer, the Göttingen historian.⁴⁶ This letter takes issue with Gatterer's thesis that history has its own *sui generis* methods

that can achieve the same degree of certainty as those of the abstract sciences.⁴⁷ Herder wrote his letter with the hope that it would be published in Gatterer's *Allgemeinen historischen Bibliothek*, though he never sent it and did not even finish it. Instead, the contents were revised and made the first part of a draft of the *Kritisches Wäldchen*, what is now known as the *Älteres Kritisches Wäldchen*.⁴⁸

The starting point of Herder's reflections is Winckelmann's famous statement in the preface to his *Geschichte der Kunst des Altertums* that his history attempts to be more than a narrative but a "*Lehrgebäude*," i.e., an entire or complete scientific doctrine.⁴⁹ For Herder, such a bold claim raises fundamental questions: What does it mean for history to be a science? And can such an ideal be attained? His main argument is that such an ideal is beyond our reach. A scientific history would be at the very least a complete description of a fact; but no single event, no single fact, ever permits such a description. As if he were citing Chladenius, Herder maintains that we can examine each fact from an infinitude of angles and never exhaust it (12). Which standpoint we choose is ultimately a matter of convenience or the purpose of enquiry.⁵⁰ But the problems of scientific history scarcely stop here. History should be more than chronology, more than a report or description of what happens; it must also provide a *causal analysis* of an event. But as soon as we attempt to ascertain causes, we enter into an even more uncertain and subjective realm. Making use of Hume's skepticism about causality, Herder points out that no causal analysis can be directly verified by experience. What is given in our experience is simply a *constant conjunction* of events, where one event follows another; but this alone does not justify the attribution of a *necessary connection* between them. Since I never directly perceive the cause, and since my senses reveal only a constant conjunction of events, it is necessary to resort to judgment, inference and reasoning. But as soon as we judge, infer and reason, we have to allow different perspectives and explanations of the same event (13). The structure of historical thinking involves even more than causal analysis, Herder insists, because it also requires organizing all particular events according to a single plan and for a definite purpose (15). To give his work unity and meaning, the historian has to construct his history as a narrative, as if it were a drama. This dramatic or aesthetic dimension means, however, that history is even more subjective, because there are many different purposes in writing a history, many different narratives for the same events.

So, in sum, Herder distinguishes three levels of theorizing in history, classifying them according to their greater degree of subjectivity: that of the *annalist*, who simply reports what happens; that of the *reasoner*, who attempts to determine causes; and that of the *artist*, who orders all events according to a single plan (14–15). Although Herder thinks that the third level is the most subjective of all, it is also that which he admires most and regards as the culmination of history. Although he is never so explicit, he suggests that history has to be art as well as science.

Relentless in his critique of Gatterer, Herder pursued his every suggestion to establish a scientific history. Gatterer believed that one could learn to write history by following the example of the classical historians, viz., Herodotus, Thucydides and Polybius, who were superior to modern historians, in his view, because they provided insight into the whole of events and their causal interconnections.⁵¹ Herder is skeptical, however, that these historians are the models of scientific history that Gatterer supposes. The more we examine them in their historical context, the more we find that they wrote for a definite audience and for a definite purpose which no longer holds today. Herodotus, for example, wrote history as an epic because he knew his countrymen would appreciate history most in this form; and never did he intend to write the definitive history of his subject matter. Writing history, Herder implies, is a function partly of one's purposes, partly of one's audience, and there are no *a priori* restrictions that we can impose to give us *the* history of a certain topic.

Given his skepticism about a scientific history and his preference for the artistic dimension of history, it might seem that Herder comes close to the post-modern doctrine that everything in history is a matter of interpretation or rhetoric. Some scholars have indeed pressed this kind of interpretation on Herder.⁵² Yet it is noteworthy that, despite his doubts about a scientific history, Herder does *not* conclude that history is completely subjective. He does not think that the historian can resort to *any* plan to organize his facts, still less that there are no objective facts at all. Hence he complains about how history degenerates without a sound foundation in the facts (23). Attempting to balance the demands of factual research and artistic narrative, he maintains that the best history would be that where the historian is aware of the gulf between fact and theory but still attempts to combine both (23).

These two themes—the importance of objectivity, and the need to distinguish yet combine fact and theory—come to the surface in another essay Herder wrote in the final Riga years. This was his 1769 “Ueber die Reichsgeschichte: ein historischer Spaziergang,” which appeared in the third of the *Kritische Wälder*.⁵³ His subject here is the special problems of writing the political history of the German states, the genre

known as "*Reichsgeschichte*." Since this had been a special topic among the Göttingen historians, Herder could not resist airing his own views. He begins by asking why it is impossible to write a history of Germany comparable to the histories of ancient Greece and Rome. "Where are the Thucydides, Xenophons, Livis and Humes of our Germany?" (462). Part of the reason there are no comparable German historians is that Germany, unlike ancient Greece and Rome, lost its ancient myths, legends and poems. When we enter the temple of Greek and Roman history, Herder says, we are greeted by a choir of bards; but when we enter the temple of German history, we are stunned by silence. Since myths and legends are fiction, one might think their loss is insignificant; but, Herder insists, myths and legends tell us much about the values, customs and beliefs of a people (463) Another problem in writing German history is that the only written history about the Germans came from the Romans, from the *Taciti*, who knew the Germans only as foreigners, indeed as enemies. Writing from such a foreign perspective, Herder insists, is no way of knowing a people; he then lays down, explicitly and emphatically, his own demands for understanding another culture:

Whoever does not place himself into the characteristic ways of thinking of such a different people, whoever cannot judge things according to their characteristic spirit, their secrets and education, he knows only very little; and whoever writes as a foreigner about an unknown political enemy, and above all as someone with another way of thinking about things, knows even less. (464).

Although Herder stresses the value of sympathy, poetry and myth for understanding the history of a nation, he is far from underrating the importance of basic historical research. Just as he did in the *Älteres Wäldchen*, he again stresses the importance of determining facts and distinguishing them from theory. He then declares in some striking lines that he prefers knowing the simple, plain facts than reading elegant narratives and philosophical reflections:

Perhaps it is stiffness, or something else, but the last thing I look for in history is elegant exposition and philosophical remarks...I demand with every deed an exact report and with every fact sure testimony...I ask with indignation about many beautiful historical novels: 'Does that come from you or have others told it to you?'...I wander about with indignation when I do not know whether this is fact, deed, history—or remark, idea or opinion of the historian...? (468)

Foreshadowing Ranke's famous phrase, Herder even declares that the task of the historian is to give us "the true body of history *as it is*" (*wie er ist*). (469). He then reaffirms his advice to the historian in the *Älteres Wäldchen*:

With all our mistreatment of history according to good taste, it should still be a rule to designate for the reader exactly where history ceases and conjecture begins, and exactly the degree of certainty involved in every step we take. (469)

Yet, for all the scruples of the later Riga years, Herder was far from abandoning his project for a new science of history. No sooner did he leave Riga than he reaffirmed his ideal to write a natural history of humanity. Thus in his travel diary, which he wrote on board ship to France, he enthuses about his project for a new history about the origins of man and the development of culture. "What a work on the human race! The human mind! The culture of the earth!"⁵⁴ In the face of such enthusiasm all his doubts about writing history evaporate. We shall soon see, however, that other more powerful forces would conspire to sink his project. The worst of Herder's crisis still lay ahead of him.

6. The origins of language

A formative stage in the development of Herder's historicism—and, indeed, historicism in general—came with his 1772 treatise on the origin of language, *Abhandlung über den Ursprung der Sprache*.⁵⁵ There are few reflections on historical events or historical method in Herder's treatise, so that it might seem at first blush an unlikely source for his historicism. Yet it is here that Herder applies his genetic method to the investigation of the origins of language, and, since thinking is inseparable from language, to the origins of rationality itself. With Herder's treatise rationality is brought within the historical worldview, so that it loses its transcendent status and becomes just another phenomenon in history.

The occasion for Herder's tract was a prize competition, set in 1769 by the Academy of Sciences in Berlin.⁵⁶ The prize was for the best essay on the questions: "If human beings were left with their natural faculties, would they be able to invent language? And by what means could they invent it?" Competitors were expected to examine the views of a late member of the Academy, J.P. Süßmilch, who had argued that humans alone could not have created language, which must be therefore a gift of God.⁵⁷ Herder was delighted to learn about the competition. Here was an opportunity to elaborate his views on the origins of language, which he had already sketched in his *Fragmente*. "A splendid, great and truly philosophical question," "a question written for me," he wrote his friend Hartknoch from Nantes in October 1769.⁵⁸ More than a year later, in the last two weeks of December 1770, Herder hastily wrote his contribution to meet the January 1, 1771, deadline. His essay duly won the competition, and was published under the auspices of the Academy in 1772.

Herder's treatise was his first major attempt to realize the grand ideal of his anthropology: a natural history of the human mind. True to that ideal, Herder vowed that his explanation would be entirely naturalistic. It would forswear all appeals to the supernatural; it would explain all stages in the development of language according to natural laws; and it would confirm all its assumptions through observation and historical fact. Hence, throughout his treatise, Herder lays down one "natural law" after another, formulating each law in terms of direct or indirect ratios between observed variables. Here again we see how much Herder clung to his scientific ideals despite his doubts about their practicability in the later Riga years.

While Herder's project is naturalistic, we fail to understand his intentions if we describe it in these terms alone. There had been other notable attempts in the eighteenth century to explain the origin of language on naturalistic principles, most notably that of Condillac in his *Essai sur l'origine des connaissances humaines* (1746), and that of Maupertuis in his *Reflexions philosophiques sur l'origine des langues et la signification des mots* (1747). But Herder sharply distinguishes his approach from theirs, which he finds much too reductivistic.⁵⁹ He complains that they attempt to explain the origins of human language on the basis of those primitive cries and groans that human beings have in common with animals (708). While Herder does not doubt that human language *begins* with such cries and groans—his own theory of the origin of language in the *Fragmente* assumed something like this—he insists that they alone are not a *sufficient* basis to explain what is distinctive about human language: its capacity to communicate thought. There is an insurmountable gap between the cries and groans of animals and the concepts of human language. A satisfactory explanation of human language must close this gap, showing how the discursive dimension of human language arises inevitably and naturally from the characteristic nature of human beings: rationality.

Herder was convinced that only his new naturalistic yet non-reductionist approach could resolve the old dispute about the origin of language in the Academy. That dispute, which began in the 1750s, had now reached a stalemate. The *status controversiae* was a drastic dilemma: the reductivistic naturalism of Condillac and Maupertuis or the extravagant supernaturalism of Süßmilch. It seemed as if language either came from the cries and shrieks of animals or was received through divine instruction. To some, the difficulties of the naturalistic theories made Süßmilch's supernaturalism seem a more attractive alternative. Such, at any rate, was how Herder summarized the dispute (711, 725). The point of his theory was to find the middle path between the horns of the dilemma.

The greatest challenge for Herder in solving the origin of language dispute came not from any member of the Academy but from a thinker who had always troubled him: Jean Jacques Rousseau. In his 1754 *Discours sur l'origine de l'inégalité* Jean Jacques had dramatized the difficulties in explaining the origin of language.⁶⁰ The theory of the human origin of language had to resolve two vicious circles: first, one needs reason to invent language but language to have reason; second, society is necessary to establish language but language is necessary to establish society. Man would never have developed language in the state of nature, Rousseau argued, where all he needed to survive is instinct alone.⁶¹ These Rousseauian remarks set the background for much of Herder's argument.⁶² His treatise was first and foremost a reply to Rousseau, an attempt to demonstrate that the creation of language is not impossible but necessary for man in his natural condition.

Although Rousseau set the major challenges for Herder, much of his treatise is a polemic against Süßmilch. It was partly an act of courtesy to the Academy, partly a matter of expositional convenience, to give so much attention to Süßmilch, even if, all along, Herder had Rousseau in mind. It was surely no accident that Herder focused on that aspect of Süßmilch's argument that had already been stressed by Rousseau: the circularity between needing reason for language and language for reason. Süßmilch had drawn attention to this circle to demonstrate the necessity of a divine origin of language; he had argued that early human beings could not invent language because their reason is not sufficiently developed without it; hence they must have learned language from some higher intelligence, namely, God.⁶³ Herder replied that, from the circularity, Süßmilch could have drawn just the opposite conclusion: that if language is necessary to human reason, the development of language is as natural as the exercise of human reason itself (726–7). This circle was as much of a problem for Süßmilch as it was for the human origin theory: for humans need reason to understand divine instruction; and since reason requires language, they would already have language before receiving instruction in it (727). Whatever the merit of such polemics, the more convincing side of Herder's case against Süßmilch is purely empirical. He cites many facts that reveal the all too human origin of language: that the first words reflect sounds conspicuous to human ears (734); that words often express human emotions; that the first articles are masculine and feminine (737–9); that some languages are rich in synonyms for some things yet lack entirely words for others (755–6); that languages

reflect the customs and values of the people who speak them (757–8); that all abstractions begin as metaphors (759–60); and so on.

Having disposed of the supernaturalist theory, it was now incumbent on Herder to put forward the case for a naturalist one. Following his non-reductivist approach, he begins to sketch his own theory, in the first section of Part I, by noting one fundamental difference between animals and humans: animals have instincts and acute senses to guide them because they are limited to a specific sphere of activity; humans, however, have few instincts or acute senses because they have to adapt to many different spheres (711–15). It is a general law of nature, Herder claims, that the senses and instincts of animals are in *indirect* ratio to the size and variety of their spheres of operation, i.e., the smaller and more uniform these spheres, the stronger their instincts and the acuter their senses (713). Since the spheres of human activity are so wide and various, humans have fewer instincts and less acute senses to guide them. Although born weak, with few natural defenses, and lacking instincts and acute senses, humans still have something to compensate for these deficiencies: reason and freedom. It is reason and freedom that allow human beings to transcend the limits of their immediate environment, to work in many different climates and in many different ways.

Now, though, a problem arises. Since Herder assumes a distinction *in kind* between humans and animals (716), and since he thinks that this distinction lies with the human possession of reason and freedom, one might well ask how his explanation is naturalistic at all. For it seems as if he is placing human beings above the natural order. After all, reason and freedom are faculties often placed outside nature. It is important to see, however, that Herder does not accept a metaphysical dualism between mind and nature. Although human beings are distinct in kind from animals, they are parts of nature no less than they. There are two aspects of Herder's explanation of the origin of language that make it consistent with his naturalism. First, he often insists that the general order of nature consists in distinct species, and that each species has its own specific language (699, 729–30, 741); hence an adequate naturalistic explanation must be species-specific, i.e., it must take into account the characteristic nature of each species, “the distinctive language of a creature” (*die eigentümliche Sprache eines Geschöpfes*) (714). Second, he assures us that his explanation will cohere with “the universal animal economy” (*die allgemeine tierischen Ökonomie*), according to which nature does nothing in vain and every organ of an animal is necessary to some purpose (716, 777). They are shown to be necessary when it is demonstrated that they are indispensable for its survival (776). Herder's explanation must show, therefore, how language is an utter necessity for a human being to survive.

What, though, does Herder mean by “reason” and “freedom”? Since he thinks that they are the source of human language, he owes us an account of their meaning. Unfortunately, however, Herder does not trouble himself much with a precise definition of freedom. In the context of his argument, freedom seems to mean little more than not being limited by instinct to acting in one particular way or in one particular sphere; he implies that freedom means the power to choose between different ways of

acting and different spheres of activity. On these grounds Herder writes that man is not “a machine in the hands of nature” and that he becomes “the goal and end of his own action” (717). Fortunately, though he says little about freedom, Herder does devote some attention to defining rationality. He warns against making reason into a *qualitas occulta*, against postulating some kind of special linguistic power, which would create only a circular explanation (715). With Rousseau and Süßmilch in mind, he complains that the nature of rationality has been much confused of late. There are two common mistakes made about it. The first is to assume that it is a distinct faculty, a separate aspect of human nature, as if the rest of our nature were somehow animal. This is to hypostasize an artificial intellectual distinction, to distinguish between faculties and single out one as if it could somehow exist on its own. *Per contra* Herder insists that we are rational only in the exercise of the *totality* of our powers. The second mistake is Rousseau's idea of reason as a latent faculty or power actualized only under specific circumstances.⁶⁴ Reason, Herder contends, is more than a mere possibility: it is an active *self-realizing* energy, and one that adapts to all kinds of circumstances. What we should mean by reason is not a distinct faculty or power but the *characteristic manner* in which a human being unites, organizes and directs all faculties or powers. Hence reason is not a kind of thing but *a way of acting*, and indeed a *second-order* way of acting that organizes, directs and unifies all our more particular activities.⁶⁵ To avoid the misleading associations of the term “reason,” which imply a special kind of faculty, Herder proposes calling this distinctive or characteristic manner of acting “*Besonnenheit*,” an unfortunately untranslatable term having connotations of self-awareness, prudence, presence of mind and self-possession. He defines *Besonnenheit* as “the whole organization of [man's] sensitive and cognitive, cognitive and volitional nature” (717), or as “the whole direction of his thinking power in relation to his sensibility and drives” (718). Since Herder often uses the term “*Reflexion*” as a synonym for “*Besonnenheit*,” it is perhaps best to translate it as “reflection,” though that term has none of the suggestiveness of the German.

Granted that *Besonnenheit* or reflection is characteristic of a human being, what is its connection with language? Why must someone having a power of reflection use language? Herder's explanation is remarkably brief and sketchy (722–3). He explains that reflection involves *inter alia* the abilities to focus on one aspect of our experience, to single out one feature among the great confused mass striking our senses, and then to recognize that aspect or feature again on a later occasion. Reflection involves therefore a power of recognition (*Anerkenntnis*), the capacity to recognize features of our experience as the same as we have sensed before, i.e., to grasp their identity throughout

time. What recognition requires to execute this function, Herder claims, is a sign or mark (*Merkmal*), which serves to aid memory and to focus on what is similar amid so many different things. This sign or mark is the first word, the beginning of language. And so Herder exclaims:

By what means did recognition occur? Through a sign, which it must abstract, and which, as a mark of reflection, becomes distinct for it. Here we have it! Let the soul shout *Eureka! The first use of a sign or mark (Merkmal) by reflection is a word for the soul! Hence human language is discovered.* (723; Herder's italics)

This all seems much too quick and simple. While it perhaps explains the connection between reflection and word, *Besonnenheit* and sign, it does not amount to an account of the *genesis* of language itself. All that it shows is the interdependence of reason and language; but it has said nothing about the genesis of either. It states only that *if* there is rationality, there is the use of signs; but it does not explain the genesis of rationality itself. Conversely, it states that *if* there is the use of signs, there is rationality; but it does not account for how the use of signs began in the first place. As it stands, we are left wondering how Herder's theory escapes Rousseau's circle: that language cannot arise from reason because reason presupposes it. It was not least for this reason that Hamann would later criticize Herder.⁶⁶

Herder was perfectly aware, however, that his theory was incomplete, and that, as it stood, it could not break out of Rousseau's circle. He begins to sketch his own account of the origin of language only in the third section of Part I. Herder's account gives great importance to hearing as the crucial sense in the formation of language. If a person were blind or dumb, he could still invent language; but if he were deaf, he would be helpless (734). The ear is "the first instructor in language," Herder believes, because the most conspicuous features of objects to primitive man were the sounds they made (733). The dog barks, the sheep bleats, the dove coos. Man imitated these sounds, and then gave things names according to them (737). Herder stresses that the first words were verbs rather than substantives, because what caught the attention of primitive man was what a thing did, especially its making sounds. Substantives were later formed from these verbs, viz., the dog was that which barks, the sheep that which bleats, and so on. This was indeed "the first step toward abstraction," Herder declares, because names were made from verbs (738).

So far, then, Herder's theory involves three theses: (1) that the first words were onomatopoeic, (2) that man creates language through imitation, and (3) that the first words were not cries of feeling, as Condillac and Rousseau assume, but verbs and the substantives formed from them. On this basis, Herder thinks that he can account for the cognitive dimension of language, which Condillac and Rousseau failed to do. This dimension arose, he argues, from the act of giving names to the same creature (741).

As stated, Herder's theory is still incomplete. For he has explained only the origins of those words that sound like their objects. But there are so many words, in any human language, that are not onomatopoeic. How do we account for them? Posing just this question (743), Herder attempts to explain the genesis of non-onomatopoeic words by postulating a *sensorium commune*, a power of inner sense that connects through feeling all our senses (744). Although Herder offers little explanation for this power, all that he seems to have in mind is that there is one and the same soul that feels heterogeneous sensations. It is in virtue of this power that it can associate its various sense qualities. Although these qualities have no necessary connection, we still associate them, so that whenever we hear a certain sound we imagine a certain color, or whenever we see a certain shape we think of a certain tactile feeling (744). This power of association means that we transfer the words for certain sounds to other sense qualities, viz., colors, sizes, shapes. For example, "cawcaw" would originally imitate the sound of a crow; but it eventually, through elision, becomes "crow," designating a bird of a certain size, shape and color. Although this part of Herder's theory is very sketchy, he seems to assume that we can form the basic vocabulary of a language by a basic set of onomatopoeic words and association from them. The theory fails to specify, however, the forces that make an originally onomatopoeic word into a non-onomatopoeic one. The most notable aspect of his theory is his reluctance to admit any form of convention in explaining the origin of non-onomatopoeic words. The reason for this reluctance is that he finds the appeal to a convention circular. Condillac's assumption that language arose from convention—the agreement to use certain arbitrary signs to designate certain things—already presupposes the idea of language (709–10).

But even now the theory remains incomplete. Granted that human languages gradually arose from onomatopoeic words and association, why is it that man had to speak in the first place? Why not just accept Rousseau's thesis that man did not need language at all in the state of nature? Solving this problem, and rebutting Rousseau's thesis, was the task of the second part of Herder's treatise. Here Herder attempts to explain why human beings had to create language, or why language is necessary according to the principles of "the general animal economy." His explanation picks up on his earlier account of the difference between human beings and animals stated earlier in the first section of Part I. What allows human beings to adapt to different climates, and to do such different things, Herder maintains, is precisely their capacity to think or reason. Reason gives human beings the power to generalize, so that they can learn from their experience. Through reasoning, for example, they learn that this kind of animal is dangerous, and that this kind of plant is beneficial (775). Now language is an indispensable tool for such reasoning, and so a necessary means for survival, because it allows the human animal to record these lessons and to hand them down to the next generation. Although human beings do not have instinct to guide them, language serves to instruct them about what is essential to their survival. Hence language serves as a store of memories for the good of the species as a whole. Although animals too have memories, they do not generalize their memories for the good of their species; in their

case, memory functions solely for the welfare of the individual (772). Through reasoning, as Herder puts it, man has the power *to progress*, i.e., he does not continue to act in the same ways nature prescribes but he changes and adapts according to what he has learned (773). Here, then, was Herder's answer to Rousseau's thesis that man in the state of nature did not need language and could survive happily from instinct alone. Man's instincts were simply too few to guide him in all the different spheres of activity to which he had to adapt himself. Without language to guide him, each generation would have to learn the hard way the lessons of its parents. The price could be extinction itself.

It was by adding this dimension of natural history to the study of language that Herder could finally break out of Rousseau's circle. The underlying premise behind that circle was false: it assumes that language is a complete structure from eternity; it projects modern languages back into the past, as if early languages have complex and refined structures like contemporary French and German.⁶⁷ If this were so, primitive human beings would be indeed incapable of creating language, and they would certainly have need of divine instruction. What Rousseau failed to consider, however, is the dimension of time: that languages are the product of slow and gradual evolution over the centuries (807–8). Adding the dimension of natural history means that reasoning is a matter of degree, and that it increases with facility, complexity and subtlety over time. Rousseau and Süßmilch had wrongly assumed that reasoning is an all or nothing matter, as if the infant could reason like the sophist from the lectern or like the statesman in his cabinet (719–20).

Such was the sum and substance of Herder's argument in his 1772 treatise. For all its shortcomings in exposition and argument, it was a brilliant performance, one rich in ideas and spirited in polemic. All his friends admired it, and not for nothing did it receive its prize. But, as we shall soon see, no one was more dissatisfied with the work than Herder himself. To the astonishment of contemporaries and to the puzzlement of later scholars, he utterly disowned it, recanting its central theses and renouncing its entire purpose. Why? We must now attempt to explain this mystery.

7. The hermit and his cell

In April 1771, only a few months after writing his treatise on the origin of language, Herder moved to the small principality of Bückeburg to serve as its *Konsistorialrat* and *Oberpfarrer*. The Bückeburg years (1771–76) were to be his unhappiest.⁶⁸ Herder felt isolated and lonely, stuck and stranded in a small provincial town, far away from Riga,

his homeland, where he might have made an impact on the world. It did not help his mood that he had a tense relationship with his employer, Count Wilhelm zu Schaumberg-Lippe, the epitome of an enlightened despot. Since the Count had little interest in religious affairs, Herder could achieve little as chief preacher and advisor, and so he felt his job pointless. While he was loved by his congregation in Riga, the less educated flock in Bückeberg were suspicious of such a liberal pastor, who to them seemed a dangerous free-thinker. To console himself, Herder would often take long solitary walks to commune with nature. The only satisfying friendship Herder formed in the Bückeberg years was with the Countess, Maria zu Schaumberg-Lippe, whose pietistic religious sensibility Herder admired. One of the few to appreciate Herder, she made him her confidant and *Seelesorger*.

All these biographical details would scarcely deserve mention if they did not provide the context for a radical shift in Herder's intellectual development—a shift that would soon have a profound effect on his nascent philosophy of history. Alone, disappointed and isolated, Herder was thrown back upon himself; and, inspired by the Countess Maria's example, he began to return to his own religious roots for comfort and support. It was also during these years that he read Pascal, whose defense of religion against the rationalism of his day greatly impressed him.⁶⁹ The net result was that Herder grew more skeptical, even hostile, toward the *Aufklärung*, especially its intolerance toward religion. This reaction was fuelled by Herder's tensions with the Count, who embodied for him the dogmatism and tyranny of the *Aufklärung*. Herder's hostility toward the *Aufklärung* was not least the intellectual sublimation for his resentment toward the Count.

Summa summarum, the Bückeberg years are characterized chiefly by Herder's zeal against the *Aufklärung* and his rediscovery of the value of religious sensibility. It was a move away from free-thinking toward mysticism. To describe Herder's change in attitude in such general terms might seem crude and clichéd; but Herder wrote about himself in just such language. Read his revealing October 17, 1772, letter to Merck:

That my present situation has changed me a lot I need not demonstrate to you...You should also think that the old theological libertine is gone; but you will hardly fathom that he has now turned into a mystical enthusiast. But the soul raises itself and dreams all the more happily of foreign worlds the less it finds itself in the present one. Heaven and the hermit's cell always go together.⁷⁰

It would be a mistake, however, to think that Herder's change in thinking came from his Bückeberg environment alone. There were other forces at work, some coming entirely from within Herder himself. We have already seen how, since the late Riga years, Herder underwent a profound spiritual crisis arising from the tension between

his religious office and philosophical views. He never escaped this crisis on his sea voyage, and he took it back with him to Germany. Now, in Bückeberg, lost and lonely, he had to confront his inner demons. The tension could be resolved in two ways: either by taking Lessing's free-thinking philosophical path and casting doubt on all revelation; or by going down Hamann's mystical road and reaffirming the value of revelation. His renewed spiritual self-awareness in Bückeberg took him down the mystical road. The new attitude toward religion in Bückeberg was Herder's solution to his crisis.

The most remarkable manifestation of Herder's new religious sensibility was his change in thinking about the Old Testament. While working on the manuscript of his *Archäologie* in Straßburg to prepare it for publication, he had an epiphany. He had made, he told his friend Merck, a "remarkable discovery".²¹ Ever since he began his studies on Genesis he found that its structure had a peculiar symmetry which could be represented in the form of a sextogram with a point in the middle. At first Herder gave little thought to this sextogram, which seemed only a convenient way of symbolizing the structure of the text. He assumed that it was only a mnemonic device among the ancient Jews, who used it to remind people of the Sabbath. He hesitated to say that it was a hieroglyph, because that would be to impose just another intellectual construction on the text.²² But Herder's fascination with the strange sextogram grew. Then he made his discovery: that the sextogram was a hieroglyph after all, and indeed the basis of all oriental wisdom and theology! Since it symbolized the structure of the creation and the first revelation of God to man, Herder attributed the greatest religious significance to this "rune" or "hieroglyph". He believed that it was the tool with which God first instructed man in the arts and sciences. Herder now began to see new meaning in Hamann's theory that the creation is the language of God, the symbols with which God speaks to man. The first symbol of that language, he now believed, was nothing less than his rune or hieroglyph. Here, then, was the source and soul of Herder's new "mysticism". It came less from any religious experience than the magical meaning he read into his hieroglyph.

All these new mystical ideas would finally appear in 1774 when Herder published the first part of his *Älteste Urkunde des menschlichen Geschlechts*.²³ The *Älteste Urkunde* is a drastically revised version of the ideas in the *Archäologie* and *Einige Anmerkungen*, the earlier manuscripts on Genesis. The first two chapters are a reprise of the older ideas; but then the next four are a virtual repudiation of the radical implications of the older texts. Herder now saw that his old biblical criticism was heading toward the abyss; and he shrank back. To save his soul, he now attempts to restore the significance of revelation, and he warns of the dangers of the rationalistic interpretations of the Bible, which are turning it into "*Deistische Wasserbrühe*" or "*Wolfs Paragraphen*" (238). Crucial to his new standpoint is his opposition to any separation between nature and

revelation. God, he insists, reveals himself through his creation, which is a miracle itself. With each new day God reminds us of his creation (239, 246). In the *Älteste Urkunde* Herder continues to say that the ancient Jews had no sophisticated powers of reasoning and that they had to sense and feel everything; but he now attributes the greatest cognitive significance to their feelings and senses: it is through them that they become aware of “the presence and power of God” (250–1). This immediate experience of his presence and power, Herder now claims, is nothing less than the basis of all knowledge (255). Throughout the *Ältestes Urkunde* Herder settles his accounts with the *Aufklärung* for failing to see the significance of revelation and degrading human beings down to the level of animals. First and foremost among the *Aufklärer* to suffer censure are Lowth and Michaelis, the very leaders of the historical school of criticism whom Herder once admired. He now attacks them viciously for regarding the Bible as mythology—the very view he had espoused in his *Archäologie*! The viciousness of Herder’s polemic against Michaelis was in part severe self-censure for having admired him in the first place.

The *Älteste Urkunde* was not the only fruit of Herder’s new religious attitude. Even before the first part of that work appeared in April 1774, Herder began distancing himself from his past, first and foremost from those writings where he seemed to show a much too rationalistic temper. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that he now disowned his treatise on the origin of language. Although his work was greeted almost everywhere with acclaim, Herder declared himself completely dissatisfied with it. “I am astonished and confused when I read the Prize piece,” he wrote Nicolai in February 1772, “I do not know what demon possessed me to write such stuff for the Academy.”⁷⁴ After sending a copy to Karoline Flachsland, his fiancé, he wrote her on February 10: “Here is the latest bouquet from me that you have to put up with...It is a disaster, and I would like to be rid of it...Right now I would not write it for anything.”⁷⁵ Haym found Herder’s act of disownership puzzling, and mentioned that even Herder’s contemporaries were at a loss to explain it.⁷⁶ But, when we place it in his Bückeburg context, it becomes perfectly comprehensible; for in writing the treatise Herder assumed the role of an *Aufklärer*, “a theological libertine,” a representative of the very movement from which he now wanted to distance himself. When reevaluating the concept of revelation while writing the *Älteste Urkunde* Herder came to see the point of the theory of the divine origin of language—the very theory he attempted to refute in the treatise (278). He now said that man alone, unaided by divine instruction, has only the power to learn language, and that this power has to be actualized through God. He cited his own treatise to prove the point, as if there were no contradiction; but any close reader of the treatise could not fail to see the inconsistency. For there Herder had criticized Süßmilch and Rousseau for thinking that natural man alone does not have the power to create language.

Shortly after writing to Nicolai and Karoline, Herder found even more compelling reasons for denouncing his treatise. From Riga his old friend Hartknoch sent him some reviews of his treatise by his old teacher and friend, Hamann.⁷⁷ In his loneliness in Bückeburg he had missed Hamann and grew to appreciate their old friendship all the more. But instead of a friendly letter he received instead what seemed like a declaration of war! Herder was wounded by the derisory tone of the reviews and considered breaking off the friendship.⁷⁸ The Magus was punishing Herder for his apostasy, of course, for his apparent solidarity with the cause of the *Aufklärung*. To counteract the one-sided naturalism of his student, Hamann then put forward his own theory of the origin of language in his *Philologische Einfälle und Zweifel*.⁷⁹ According to his theory, the origin of language is both human and divine: human, because it is a direct product of our natural human faculties; but also divine, because God creates human nature and works through it to create language. But in putting forward his theory Hamann was preaching to the converted, for Herder's thinking was already moving in a mystical direction in Straßburg. It is not surprising, then, to find Herder agreeing with his old teacher. He assured Hamann that he accepted his point that the creation of language is not simply a human feat but that God creates language through human nature; for good measure, he then went on to denounce his treatise in the most firm and explicit terms: "I can assure you that the manner of thinking in the Prize piece can and should have as much influence on me as the picture that I am now nailing to the wall."⁸⁰ Of course, Hamann was delighted by the return of his erring son, and he had fun tweaking the Berlin *Aufklärer* about his reconversion. Understandably, Haym regards "the return to Hamann" as "the epoch-making event" of Herder's lonely years.⁸¹ At the very least, Herder's realignment with Hamann deepened his opposition to the *Aufklärung*.

What effect did Herder's "reconversion" have on his unfolding philosophy of history? The greatest imaginable. Herder's first statement of that philosophy is from his Bückeburg years, his 1774 *Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit*. The purpose and central theses of that work are the direct result of Herder's new attitude toward religion and his reaction against the *Aufklärung*. Herder rejects the two prevalent views about history found among the *Aufklärer*: the skeptical view that history is meaningless and the optimistic view that the meaning of history is found in the present age. Herder's escape from this dilemma of skepticism or complacency is a theodicy: that the meaning of history comes from providence whose ends are not accessible to reason. It is astonishing to find Herder going back to theology after his original plans for a

philosophy of history were so closely tied to the anthropology of the *Aufklärung*. Gone from Herder's 1774 tract, however, is his older naturalistic program, the heart and soul of his early anthropology. The treatise on the origin of language was the epitome of that program; but now, of course, it had been denounced and disowned. The anthropologist had become a mystic.

8. Another philosophy of history

Herder's 1774 tract *Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte* has been called, with some justification, “the grand foundational work of historicism.”⁸² The tract anticipates many basic themes of historicism: that we should not judge the past by the standards of the present; that each culture is an individual and unique whole; that each age has its own standards of happiness and virtue; that the past should be relived and felt rather than just described and explained. All these themes, later commonplaces of the historicist tradition, are clearly stated, indeed passionately proclaimed, in Herder's tract. Not that Herder invented them,⁸³ of course, but he did weld them together into a powerful attack upon the historiography of the Enlightenment, an attack so effective it made historiography seem naive, complacent and outdated. The historicist tradition grew out of a reaction against Enlightenment historiography; and Herder's tract is the first and most powerful statement of that reaction. The famous complaint that the Enlightenment had no “historical sense” ultimately goes back to Herder's 1774 tract.

It is important, however, not to overstate Herder's case. In some respects the 1774 tract cannot be regarded as foundational at all. It says very little about methodology. It declares that the historian should feel himself into the way of life of a past culture; but it provides no account of how such empathy is possible, let alone reliable.⁸⁴ There is also a shadowy side to Herder's legacy, which bestowed upon the historicist tradition not only central themes but also basic problems. The worst problem was relativism, i.e., how there could be universal standards if all values are cultural and historical. While Herder clearly sees this problem and struggles to avoid it, he offers nothing toward its solution but religious faith, an appeal to providence. It was a desperate strategy; but also the precedent for Humboldt, Ranke and Droysen.

Any discussion of Herder's 1774 tract has to begin with its remarkable title. The full title is *Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte zur Bildung der Menschheit* (Another Philosophy

of History for the Education of Humanity) and it bears the subtitle *Beitrag zu vielen Beiträgen des Jahrhunderts* (Contribution to the Many Contributions of the Century). The title is a clear indication of Herder's polemical intentions. The heavy irony suggests parody, though what we get instead is diatribe, a vitriolic settling of accounts with a whole tradition of historiography. What ostensibly claims to be just another philosophy of history really intends to end the genre entirely. In the preface to his *Ideen* Herder later gave a misleading gloss to the title and subtitle of his earlier work. They were meant to convey, he explained, "a note of modesty" because he did not intend to give a whole new philosophy of history but only to point out "a little footpath," another way of pursuing philosophy of history. But this was the wishful thinking of an older, wiser and more temperate man who really wanted to downplay his original immodesty. For Herder's original intentions had all the brashness of youth: to show *the right way* of doing history, not just an alternative way.

Herder's critique of Enlightenment historiography was essentially a *meta-critique*, a radicalization of the Enlightenment's own critical program. It was one of Hamann's favorite themes that all radical criticism should be meta-criticism, that the Enlightenment could not exempt its own tribunal of criticism from criticism. Herder makes this theme central to this own polemic. He agreed with the *Aufklärer* and *philosophes* that reason is a critical power, and that it has the right, indeed duty, to examine *all* our beliefs and actions. On just these grounds, however, they have to be *self-critical*, examining the assumptions behind their own tribunal of criticism. The Enlightenment critique of past history fails by its own standards, Herder argues, because its judgments are based upon not universal and necessary principles but the values and beliefs of the present age illegitimately generalized as if they held for all mankind. So, despite all his bluster against the *Aufklärung*, Herder could claim to be its good conscience, an *Aufklärer* who judged its practice by its own standards. This was another reason for his remarkable title: his tract was just another philosophy of history because it was, after all, criticism in the Enlightenment tradition.

It is a mistake to think that Herder's polemic is chiefly directed against one or two authors, viz., Iselin or Voltaire.⁸⁵ It is extremely wide-ranging and targets many authors; Herder cites, or alludes to, among others, Shaftesbury, Hume, William Roberston, Jean-Baptiste d'Alembert, J.J. Winckelmann, Nicolas Boulanger, Johann Christoph Gatterer and August Ludwig Schlözer. Despite their differences, most of these authors share a general theory of history, which was the main target of Herder's polemic. This theory consists in four basic assumptions. First, that the present age, the age of Enlightenment, is the highest stage in the development of humanity, because mankind has finally reclaimed its power to direct its own fate according to the guidance of reason. Second, that the growth of the arts and sciences, the result of

the rehabilitation of reason during the Renaissance, has improved morals and the condition of mankind. Third, the Middle Ages was an epoch of darkness, where the use of reason was trampled by ecclesiastical authority, and where belief in revelation spread fanaticism, superstition and prejudice. Fourth, the inspiration for the age of reason is classical antiquity, more specifically, the culture of the Roman republic and fifth century Athens; civilization must return to and imitate this source, which had been cast into darkness since the decline of the Roman Empire. Such a theory of history gave rise to a specific historical practice, a specific way of doing history, which bore the brunt of Herder's wrath. Namely, if our present culture is the highest stage of human development, we can judge other ages and cultures according to the extent to which they have contributed toward our age and culture. If this seems astonishingly complacent and ethnocentric from a contemporary perspective, that is only because we are the heirs of Herder's polemic. But, in all fairness, it is also necessary to think inside the perspective of the *philosophes* and *Aufklärer*. They saw history as an essentially *critical* enterprise, i.e., it does not accept the past in its own terms but claims the right to judge it. They are confident that they possess universal and impartial standards—the principles of natural law—to which every culture ought to conform. Hence to examine the past in its own light would be to forfeit our reason; it would be to accept the very dogmatism, prejudice and illusion from which mankind has been struggling to liberate itself. For many *philosophes* and *Aufklärer* the very purpose of history is moral: good history is *pragmatic* history, which teaches us by moral examples. We learn what to do today from seeing the mistakes of the past. History is the antidote to that farce which comes with the repetition of tragedy.

Herder's polemic against Enlightenment historiography involves a tangled knot of arguments, all of them directed against the *Aufklärer's* tribunal of critique. Each strand of this polemic deserves unraveling.

First, Herder points out that there is no single uniform standard of happiness that we could apply to all cultures (38–9).⁸⁶ Human nature is not static and fixed but variable and plastic; it assumes different shapes according to time and place, so that what makes one people happy makes another miserable. Hence Herder writes in some celebrated lines: “each nation has the center of its happiness within itself, just as each ball has its own center of gravity” (39). He then warns against measuring one nation by the standards of another because “all comparison is problematic” (38).

Second, Herder, like Möser, contends that people become who they are from necessity, that they are formed by circumstances, so that it is pointless to judge them. Since “ought” implies “can”, and since people cannot be otherwise, we should not judge them by some ideal about what they ought to be. Hence Herder writes that we cannot expect the Biblical patriarchs to have the bravery of the Roman soldier because “...he [the patriarch] is what God, climate, time and stage of the world could form out

of him, namely, a *Patriarch!*" (36). More generally, he contends: "...to a certain degree all perfection is *national, generational* and more specifically *individual*. One does not develop anything but what time, climate, need, world or fate gives the occasion" (35).

Third, Herder claims that we should not judge history by general moral standards, as if people could ever achieve complete perfection, for the simple reason that virtue and vice are complementary qualities.⁸⁷ We cannot have a great virtue without great vice. For example, the ancient Romans showed the virtues of fortitude, persistence, loyalty; but the exercise of these very virtues often manifested itself in cruelty, harshness and bloodshed (37). Referring to the Romans, Herder writes: "The very machine that made possible the most extensive vices was also that which so elevated [their] virtues...Is humanity in general, under a single set of conditions, capable of pure perfection? Heights have valleys." (37).

Fourth, Herder contends that we should not judge an early stage of human development by the criteria of a later stage. Just as we should not judge a child by the standards of an adult, so we should not judge primitive peoples by the standards of a more civilized age. Hence Herder takes to task Voltaire's and Boulanger's critique of the "despotism" of Biblical patriarchy on the grounds that it fails to consider the childlike condition of the first people; they were not ready to judge their rulers but required guidance from them as a child does from a parent (15).

Implicit in these arguments, and fundamental to Herder's whole historiographical approach, is his principle of individuality.⁸⁸ While this principle is only implicit in the 1774 tract—Herder never gives it a name—it is still omnipresent. Whenever he writes that each culture is a unique irrepeatable whole, incomparable with other cultures, which is often, the principle makes its appearance. It surfaces most explicitly when Herder declares that each human perfection is "*national, secular* and, in the most exact sense, *individual*" (35). The full purport of the principle becomes apparent to him when he confesses: "No one in the world feels *the weakness of general characterization* more than I do." (32). Through a few general words no one can ever do justice to the richness and particularity of experience, he stresses. What distinguishes one culture or epoch from another, what makes them just this individual and no other, is indeed ultimately ineffable.

Herder had already applied the principle of individuality to texts, languages and human artifacts in the *Fragmente*; he now simply extends it to entire cultures and nations. This has two important methodological consequences. First, it means that we should judge each culture by its own standards and values rather than those of another culture. Just as he insisted in the *Fragmente* that we judge a text from within,

according to the author's intentions and context, so he now tells us that each culture and epoch has to be treated in the same manner. Second, it implies that we cannot understand cultures or epochs through general concepts alone, or that we cannot explain them only by universal laws. There will always be something eluding conceptualization and explanation: the concrete, determinate and particular. While Herder still does not doubt that concepts and laws are a *necessary* condition of understanding, he now denies that they are a *sufficient* condition. Here the naturalistic program of his earlier years, which never questioned the adequacy of natural laws for a complete understanding of history, suffers an important qualification.

Given that general concepts never capture the particular, what is the historian to do? Herder's advice is famous: "...go into the age, in the region, and the entire history, feel yourself into it—only then are you on the way to understand the [general] word" (33). These lines are often taken to be a birthplace of the doctrine of *Verstehen*. But since that doctrine has many meanings depending on who expounds it, many different theories have been read into Herder's lines. When examined more carefully, however, it becomes clear that Herder is not advising empathy as a *surrogate* for explanation, still less as a *starting point* of explanation, as if its content had to be explicated through analysis. Rather, his point is that empathy should be a *supplement* for explanation. When words fail us, when we realize that we cannot see the particular through them, we should intuit, relive or feel into the past. Like Ranke, Herder thinks that all historical enquiry should end with an ineffable experience, the direct intuition into the sheer individuality of an action, person or epoch.

No less crucial to Herder's argument in the 1774 tract is his principle of growth or development. Like the principle of individuality, this principle was first applied to language and literature, and it too is now extended to entire epochs of world history. Herder now assumes that all history is an organism, so that all epochs and cultures are linked together in a continuum where earlier stages are the basis for the growth of later ones. Each later stage assimilates and learns from the life of the earlier ones, so that there is growth and development in world history. All the major cultures of Western civilization are linked together as if they were so many stages in the development of a single person. The ancient Jews were the infancy of the human race; the Egyptians and Phoenicians were its childhood; the Greeks were its youth and the Romans its manhood.

The introduction of the principle of development posed some difficulties for Herder, of which he was well aware. One difficulty is that it seems to undercut the principle of individuality: while the principle of development seems to make each culture a means to a higher end, one step of a ladder, the principle of individuality demands that we treat each culture as an end in itself. Herder resolves the apparent contradiction by claiming that in every organism each part is both means and ends: "No thing in the whole kingdom of God...is a means *alone*—everything is *means* and *end* at the same time..." (54). Another difficulty is that the life-stages metaphor seems to have a very limited or arbitrary application. What is the old age of the human race?

What happens after the death of the *macroanthropos*? Herder implies that the birth–death cycle repeats itself for a new generation, but on a higher level where the younger generation builds on the accomplishments of the older ones. But he does not develop his theory in any detail. Herder was well aware of some of the drawbacks of his metaphor, which were brought to his attention by Christian Garve in a review of the first edition of the *Fragmente*.⁸⁹ Herder did not, however, abandon the metaphor,⁹⁰ still less did he intend to refute it.⁹¹ He replied in the second edition of the *Fragmente* that the comparison of a language with the stages of life was simply a metaphor, but one that he found “natural, true, correct and fruitful” (I, 600). Just why Herder found it so natural and fruitful he does not explain; but it is not difficult to reconstruct his chief motive.

The organic metaphor, or the principle of development behind it, was very strategic for Herder. It was his middle path between two extreme views about the meaning of history. One extreme affirms that there is purpose in history but measures progress toward it according to an ethnocentric standard; the other extreme denies that there is purpose in history because it sees epochs come and go with no coherent or cumulative result, as if history were the work of Penelope, who weaved her shroud during the day only to unravel it at night (40). Herder's principle steers between these extremes by assuming that each nation takes from the past, and gives to posterity, according to its own individual nature (41). Although there is no single uniform set of values for all nations, they are also not self-sufficient and independent of one another; rather, they form a chain or continuum where each learns from past cultures and gives lessons for future ones. While each nation has its center of happiness in itself, there is still growth and progression because it builds according to its individual nature on the achievements of the past (41).

Entwined with Herder's principle of development is another central theme of his 1774 tract, a theme that came straight out of his religious sensibility in Bückeburg: the idea of providence. So important is this idea for Herder that he heralds it as “*mein großes Thema!*” He introduces it by saying that, despite all the changes of history, there is still “a plan” behind it (40), what he calls “progress and development in a higher sense” (41). The “higher sense” turns out to be nothing less than providence. Amid all the chaos and confusion of history there is still “a greater plan of God in the whole” (82). Herder likens all the events in world history to the stage of one vast cosmic drama, where everyone is an actor who plays a definite role according to a preconceived script

(42, 82). What is this script? To what ends does history conform? To these questions Herder offers no answers. We know only a small part of the great plan of world history, he repeatedly says, and we cannot rise above this part to grasp the design of the whole (42, 82). We are on a pilgrimage on this earth; and we do not know why we are here, where we are going or what will happen to us. In introducing the idea of providence, Herder intends to deny the secular or humanistic view that the meaning of history is to be found within history itself. Hence he claims that we must think “outside the human race” if we are to consider the ultimate purpose and design of history (83). This is a remarkable shift away from his earlier views when, in his correspondence with Mendelssohn,⁹² he had defended the doctrine that the meaning of life has to be found within history itself; but it is only in keeping with the greater religiosity of the Bückeburg years, when Herder explicitly renounced his old “free-thinking ways.”

Although Herder admits that we cannot know the purposes of providence, he still insists that we can know history is governed by higher powers. That history is in their hands is apparent, he argues, from the role of fate in human affairs. Fate is not something completely blind, for Herder, but the agency and power of providence itself.

The *Aufklärer* and *philosophes* presuppose that there is no fate, because they assume that man can make his own destiny, that he can subject nature to his own will and guide his life by reason alone. But Herder dismisses this as a conceit. He asks us to consider the causes of the Renaissance, the rebirth of the arts and sciences in the sixteenth century.

The *Aufklärer* and *philosophes* think that it was the work of reason alone, which had finally freed itself from ecclesiastical tutelage; but it was more the result of events beyond anyone's control, a matter of fortunate coincidence (57). There would have been no Renaissance if the Turks had not conquered Constantinople in 1453, forcing Greek scholars to flee to Italy (57–8). There would have been no Enlightenment without the chance discovery of the compass, printing press and gunpowder (59). The great epochs of history, such as the Renaissance, Reformation and Enlightenment, were more the result of chance than human planning. The more we consider the role of fortune in history, the more we see, Herder thinks, that we are only the tools of higher purposes. We are like ants crawling on the great wheel of fate (58, 106).

Herder's idea of providence serves as the complement and constraint on his principle of individuality, which, on its own, leads to relativism. It is noteworthy that Herder introduces the idea just after arguing that each nation has the center of its happiness in itself, and just after contending that human nature is plastic (38–9). These arguments seem to show that there is no general standard of happiness by which to measure and compare different nations, that there is no single uniform human nature. They bring

Herder dangerously close to the skepticism of those *philosophes*—he mentions Bayle, Montaigne, Voltaire and Diderot—who doubted the existence of ultimate values in history (40–1). Herder's answer to this skepticism, which he takes virtually as a *reductio ad absurdum*, is his appeal to providence. It is providence that assures us that there are absolute values behind history, and that there is a single uniform human nature behind all its protean changes (40, 82). Herder's point seems to be that if we only have faith in providence we can escape skepticism and hold onto meaning in history after all. But this, of course, is a *salto mortale*, a leap of faith. It has no bearing against a skeptic, who simply doubts this faith. Since Herder could not reveal the ends of providence, he left his own concept in the realm of obscurity where it became impossible to assess its truth or falsity.

Haym remarked that the spirit of Herder's 1774 tract was “pious faith, belief in revelation.”⁹³ Certainly, the crucial role that Herder gives to the idea of providence stands as weighty evidence in behalf of Haym's statement. It is important to see, however, that Herder's tract was no orthodox defense of traditional Christianity. Nowhere in his exposition does Herder rest his case upon the Bible alone, and still less does he presuppose the supernatural, the evidence of miracles or prophecy. Rather, he takes it as a principle that God works through nature, and he makes conjectures according to “the analogy of nature.” Hence he asks rhetorically: “When, in the whole analogy of nature, did divinity act otherwise than through nature?” (48). Herder seems to be his most orthodox, and closest to abandoning his naturalism, when, in the opening passages, he defends the literal truth of Genesis against the skepticism of Voltaire and Boulanger, who had doubted the long lifespans of the first patriarchs. It is noteworthy, however, that even here Herder defends Genesis according to “the analogy of nature.” We have evidence from travel reports and archeology, he says, that shows the long age of the patriarchs was necessary for them to establish their authority and to begin the process of civilization (12–13). The first patriarchal age only seems miraculous, Herder thinks, if we wear “the *a priori* glasses of the philosophers,” i.e., if we assume, arbitrarily, that what is true for the later stages of humanity must also be true of its earlier stages (11). Nowhere is Herder's reluctance to introduce orthodox Christianity more apparent than in his account of early Christianity, which he understands essentially as a moral religion, even as a “philanthropic deism” (47). The essentials of early Christianity, we learn, were “religion of humanity, the drive of love, the bond of all nations into one brotherhood” (46). Never does Herder mention faith in the incarnation and trinity. His portrait of early Christianity seems cribbed from the pages of a Toland, Tindal or Collins. Only partially, it seems, did Herder renounce his old free-thinking ways.

Still, Herder's reluctance to assume the truth of revelation has more to do with his argumentative strategy than his lack of faith. He wants to meet the arguments of the

philosophes and free-thinkers on their own terms, which means not assuming the truth of the very revelation they wanted to throw into question. The truth of the matter is that Herder held his more personal spiritual beliefs in reserve in his 1774 tract. But were they to remain a secret? We have reasons to doubt that. For in June 1774 Herder wrote Lavater that he wanted to write a second part of his philosophy of history which would relate to the first part as the key to the lock. And the key? It was nothing less than “Religion, Christ, the end of the world with a glorious blessed development.”⁹⁴ But, ultimately, the reluctance to drag his personal faith into a philosophical discussion trumped these plans. The second part was never written.

It has often been said, rightly, that one of the major achievements of Herder's 1774 tract was its reassessment of the Middle Ages. Along with Möser's *Osnabrückische Geschichte*, it marks the beginning of the Romantic rehabilitation of the Middle Ages, even if Herder never shared the romantics' faith in the *superiority* of medieval over modern culture.⁹⁵ Herder's reassessment had little to do with the renewed religious faith of the Bückeberg years. However prominently that faith figured in the 1774 tract, it alone was never sufficient for him to reassess the Middle Ages. Herder's religious convictions were too deeply rooted in Protestantism for them to be the source of any sympathy with the medieval past. Indeed, in the *Fragmente*, Herder regarded basic aspects of medieval culture—its scholasticism, monasticism and ecclesiastical hierarchy—as chief sources of the repression of an original German culture. Hence the reassessment of medieval culture in the 1774 tract was first and foremost a reassessment for Herder himself. The source of Herder's reappraisal was nothing more, nothing less, than his principle of individuality, whose full meaning and implications now became clear to him. This principle demands that, like any other epoch, the Middle Ages has to be understood on its own terms, as a unitary culture having its own characteristic strengths and weaknesses. In this respect the Middle Ages would have to be on par with Oriental, Egyptian, Phoenician and Greek culture. Perfectly consistently, Herder did not hesitate to draw just these consequences. The “gothic edifice” of the Middle Ages, he exclaimed, was “*great! rich! meditative! powerful!*,” indeed “*a marvel of the human spirit*” (50). All the ecclesiastical hierarchy, cloisters, monasteries, crusades—the whole institutional fabric of religion—was a tool of providence. Critical of the *philosophes* and *Aufklärer* for comparing medieval culture unfavorably to that of the Greeks, Herder insists that it is, like any other culture, unique and incomparable, having its own distinctive virtues and vices (51). He then adds that the Middle Ages brought many beneficial changes to Europe: the cultivation of lands, the formation of close social bonds between classes, an ethic of modesty, simplicity and honesty (52). If it were not for such “barbaric ages” Europe would now be a desert. Though he insists that he does

not want to defend the crusades, persecution and superstition of the epoch, Herder stresses how even these negative characteristics were part of the “one spirit” that breathed throughout all aspects of medieval culture (53). Having drawn these conclusions, Herder could now reap the hefty polemical benefits. For his reasonable demand that we examine medieval culture for its own sake utterly undermined the theory of history of the *Aufklärer* and *philosophes*. It was central to that theory that the Middle Ages be the depths, the age of darkness from which humanity would have to save itself through the light of reason. But now that Herder insisted the Middle Ages be taken on its own terms, it made no sense to describe it as an age of darkness; the nemesis of the Enlightenment, its very own bogeyman, simply vanished.

There were two sides to Herder's 1774 tract. It was a defense of past cultures against the criticism of the Enlightenment; but it was also a more general criticism of the culture of the Enlightenment itself. After all, enlightened historiography was only a symptom of the whole corrupt and decadent culture of the Enlightenment. Accordingly, most of the second and third sections of the work is a diatribe against that culture. Herder unleashes a cannonade of charges: that its excessive intellectualism fails to cultivate and strengthen character; that its faith in reason makes it ignore the role of the passions, the real motives of human action; that its radical criticism dismisses as “prejudices” beliefs necessary for action; that enlightened monarchs are really despots, imposing laws and policies that squelch all dissent, initiative and diversity; that Europeans, believing themselves the most civilized of peoples, have treated barbarously native peoples around the globe. Anticipating the concept of ideology, Herder remarks how enlightened doctrine is often only the disguise and excuse for Machiavellian policies (99). It is no accident that much of Herder's polemic against the Enlightenment is reminiscent of Rousseau. While Herder claimed in Riga to have gotten over his early infatuation with Rousseau, the solitude and isolation of Bückeberg revealed his persistent debts to an old flame. The central theme of Herder's polemic is a reprise of Rousseau's first discourse: that the arts and sciences have corrupted rather than improved morals. To all the arguments of the first discourse, Herder adds a new telling one all his own: that the growth of technology has made people less capable of doing things themselves, where control over their lives is transferred to those few who master the machines (60). Herder's central image for the age of the Enlightenment is the machine: the growth of technology and centralized absolutist government means that the entire state, and everyone within it, is becoming a machine, lacking spirit, blood and heart. Nowhere does Herder strike the Enlightenment harder than when he stresses the role of fate in history. This was a blow against the complacent pride of the *philosophes* and *Aufklärer*, who believed they were free agents having the power to shape the world in their own image. The *philosophes* and *Aufklärer* were essentially eighteenth-century Pelagians: they believed that human beings could make their lives better through their own efforts by directing them according to natural reason. On religious grounds Herder now questions this belief, insisting instead that we are all tools of providence, creatures directed by higher ends beyond our knowledge and control.

Herder's vitriolic attack upon his own age raises question of consistency. If each culture is individual, a unique whole, should not the culture of enlightenment be treated with the same respect as other cultures? It is noteworthy that Herder himself poses this very question (70). He denies that he is indulging in the old sin of idealizing the past and complaining about the present. To prove the point, he then proceeds to praise his age for its many virtues, viz., its discoveries in science, its subtle and sophisticated intellectual culture, its cosmopolitanism, and so on. Still, Herder is not evenhanded, and his praise of the Enlightenment rings hollow. For no sooner does he make these concessions than he begins to unleash his indignation again. His lengthy diatribe dwarfs his brief encomium. But diatribe is just what we expect from the lonely hermit of Bückeburg.

9. Back to the sunlight

There is an old controversy among Herder scholars, which persists to this day, whether Herder belongs more to the tradition of the Enlightenment or the Counter-Enlightenment. This dispute is sometimes phrased as the question whether Kant or Hamann had the greatest influence on his thought. Because weighty evidence can be mounted on both sides, it is not easy to decide the question. There are also subtle and sophisticated synthetic efforts to show how Herder combines both Enlightenment and Counter-Enlightenment into a single philosophy. The whole debate is pointless, however, because it proceeds from a false assumption: that Herder's thinking was static or continuous, remaining essentially the same from the Königsberg to the Weimar years. The clear and hard truth of the matter is otherwise: Herder's thinking underwent remarkable shifts and reversals in attitude and principle, such that he sometimes passionately denied what he once passionately affirmed. We have already seen how this is the case with his views on the origin of language and his attitude toward Biblical criticism. In each case there are not simply differences in emphasis and attitude; there are straightforward contradictions. These shifts are most evident in Herder's attitude toward the Enlightenment itself. To be sure, the shift is never from pure black to pure white—Herder always accepted some aspects of the Enlightenment and always rejected others—but it is also not just a matter of degree, because there are other aspects that he first affirms and then denies. Once we admit these contradictions, it becomes clear that the whole debate about Herder's ultimate loyalties is falsely framed. The fundamental question for Herder scholarship is not *what* were Herder's ultimate attitudes and allegiances but *why* he undergoes such basic shifts in attitude and allegiance.⁹⁶

Nowhere is there a greater need to explain basic changes in Herder's intellectual development than in the case of the philosophy of history. There are profound differences between Herder's 1774 tract and his 1784–91 *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit*. While the 1774 tract limits the role of naturalism in explaining history, the *Ideen* embraces a complete naturalism. The 1774 tract describes modern Pelagianism and preaches the role of fate in human affairs; but the *Ideen* returns to Pelagianism, telling us that man can direct his own fate through the use of reason and freedom. The 1774 tract finds the ultimate meaning of history outside it; but the *Ideen* insists that the meaning of history has to be found within it. The 1774 tract answers skepticism and relativism with an appeal to faith; the *Ideen* replies to it with an analysis of the basic laws of history based upon the natural sciences. The 1774 tract adopts and extends Rousseau's attack upon the arts and sciences; the *Ideen* defends the arts and sciences. Herder's intellectual development was indeed cyclical: the *Ideen* returns to the humanistic and naturalistic philosophy of his earlier years. It is as if all the *Sturm und Drang* of the Bückeburg years has burned itself out and the sun, after a dark storm, now shines again.

How do we explain these changes? Why did Herder return to the earlier program of his youth? What happened to the religious fervor of Bückeburg? There are no simple answers to these questions, and a full account of these changes remains a desideratum of Herder scholarship. We cannot develop here a complete explanation; but we can at least identify some of the most important factors.

One major event that helped to cure the religious fever of Bückeburg was the appearance in the late 1770s of Lessing's *Wolfenbüttler Fragmente*.⁹⁷ Beginning in 1774, Lessing published anonymously parts of a posthumous work of H.S. Reimarus, *Apologie oder Schützschrift für die vernünftigen Verehrer Gottes*. Lessing was given the work by Elise Reimarus, the author's daughter, but he pretended that it consisted in fragments of unknown origin he found in the library at Wolfenbüttel, where he was serving as official librarian. To protect Reimarus' reputation, Lessing did not reveal his identity, and even claimed, to keep censors off the scent, that they were written by Lorenz Schmidt, a notorious deist from the 1720s. Lessing had reasons to worry about the consequences of publishing even parts of Reimarus' work, for it expounded a radical deism and critique of orthodox Christianity. Reimarus argued that many traditional Christian doctrines—the incarnation, trinity, the ascension and second-coming of Christ—had no foundation in Scripture at all and were simply dogmas constructed and imposed by the Church. He also contended that Jesus' gospel was essentially ethical, so that anyone who acted morally could be a good Christian. Furthermore, he questioned, on several grounds, the reliability of revelation: it rests on historical testimony about the remote past, which weakens proportionally to the

distance from its source; some of the witnesses were dishonest or duped; and the apostles often contradict one another. Reimarus even went so far as to say that the disappearance of Christ's body from the tomb was a pious trick played by some of his disciples. At the close of the fragments Lessing was careful to distance himself from some of Reimarus' conclusions; but about one point he was completely firm: Christians who opposed their publication, though they might be devout, could not be enlightened.⁹⁸ An enlightened Christian would be one, he implied, who knew the reasons for his beliefs and would be ready to discuss the evidence for and against them. Lessing's chief purpose in publishing the fragments was to stimulate discussion about the basis of Christianity. And, in this respect, he was almost too successful. The fragments aroused great controversy. Astonished and alarmed by their contents, the orthodox attacked not only Reimarus' arguments but Lessing's wisdom in publishing them. Lessing counter-attacked, and his brilliant polemics in *Anti-Goeze* caught the attention of all Germany.

Among those who watched the debate with growing interest was, of course, Herder. Lessing's call for a rational discussion of faith struck a chord in Herder, who now realized that he needed to defend his own position. The whole argument of the *Älteste Urkunde* assumed the reliability of historical revelation—though it was precisely that assumption which Reimarus had thrown into question. It simply would not do, then, to condemn the use of reason in religion, as he had done in the *Älteste Urkunde*, because this would cut off the very branch on which he needed to sit. There is more than ample evidence that Herder was stimulated, even challenged, by the *Fragmentenstreit*. He wrote Lessing, December 25, 1778, that he had been closely involved in all the controversy. Agreeing with Lessing's demand for a discussion of the issues, he said that both friends and foes alike should look forward to the appearance of the whole.⁹⁹ He later told Lavater in July 1779 that he found the arguments of the orthodox "crude and dumb," that Reimarus' theory about the gospel of Jesus was a kick in the stomach, and that some of the arguments against historical testimony were indeed weighty.¹⁰⁰ These letters show, then, that Herder wanted to be one of Lessing's enlightened Christians. That meant he would now have to re-enter the arena of rational argument and discussion—the very arena he had shunned and scorned in Bückeburg.

The new rationalist temper of Herder's thinking after the *Fragmentenstreit* is apparent from two writings of the early 1780s. One of these is his essay on Lessing in *Winckelmann, Lessing, Sulzer*, which was published September 1781 in the *Teutsche Merkur*.¹⁰¹ Worn and tired from battle, Lessing died in the midst of the *Fragmentenstreit*. Herder was traumatized: "I cannot express how his death has made me desolate; it is as if for a wanderer all stars disappeared and there remained only the dark, cloudy heaven."¹⁰² He had always been a great admirer of Lessing, and he had spent two happy weeks

conversing with him in Hamburg in the spring of 1770. *Trauerarbeit* demanded a tribute, an obituary for the man whom he so greatly admired and whom he so suddenly lost. It is in his essay on Lessing that Herder expresses in the most firm and unconditional terms his commitment to the rational investigation of truth: "Free investigation of the truth...must be." This was Lessing's chief principle, which no one could gainsay. The only reason Lessing published the fragments in the first place was for the sake of a free and impartial investigation of the truth (701). No matter how dear one's faith, it did not stand above the tribunal of critique, and no Christian should therefore disapprove the need for its examination. Herder granted that such a free examination could not be expected from everyone, and that a clergyman had to guard the tender feelings of the most innocent of his flock; nevertheless, as far as theologians and philosophers were concerned, they could never escape the tribunal of critique. The ultimate upshot of the Lessing essay for Herder's development is well-described by Haym: "With this essay he had burned the boats behind him. Whoever so condemns all zealotry could not relapse into that fervant tone that had marred the *Älteste Urkunde* and *Provinzialblätter*."¹⁰³

The other writing that reveals Herder's new rationalist temper is his *Briefe, das Studium der Theologie betreffend*, which was published from December 1780 to October 1781.¹⁰⁴ The aim of this work was to introduce aspiring clerics to the study of theology, and so it provides good insight into Herder's latest thinking about theological issues. Although Herder upholds the orthodox view that the best study of divinity is the Bible, he insists that the Bible is a human document, and that it should be read as a book written by men and for men (145). He advises students of Scripture not to shun philology and criticism, which are vital to an understanding of its meaning. More significantly, Herder sees no conflict between reason and faith. Theology is a *philosophia sacra*, which applies the same methods as philosophy itself (384). There is no opposition between reason and revelation, nature and grace, which are simply different paths to the same goal (388). In attempting to explain the connection between reason and revelation, Herder adopts Lessing's idea of the education of the human race, according to which God educates man through revelation to the use of his reason (390).

Herder's new rationalist temper never took him so far, however, that he went down the same radical path as Lessing. Although Lessing had famously argued in his *Erziehung des Menschengeschlechts* that man is educated to reason through revelation, there is good reason to think that this was his exoteric rather than esoteric teaching. For Lessing, who was a secret Spinozist, it was more the *belief* in revelation that educated men rather than revelation itself. Famously, Lessing had argued that history is never a sufficient proof for the eternal and necessary truths of reason, which are the basis of all true religion.¹⁰⁵ There was a conflict, not harmony, between reason and historical faith, because few, if

any, historical beliefs stood the test of rational examination.¹⁰⁶ For Herder, however, the fundamental source of faith came from history, from the testimony of the Bible, because reason alone could never provide a sufficient justification for characteristic Christian doctrines. Hence he argues in the *Briefe* that faith ultimately has to be based on history, and that though reason eventually becomes independent of revelation, it never has the power by itself to discover or justify the essential truths of religion (393). Although reason eventually acquires the power to leave experience and to develop abstractions of its own, these abstractions alone never give us knowledge of matter of fact: "...for abstraction has no laws over history; no history in the world rests on abstractions, grounds *a priori*" (393).

Another event of the greatest significance for Herder's return to the *Aufklärung* was his discovery in the mid-1770s of Spinoza. He first read Spinoza's *Ethica* in a German translation while still in Bückeburg, probably sometime in late 1774. Herder was at first greatly attracted to Spinoza's conception of freedom, more specifically his thesis that human beings attain freedom only through the intellectual love of God, i.e., when they know and accept the power and love of God living and working through all things. In the first 1774 version of *Vom Empfinden und Erkennen der menschlichen Seele* he went so far as to endorse this conception of "the divine Spinoza."¹⁰⁷ Herder was excited no less by Spinoza's pantheism. He could scarcely conceal his enthusiasm about it when he wrote his friend Gleim at the end of January 1775:

One idea, quite foreign to the Occident...is that heaven is everywhere, that space and time disappear before God, that he dwells only where thought is, and only where the purest thought is, [this is his] acting love! That this is God, [what is] in each point or rather in no point...comprising everything, flowing in everything that thinks and loves, doing everything that happens in the world...¹⁰⁸

Prima facie it is odd to see Herder, in the middle of religious fervor of the Bückeburg years, embracing Spinoza. But he saw no contradiction at all. He was struck by the close affinity between Spinoza's ethics and the gospel. Hence in *Vom Empfinden und Erkennen* he identifies Spinoza's concept of freedom with that in the gospel of John;¹⁰⁹ and in his 1775 *Erläuterung zum neuen Testament*, the most orthodox of all his works, he saw the gospel as a vindication and illustration of Spinoza's morals.¹¹⁰ As early as 1777 he had hatched plans to write about Spinoza. He told Jacobi in 1784 that more than seven years ago he wanted to write a short work that would be "*eine Parallele der Dreimänner Spinoza, Shaftesburi und Leibniz*," though he never found time to write it.¹¹¹

After Herder's move to Weimar in 1778, his sympathy for Spinoza grew. The decisive event in pushing him toward embracing a more complete Spinozism came in November 1783, when Jacobi sent him the report of his conversations with Lessing at Wolfenbüttel. In those fateful and famous conversations Lessing declared in no uncertain terms: "There is no other philosophy than the philosophy of Spinoza."¹¹² The example of Lessing emboldened Herder, who replied to Jacobi February 3, 1784: "In truth, my dear Jacobi, since I moved into philosophy, I have always been convinced of the truth of the Lessingian proposition that really only the Spinozistic philosophy is at one with itself."¹¹³ Herder went on to explain that he was not a Spinozist, and that he did not agree with everything Spinoza had said; still, he believed that Spinoza was more consistent than any of the great classical philosophers. To explain his position, Herder then wrote his *Gott, Einige Gespräche*, which defends and reinterprets many of Spinoza's fundamental doctrines. Herder endorsed Spinoza's monism, naturalism and determinism, though he insisted that Spinoza's system needed to be modified in two fundamental respects. First, Spinoza needed to drop his dualism of attributes and to inject into his single infinite substance Leibniz's concept of *vis viva*, power or energy, so that substance became "*die Kraft aller Kräfte*." Second, Spinoza needed to abandon his mechanism, his aversion to final causes, so that he could retain the concept of providence, of the design of God creating the universe. Spinoza's dualism and mechanism were the unfortunate remnants of his Cartesian legacy. His dualism made it impossible to explain mental–physical interaction; and his mechanism made it impossible for him to account for the self-generating and self-organizing activity of life. To be viable, Spinoza's monism, naturalism and determinism had to be wedded to Leibniz's conception of *vis viva*, living force, which alone could avoid the problems in explaining mental-physical interaction and the phenomena of life. And so, in Herder's hands, Spinoza's philosophy grew into a kind of vitalistic monism, a monistic vitalism.

Herder wrote *Gott, Einige Gespräche* in late 1786 and early 1787. He delivered it to his publisher in March 1787, almost the same day as Part III of his *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit*. Given that his plans for a work on Spinoza were conceived years earlier, it is fair to say that the two works were siblings and grew up together. Certainly, both suffuse the same spirit of naturalism, determinism and vitalism. What effects, more specifically, did Herder's "Spinozism" have upon his philosophy of history? It is fair to say that they were deep and wide. Essentially, Herder's Spinozism provided the foundation for his philosophy of history. At the very least Herder now had a general metaphysical rationale for two of the fundamental doctrines of the *Ideen*: naturalism and determinism. Throughout the *Ideen* Herder is concerned to specify the basic laws of history, and stresses how they hold for the historical no less than natural realm. This is a major departure from the 1774 tract, which states that the providence

governing history is mysterious to us. In that tract too Herder was a determinist, believing that all actions are subject to a fate; but he did not think that we could have insight into the higher forces that guide us, forces that operate in contingent and accidental ways. It is a fundamental to Spinozism, of course, that God acts from the necessity of his own nature, and that his laws or ways of acting are, at least in principle, intelligible to us. This is the Spinozist doctrine behind the *Ideen*, the basis for all Herder's attempts to spell out the basic laws of history. Indeed, so important was Spinoza for the *Ideen*, that we do well to regard Herder's *Ideen* as historical Spinozism. To be sure, that "harsh geometrical lensgrinder" would not have approved of Herder's vitalism; but the determinism and naturalism of his philosophy of history would have only made him smile.

10. Ideas for a Philosophy of History: Parts I and II

The culmination of Herder's life work as a philosopher of history is his *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit*.¹¹⁴ The work was written in four parts, which were published separately from 1784 to 1791. Like so many of Herder's works, it was incomplete, a massive fragment. A planned fifth part, which was to treat history from the Renaissance to the eighteenth century, was never written. Still, in its sweep and composition, the *Ideen* is Herder's greatest achievement.¹¹⁵ Few works can match its ambition and scope. It treats man's place in the cosmos, every culture on earth, and the entire history of humanity, from its very beginnings to the Middle Ages.

In his preface Herder gives his reasons for writing the work. Originally, he had planned to revise his 1774 tract; but he quickly realized that his thinking had gone far beyond its limits. That tract had raised many questions which it did not fully answer. What do we mean by happiness? To what extent is it found in each culture and epoch? Is there a general criterion to measure it? What is meant by culture? And to what extent does it contribute to happiness? Is there meaning in history? Or are our lives of little importance? The *Ideen* would attempt to answer all these questions, now from a fresh perspective. In stating the need for a new work, Herder implicitly admitted that his thinking on these issues had changed from Bückeburg days.

The grand aim of Herder's *Ideen* was to write a natural history of humanity, i.e., a history that would see all human actions as part of nature. Herder summarizes the basic conception behind it in a single sentence: "The whole of human history is a pure natural history of human powers, actions and drives according to their place and time." (568). According to this naturalism, the laws of history and the laws of nature are one

and the same; there is no distinction between the realm of culture and that of nature. While such naturalism involves a break with the 1774 tract, which doubted the possibility of knowledge of the laws of history, it marks a return to Herder's earliest ambitions, those he had nurtured since his Königsberg days.¹¹⁶

Following its naturalistic program, the method of the *Ideen* would be that of the natural sciences. Herder assures us in his preface that he will base his findings on experience alone, and he duly denounces as a “flight into thin air” any metaphysics that proceeds through *a priori* reasoning alone (16). This empirical method was dictated by his ultimate ideal: to write *a science* of human history. In his preface Herder explains how, from his earliest years, he was struck by the fact that nature had its own science but not history (15–16). His ambition was to do for history what Galileo and Newton had done for physics. Although he admitted that the ideal of science is unattainable in history, he still insisted that it is an ideal one should at least strive to approach.

It is a moot question, however, whether Herder remained true to the empirical methodology of his new science. After the publication of Part I of the *Ideen* in 1784, Kant wrote his first vicious review, reprimanding Herder for his “dogmatic metaphysics” and advising him “to constrain his lively genius,” whose imagination had taken him beyond the boundaries of “observed laws.”¹¹⁷ For Herder, this was a slap in the face, not only because it came from his old teacher, whom he still venerated, but also because he claimed to uphold the very standards Kant accused him of violating. We shall soon see below how he attempted to reply to Kant's criticisms in Part II of the *Ideen*.

The very first sentence of the *Ideen* reveals the importance Herder gives to natural history: “From the heavens must our philosophy of history of the human race begin, if it is to deserve the name at all.” (21). From the heavens, no less. Accordingly, the first two parts of the *Ideen*, nearly one half of the entire book, treat the place of man in the cosmos and on earth, i.e., his relation to geography, climate, the animal and vegetable kingdoms. History proper does not begin until part III. Some scholars have found such a procedure problematic, a long way around the barn.¹¹⁸ But, for Herder, it could not be otherwise: human history is a chapter in natural history. What men do in the realm of culture is part of nature, so that we must understand their thoughts and actions as instances of natural laws. So, to be true to Herder's general conception, we must first consider, as he outlines them in the first two parts of his *Ideen*, his cosmology and man's place in it.

Herder sketches his general cosmology in Part I of the *Ideen*. The basic premise of his cosmology is Leibnizian: that nature consists in active or living forces, *vis viva*. This premise, and its Leibnizian provenance, appear unmistakably in a single sentence from

I, 3, iv: “The working powers of nature are all, each in its own way, living; there must be something in their inside that corresponds with their effects on the outside, just as Leibniz taught and the whole analogy of nature seems to teach.” (101). Like Leibniz, Herder thinks that there is nothing dead in nature, and that there is vital force in *all* things, even apparently inanimate ones. Hence he tells us in the very next section (I, 3, v): “In dead nature everything still lies in one dark but powerful drive. Through inner powers the parts force themselves together; each creature strives to gain shape and to form itself.” (105). Each force consists in a *Bildungstrieb*, the strive, urge or *nisus* to give itself form, to fashion for itself an individual identity. Hence the universal law of all creatures on earth is “*Formation, definite form, individual existence*” (*Bildung, bestimmte Gestalt, eignes Dasein*) (55). Again like Leibniz, Herder gives the greatest importance to individuality: every part of nature, even a speck of dust, is of infinite value (22); each individual is both end and means, and God loves each of his children as if each alone existed (342).

Herder originally introduced the concept of organic force in his 1778 *Vom Empfinden und Erkennen der menschlichen Seele* to solve the central problem of eighteenth-century anthropology: the mind–body problem. This concept means that the mental and the physical are not distinct substances but different degrees of organization and development of living force. The body is its visible or external manifestation, the mind its invisible or internal manifestation. *Pace* materialism, the body is not a machine, but a self-generating, self-organizing living being; and, *pace* dualism, the mind is not a disembodied *res cogitans* but the second-order power of organizing and directing the powers of the body. This theory, though not explicitly put forward in the *Ideen*, is the crucial background for much of its argument.¹¹⁹ It comes to the surface in I, 5, ii where Herder provides a brief account of the nature of force. Taking a position on the thinking matter dispute,¹²⁰ Herder states that we have no reason to assume the existence of pure spirits in nature, and that we do not know enough about the body to deny that it has the power to think (171). Forces, he explains, must have some organ or instrument, some material medium through which they work; they must be added to and realized in a primal matter, which is “light, aether, warmth” (174). Herder stresses that forces, though not identical with their organs or instruments, are inseparable from them (173). While a force exists without the organ, it is only potential or latent; and without a force, an organ does not develop at all (175). It is important to note that, though forces must have some organ, they are not limited to only one kind;

they attach themselves to other kinds according to their degree of development, viz., the egg, worm, chrysalis of the butterfly. It is with this premise that Herder supports his theory of immortality, whose exposition dominates several chapters of the *Ideen*.¹²¹ According to that theory, the living forces of the soul reincarnate themselves into other bodies after their life on earth. Death is only a loss of an organ or instrument; it does not mean the end of the living force itself.

Granted that force is the basic unit of reality, how do such units relate to one another? According to Herder, they interact according to the laws of attraction and repulsion, so that their effects balance one another and lead to equilibrium. Such balanced forces form an organic whole, whose inner structure consists in a hierarchy, organized according to the forces' degree of organization and development (106, 166). The more complex and differentiated an organism, the higher its place in the hierarchy. On earth, the hierarchy is from stone to crystal, from crystal to metals, from metals to plants, from plants to animals, and finally from animals to man, who is the most complex organism of all. But, *nota bene!*, the hierarchy goes beyond the earth. There are higher creatures than human beings, more refined forms of life than those on earth. Man is a middle creature, the end of the scale of life on earth, the beginning of the scale beyond it (193, 194). When the living forces in man press toward a higher stage of development, they leave behind their instrument on earth and assume another instrument in a higher sphere. Since forces must have some organ, they must be embodied; but they will be embodied in a more complex, differentiated and refined organ than any on earth. Sometimes Herder's speculations about immortality read like science fiction, viz., he imagines that after reaching the summit of its achievement on earth, the soul will undergo "a transformation" (*Wandelgang*) on some other star where it will commune with kindred spirits from other worlds (27). Surely, one might complain, Kant rightly censured this kind of speculation; yet, ironically enough, no one encouraged it more than Magister Kant himself.¹²²

Herder's vision of the cosmos was a reaction against Descartes' and Wolff's mechanical worldview, which reduces nature down to matter and motion. It was indeed an attempt to reinstate the classical conception of "the great chain of being," according to which nature is organized into a scale of being from the less to more perfect.¹²³ Herder's organic worldview is traditional in two further respects: it is *anthropocentric*, because it places man at the apex of the hierarchy of nature on earth; and it is *teleological*, because each force has a purpose, a "formal and final cause," the realization of its individual nature. This makes it seem as if Herder's worldview were a relic of a moribund scholasticism. Nothing, however, could be further from the truth. True to his methodology, Herder attempted to base his worldview on the latest developments

in the natural sciences. We must remember that he was writing when the mechanical worldview was crumbling, because it could not explain the new forces of magnetism, galvanism and electricity, and when the old theory of preformation had been discredited by the careful observations of Caspar Wolf. Herder believed that he was justified in reviving Leibniz's concept of *vis viva* because it alone could explain the phenomena of magnetism, galvanism and electricity, and because it alone could explain the phenomenon of epigenesis, i.e., that organisms are not pre-formed but spontaneously develop from the inchoate to the organized.¹²⁴ Whether or not Herder was justified in postulating organic forces, it is misleading to accuse him of a naive relapse into dogmatic metaphysics.

Herder also thinks that there is good anatomical and physiological evidence for his anthropocentrism. Here he bases his case on the evidence assembled by Robinet and Goethe for the existence of an *Urtypus* or prototype. The more we examine the anatomical structure of plants and animals, he argues, the more they seem to be built according to a single plan or form, which is most visible and differentiated in human beings (73). The human form seems to be the summary of all the other forms of creation, uniting all their most developed powers into a single form (74). Since man is the most organized creature on earth, and since it is a general law that the more organized a creature, the more it comprises lower forms within itself, it follows that man is "a compendium of the whole earth." All of the forms of creation therefore center around, and culminate in, the human form, which Herder calls "the chief form" of all creation. All lower forms resemble, to some degree, this chief form; they were indeed created according to it and strive to realize it (73).

To say that Herder's worldview was based on the best science of his day is not to say, of course, that it is defensible by contemporary standards. Even if his worldview is not a relic of scholasticism, the sciences have advanced too far from his age to make it acceptable today. Nowhere is Herder's distance from contemporary science more apparent than in his views about evolution. There is no anticipation of Darwinianism in Herder's cosmology.¹²⁵ Kant was horrified by Herder's speculations, not least because they seemed to allow the emergence of one species from another, and ultimately all species from some original species.¹²⁶ But Kant really had no reason to worry. For, even in Part I of the *Ideen*, Herder staunchly defends the fixity of the species, i.e., the inability of one species to evolve into another. He found it impossible to conceive how man, with his upright posture and erect locomotion, could evolve from a crawling creature like the orangutan. After rejecting that very possibility, he declares:

No creature that we know has gone outside its original organization, and contrary to it, prepared for another species; for it works only with the powers that lay within its organization; and nature knows enough ways to hold every living thing on to the standpoint she assigned to it. (115)

Later in Book 2, Herder reminds those who affirm the *lex continui* in nature not to forget that there are rungs and intervals on the ladder of being (252). But, even in rejecting evolution, Herder attempts to base his case on empirical evidence, viz., that even in different climates the same genetic traits reappear (280), that in places where humans seem most similar to apes, the apes have long since died out (254–55). Still, it is odd to find Herder rejecting evolution when he has reaffirmed the transformation of an organism after death. It is even odder to find a champion of genetic explanation rejecting the possibility of gradual evolution upon the evidence of the static appearances of the present. Such inconsistencies, as we shall soon see, have to be explained by Herder's moral and religious views.

The fixity of species notwithstanding, in the rest of Part I of the *Ideen* Herder never loses an opportunity to stress how man's moral and intellectual capacities depend on his place in the natural world. We learn that the rapidity of our thinking is determined by the place of our planet in the solar system (27). We are told that air, “the mother of earthly creatures,” has a great effect on moral character (38). Such is the importance of air for temperament that Herder imagines a new science of astrology that shows how the stars affect the air on earth and ultimately our character (39–40). These speculations reach their height in Herder's theory that the distinguishing feature of man from apes lies in his upright posture and erect locomotion (118). Herder gives great significance to these factors for man's moral and intellectual development. They mean that our senses of hearing and sight are much more acute than smell or taste, and that our hands are free to make tools and artifacts (136). Without upright posture and erect locomotion, man would lose his ability to adapt to different climates (150), and his brain would not grow to a sufficient size for him to be able to reason (127, 133). Because of the importance of upright posture for our moral and intellectual development, Herder imagines that the decree of the creation to man was: “*Geschöpf, steh auf von der Erde!*” (136). Herder's emphasis on these anatomical factors is not the result of any crude materialism; it is not that he thinks that they alone are a *sufficient* condition for human intellectual and moral development. But he does want to undermine the dualistic view, and to stress how much man is a creature of nature. It was not least for this reason that Kant reacted so strongly to Part I of the *Ideen*: these were not the kind of reflections that supported his own noumenal–phenomenal dualism.

Part II of the *Ideen*, published April 1785, appeared only four months after Kant's review of Part I. Herder had enough time to work into Part II some replies to Kant, though these are usually asides which never mention Kant by name. Part II also contains Herder's hidden polemic against Kant's theory of history, the antithesis of his own. Kant had expounded his theory in his “*Idee zu einer allgemeinen Geschichte in weltbürgerlicher Absicht*,” which had appeared in November 1784, six months after

the publication of the first part of the *Ideen*.¹²⁷ Since Herder's replies and polemic are of the greatest philosophical interest, we will note them as we go along.

While Part I sketched Herder's general cosmology, Part II surveys the different forms of humanity according to geography and climate. In the first two sections of Book 6, the first book in Part II, Herder considers variations in anatomy and physiognomy; but these he treats more with an artist's than a doctor's eye, i.e., he is especially concerned with the aesthetic appearance of different peoples. Such is Herder's emphasis on the beauty or ugliness of different peoples that the reader might conclude he is reading a work on comparative aesthetics rather than comparative anthropology. But Herder's interest in aesthetic appearance comes from his view that it is a manifestation of health and thriving, and ultimately of the effects of an environment on a people. The more life prospers in a climate, the more a human being thrives, and so the better their appearance (215). Still, Herder's faith in the universality of certain aesthetic qualities, and his confidence in passing aesthetic judgments on whole peoples, is astonishing, viz., he finds Mongolians so ugly that he likens their physique to that of vultures (218). Apparently, the principle of individuality, the relativism of cultural values, did not extend to aesthetic appearances.

One of Herder's more interesting replies to Kant in Part II appears in chapter iv of Book 7, which treats his concept of organic powers. Kant had rejected this concept as too speculative, as going beyond all the evidence available from experience. As if to respond to this very point, Herder cites the work of Caspar Wolff, who had conducted detailed experiments on the embryos of animals.¹²⁸ Wolff's observations were important in discrediting the theory of preformation, according to which all the parts of an animal are already preformed and exist in miniature in its seed. They seemed to provide telling evidence for the opposing theory of epigenesis, according to which an organism spontaneously develops from an inchoate mass into a differentiated whole. Herder claims that the concept of a genetic power designates the cause of the self-organization of a homogeneous mass (271). In postulating such forces Herder does not claim to know this cause. The concept of force does not specify a particular cause; but this does not mean it is empty; for it designates that the cause cannot be mechanical (because the self-organization is spontaneous, taking place without some external cause). Whatever the merits of Herder's argument for the existence of organic forces, it is noteworthy that it was the standard theory of his day, and common among such physiologists as Wolff and Blumenbach.¹²⁹ Kant's contention in the *Kritik der Urteils kraft* that such powers have to be read in a strictly regulative sense was a minority view.

The chief problem that troubles Herder in Part II is whether there is one and the same humanity amid all the differences between peoples, and amid the many transformations they have undergone in history. The very title of chapter i of Book 7 leaves no doubt about his answer: “*In the many different forms that the human race appears on earth, there is still everywhere one and the same human species.*” (251). What makes Herder so confident of this thesis? There are two essential premises to his argument, both of which surface explicitly in this chapter. First, Herder thinks that the human species is fixed and stable, such that there are no gradual transitions between it and other animal species. This means that we are all humans—Europeans, Americans, Negroes—to the same degree. And so Herder declares: “But you, man, respect yourself! Neither the pongo, nor the longimanus, is your brother; he is the American, the Negro.” (255). Second, Herder denies that there are distinctions *in kind or race* between human beings. He disagrees with those, viz., Kant, who divide the human race into four or five kinds according to skin color or location. Rather, there is only one race whose essential human features differ only in degree or shading (255–6). So while the first premise denies that there are *vertical* quantitative differences between human beings—i.e., differences arising from being more or less evolved from animals—the second denies that there are *horizontal* qualitative differences—i.e., differences in kind within the same species. Hence, for Herder, despite the great diversity of its forms and its enormous changes, there is one and the same human nature throughout the earth. What makes the human race the same are two factors: the fixity of each species with respect to other species; and the lack of distinctions within the human species.

No sooner does Herder argue in behalf of the uniformity of human nature than he stresses in the very next chapter the profound influence of climate in shaping human beings. We are through and through creatures of climate, he says. Our bodies, our occupations, our entire mental outlook, depend on it. Take people from their land and you take from them everything (259). If this seems an exaggeration, it is necessary to note that by “climate” (*Klima*) Herder means more than just temperature. He also means air quality, topography, constitution of the soil, kinds of food and drink, clothing, entertainment, arts, even ways of living (266). In short, for Herder, climate is everything that we would now include under the heading of environment.

The question is then inevitable: How does Herder reconcile his insistence on the uniformity of human nature with his recognition of the role of environment in shaping human beings? He attempts to answer just this question in the final chapter of Book 7. He finds a conflict between the two forces shaping the human species: genetics and environment. It is genetics that explains the uniformity of human nature, while it is environment that accounts for the variation among peoples. People inherit the same general characteristics of their species from their parents, which remain the same even for different environments. It is just a fact that, with a change in climate, a rose does not turn into a lily or a dog into a wolf. Nevertheless, Herder does admit some role of the environment in shaping the species over a long period of time or over many generations. Eventually, if a people does not die out, its inner nature will be affected by the

environment, and then passed down to the next generation (280). The skin color of negroes, for example, is the result of sun affecting the skin; and, eventually, this characteristic is inherited by succeeding generations. Herder assumes, therefore, the heredity of acquired characteristics. A remarkable concession, because it means that species cannot be so fixed after all!

Herder attempts to formulate the constant and common features of human beings with his concept of humanity (*Humanität*). He had already introduced this concept in Part I, but admitted that he could not give a precise definition of it. There he wrote that he wanted to include under the concept “everything having to do with what I said about man's noble education toward the use of reason and freedom, toward finer senses and drives, toward the finest and strongest health, toward the fulfillment and domination of the earth” (154). Humanity is for Herder both an *ethnological* concept, which refers to the common human kind, and an *ethical* concept, which means something like self-realization or perfection. This ethical meaning becomes apparent when Herder writes that the development of our humanity—the realization of our characteristic human powers—is “the vocation of human beings on earth” (154, 187). One is left wondering, however, what content can be given to the ethical concept, given that Herder thinks that each culture has its own conception of happiness or humanity—a doctrine emphatically affirmed in the 1774 tract and reintroduced into the *Ideen* itself. Remarkably unflapped by this issue, Herder proceeds directly to enumerate the natural dispositions of human beings (154ff). All these dispositions are of two kinds, we are told. They are either a form of self-preservation or a form of communication and participation with others; among the latter dispositions Herder includes the sex drive, sympathy, justice, decency or refinement, and religion. However problematic such claims might be, Herder's formulation of the concept of humanity went far beyond these hasty efforts in Parts I and II of the *Ideen*. We shall see how in Part III he makes a more sustained attempt to reformulate his concept so that it is consistent with the changes and variations of history.

One of the striking features of the *Ideen* is Herder's retention of the concept of natural law, a concept later disowned by the historicist tradition. To be sure, Herder is one of the first critics of *individualistic* theories of natural law, i.e., those theories which assume that each human being has self-sufficient or complete nature apart from society; but he does not abandon the concept itself. Rather, he thinks that the individualistic theories have simply misconceived the nature of natural law. Against Hobbes and Rousseau, he argues that man is naturally social, and that he cannot survive, let alone prosper, without the aid of others (314, 362). This means that it is a natural law for people to live with others in society, and that justice—the principle that we should treat others as we would have them treat us—is the first principle of natural law, because without it we cannot live in our natural social state. While Herder regards social life as entirely natural, he has misgivings about the state, especially the centralized bureaucratic states of the modern world, which he finds unnatural and monstrous (370). He takes exception to Kant's “evil” dictum in Proposition VI of his “Idee” that

man is an animal in need of a master;¹³⁰ the very converse is true: a man in need of a master is an animal (369). Nature has not prescribed a master for any man; and only animal vices make one necessary. The only natural forms of government are those that are based on the family, and these would be states expressing the national character of a people (369).

One of the most important chapters in Part II of the *Ideen* is the first chapter of Book 9, where Herder takes special care in formulating the assumptions behind his philosophy of history. There can be a philosophy of history of humanity, he explains, only if there is a history of humanity as such or as a genus. The subject of history must be humanity—not only the sum total of individual people—and this subject should undergo development or perfect itself as a species. To write about the history of humanity makes sense, Herder argues, only if we reject one very common assumption: that each individual makes everything for himself, as if he alone were the master of his own fate, the sole source of his happiness. The unnamed target of Herder's argument here was, again, Kant, specifically the Third Proposition of his "Idee," according to which man "should produce everything out of himself" and "everything should be entirely of his own making."¹³¹ Taking Kant's proposition very literally, Herder sees it as the expression of an implausible individualism.¹³² No one by themselves has the power to produce anything. It is an indisputable fact that who we are, and the powers we develop, depend upon others, and more specifically upon our education. We depend first upon our family, teachers and friends, and then upon our culture and nation, and ultimately upon the entire chain of history of which our culture and nation is only one link (338). This dependence of the individual upon society, and ultimately upon "the golden chain of history," is the fundamental principle of the philosophy of the history of humanity. For if we conceive of history as a collection of isolated individuals, as Kant does, this gives us only a history of *people*, not of *humanity* itself. What allows us to have a history of humanity, of the species as a whole, is that people develop their humanity only through education, through inheriting a cultural tradition, which is handed down through the generations (337). We can then see all people, indeed all cultures and nations, as connected in a continuous chain that has a single goal or purpose: the education of humanity. This chain works according to two basic principles: *tradition*, which involves imitation and practice, the transition from *Vorbild* to *Nachbild*, model to copy; and *organic powers*, the genetic forces in new generations that allow them to appropriate and apply in their own way the lessons handed down to them from previous generations (340). So, as Herder himself explains it, his philosophy

of history depends on the thesis that history is the education of the human race, that all peoples and nations are struggling toward the development of their humanity. That all history is about the education of humanity is for Herder reason to think that it is not pointless or anarchic, and that it is guided by the hand of providence (344–5).

As stated so far, Herder's philosophy seems vulnerable to two objections. First, that in talking about the education of humanity as a whole or species, he has simply hypostasized the concept of humanity. Sensitive to this very point, Herder responds that he does not mean that the human race develops as a whole *apart from* all the individuals that compose it; he realizes that a kind or species, as a universal, exists only in and through individual things (338). He rejects the “Averroist philosophy” that postulates a single soul for the entire human race, a soul of which each individual is only a part. Remarkably, the “Averroist” here was, yet again, Kant, who had stated in the Second Proposition of his “Idee” that reason could develop only in the species and not in the individual.¹³³ Here, it seems, Herder's resentment against his former teacher got the better of him. For Kant, always wary of hypostasis, does not postulate a single human soul for the whole human race. But Herder's polemic is somewhat misleading. His real concern is not logical but moral. He is troubled not by a mere logical fallacy but Kant's disturbing thesis that earlier generations labor for the benefit of later ones. Kant himself admits that this is a hard and paradoxical truth, but he insists that it is still one we have to accept if reason is to develop in the species as a whole.¹³⁴ Herder was not buying it. In the strongest terms he protested that the Kantian thesis distorted the ends of providence, which are that each generation has an intrinsic value, that each is an end in itself having its center of happiness within itself (335, 341–2).

The second objection is how can there be a single process of education, a history of humanity as a whole, if each culture and epoch has its own conception of happiness and perfection? Herder uses his relativistic doctrine as a stick to beat Kant for assuming that the creation of a republication constitution is *the* goal of world history.¹³⁵ One is left wondering, however, how he squares this doctrine with his own belief in a philosophy of history of humanity. Though he does not explicitly address the difficulty in the *Ideen*, he does have the conceptual tools to deal with it, having already outlined his position in the 1774 tract.¹³⁶ Herder's solution is that, though each nation has its individual conception of happiness, it cannot develop this conception on its own or *de novo*; rather, it acquires it only by appropriating the past in its own unique way. Whether it accepts or rejects aspects of past cultures, it cannot come to its own conception of happiness without them. Just as he did in the 1774 tract, Herder again insists that each culture is not only a means but also an end, and that none should be

treated simply as a stepping stone toward the ideals of a later more “enlightened age” (viz., a republican constitution) (342).¹³⁷

In Herder's caustic allusions in Book IX, chapter *iv*, to Kant's republican constitution we find one of his deepest philosophical differences with his former teacher. Herder's conception of the ideal state is the very antithesis of Kant's. Kant's ideal state is cosmopolitan, Herder's is national. While Kant held that there is a single ideal constitution that holds for all of humanity, Herder insists that the ideal constitution is individual, reflecting the character and way of life of a people (369). In making his claim on behalf of a national state, Herder was only being consistent, applying his principle of individuality to politics as he had once applied it to literature. For Herder, like Möser, the law of nature demands the realization of individuality, whether the individual is a particular person, culture or state (369). Again like Möser, Herder profoundly mistrusted the Enlightenment ideal of a single rational constitution, which he too feared could lead to a universal tyranny, the suppression of all individuality and variety. Providence was wise to create separate nations, because that prevented one massive empire or state dominating all others (335).

Part II of the *Ideen* concludes in Book 10 with Herder's account of the birth of humanity. It is here that Herder's cosmology seems its least modern and scientific, chiefly because his theory is based upon Genesis. But we must not beg questions. For even here Herder bends over backwards to support his case with evidence from natural history and ethnology. He does not assume the divinity of the Bible, and does not even attempt to argue for it; he only wants to show that it provides the most likely story available about the beginnings of the human race. His argument, which he had already stated in detail in his 1772 *Älteste Urkunde des Menschengeschlechts*, combines the methods of literary analysis with natural science to interpret and vindicate Genesis. Herder is fully aware of the risks involved in speculating about the beginnings of humanity. He raises again the difficulties about tracing origins he had already set forth in his *Versuch* essay. To seek the source of any tradition, he warns us, is like searching for the end of the rainbow (397). Just as a child cannot tell us about his birth, so we cannot expect the first human beings to say anything reliable about their origins. Nevertheless, the child does remember something about its past; and if we piece together what many children remember, then a picture begins to emerge. Why not reflect on these sources, Herder asks, if we have no others? Why not indeed! And so Herder surveys the myths and legends of the ancient Chinese, Persians, Tibetans and Indians, and finally comes to the apparently orthodox conclusion that the oldest written document of the human race is Genesis (402). Of all accounts of the creation of nature and man, Genesis is the oldest, simplest and most coherent (411). The conclusion seems as orthodox as it is tendentious. Yet the appearance of orthodoxy here is misleading. For Herder does not reject the myths and legends of other cultures to maintain the unique and singular truth of

Genesis; rather, working on the assumption that all myths ultimately coincide, he uses them to interpret and support Genesis. In his view, Genesis turns out to be the basis of other ancient texts, all of which agree in their essentials. We learn with the help of Indian mythology, for example, that the Garden of Eden is in India, and that the river flowing through it was the Ganges (416). Realizing that Genesis is not a straightforward narrative about the facts, Herder warns us against interpreting it as if it were history or primitive cosmology; he insists instead that we understand it as a national myth, a poem of the ancient Jews having all the marks of their culture and language (420, 449). Nevertheless, like all myths, it symbolizes deep truths which make it the best document available about the origins of humanity. Although Herder thinks that the truth of Genesis is poetic, he goes out of his way to show that many of its statements are in accord with “experience”. The importance that Genesis gives to light, for example, agrees with modern physics, which holds that the original fire is the creative principle of nature (404). Although Herder realizes that the age of the earth is probably much older than what Genesis implies if we interpret it literally, he insists that we must understand the six days of creation symbolically, as a poetic way of representing the vast stretches of time involved in the creation of the earth (412–13). Herder interprets the end of the creation on the seventh day to mean that the creation was complete, i.e., that there were no new species to be created. Hence his doctrine of the fixity of species is used to interpret and support Genesis—the very document which inspired it. All in all, there can be no doubt that Herder's argument was tendentious, serving his Christian beliefs rather than really supporting them; but at least it attempted to meet more objective standards, and its use of all mythical sources places it far above traditional Christian apologetics.

11. Ideas for a Philosophy of History: Parts III and IV

Parts III and IV of the *Ideen* treat the history of humanity from the earliest civilizations in the Orient to the beginning of the early modern age in Europe. They contain original accounts of Chinese, Greek and Roman culture, each of which deserves detailed commentary and critique. It is impossible here, however, to do justice to any of them. Our task is more limited: to examine the philosophical foundations of Herder's way of doing history in Parts III and IV.

One of the most remarkable features of Parts III and IV are the many moral judgments that Herder makes about past cultures. Herder judges these cultures, often very harshly, from a decidedly European, modern, even Protestant, perspective. This is not what one expects from Herder's own methodological guidelines. He tells us at the close of Book 12, for example, that the historian should treat all cultures and epochs from an impartial standpoint. Just as the *Naturforscher*, for the sake of greater knowledge, examines the thorn as much as the flower, the skunk as much as the elephant, so the historian should investigate all peoples equally (510). The methodology of empathy that Herder prescribed in his 1774 tract also seems to forbid such moral judgments.

There he advised seeing past cultures in their own terms rather than criticizing them by contemporary standards. From the apparent relativism of that tract, we expect a complete tolerance toward other cultures and epochs. What we find in the *Ideen*, however, is the very opposite: that Herder is ready to censure the values, institutions and whole ways of life of past cultures. One is almost startled by Herder's willingness to make sweeping, damning judgments. For example, in Book 11 Herder writes that China is a land so strangled by custom and ritual that we cannot expect anything creative of the Chinese in the arts and sciences (438). In Book 12 he damns the Egyptian pyramids and the custom of mummifying bodies because he finds them superstitious and wasteful (503). And in the first three chapters of Book 19 Herder engages in a sustained critique of the "holy despotism" of the papacy. As a Protestant clergyman, Herder recognizes that his account of the papacy is likely to seem biased, so he demands impartiality of himself (806, 811) and even expresses, anticipating Ranke, the need for a "thoroughly unpartisan, pragmatic history of the papacy" (806–7). Still, the account he gives is more an indictment than a balanced assessment. Hence in chapter II he recounts all the alleged benefits that came from the papacy—only to refute them one by one.

Yet our surprise at such judgments comes less from an inconsistency in Herder than an anachronistic interpretation of him. Since Herder has influenced the ethic of impartiality of many modern anthropologists and historians, we read him in the light of that ethic, which demands that the historian and anthropologist *refrain* from all moral judgments. These historians and anthropologists banish moral judgments because they fear they are ethnocentric or because they assume they are subjective. It is important to see, however, that Herder never adopted such an ethic of value-freedom; we are more than a century away from Weber's call for *Wertfreiheit*. Herder demanded impartiality, to be sure, but impartiality means for him not the *absence* of moral judgment but *fair* moral judgment. Herder's equation of impartiality with fairness is apparent from the beginning of Book 16 when he makes two apparently contradictory statements: that he will not conceal his opinion about the peoples of the Northern hemisphere who are much closer to him than Asian peoples; and that the philosophy of history demands nothing less than a non-partisan love of truth (677). A modern reader stumbles over the apparent contradiction: Why should the historian give an opinion if he should be non-partisan? The answer is, of course, that, for Herder, giving one's *fair* opinion is to be non-partisan. He thinks that the historian not only can or may give moral judgments, but that he must or ought to do so. The very value-freedom of later historians and anthropologists Herder would regard as not a virtue but a vice, a forfeiture of the historian's responsibility.

Why is this? Why does Herder think that the historian should make value judgments? To answer this question, we should first consider Herder's conception of the philosophy of history. The task of the philosophy of history, Herder believes, is to determine nothing less than the *goals* of history, the *ends* of providence. While the archivist or historian *simpliciter* treats facts and causes, the philosopher of history is an

anthropologist who considers humanity as such, and therefore the goals or ends of human life according to the economy of nature. These goals or ends are not only formal and final causes about what does happen, but also *norms* about what should or ought to happen. The value judgments of the philosopher of history will then be made according to these norms, which are derived from the general economy or teleology of nature, and which apply to history itself.

What are these norms? Herder's account of them in the *Ideen* derives from his philosophy of humanity of his earlier years. The philosophy of humanity makes man—not the decrees of a *deus absconditus*—the source of all value. It therefore gives man autonomy, the power to govern his own life according to his natural reason. Herder thinks that God wills that man have such autonomy, so that the ends of providence coincide completely with the ends of man (633). Hence the anti-Pelagianism of the 1774 tract is now completely laid aside.

But our question has only been thrown back another step. Granted that man is an autonomous agent who should govern his life according to reason, what should he choose as his ends? What norms does he have to conduct his life? Herder's answer to this question lies with his concept of humanity (*Humanität*). The basic norms by which we should govern our life are those that ensure, as their minimal precondition, that we can live autonomously and rationally. Hence, for Herder, the two fundamental characteristics of humanity are the use of reason and freedom. It is important to see that these are essentially *formal* characteristics for Herder, i.e., they do not determine *what* should be rational, or *what* we should choose as a free being; in other words, they leave open the specific *content* of rational and free actions, which will vary greatly according to circumstances and climate. Freedom and rationality are simply necessary conditions for all actions to be successful and for all beliefs to be true. Freedom prescribes only that we choose effective means to ends, *whatever these ends might be*; and reason prescribes only that we find sufficient evidence for our beliefs, *whatever these beliefs might be*. The formality of these requirements, Herder assumes, make the standpoint of humanity compatible with historical change and cultural diversity. All cultures have different ways of acting according to their reason and freedom; but they all presuppose them if they are to hold justifiable beliefs and if they are to choose and achieve their ends. Such was Herder's ultimate solution to the problem of the one-in-many in history, of how there could be a single rational standard amid incommensurable national ones.

Throughout the *Ideen* Herder's judgments remain remarkably consistent with his basic standpoint of humanity. When we examine more closely his judgments upon the Chinese and Egyptians, for example, we find that Herder is applying his basic values of reason and freedom. The reason that he censures Chinese culture is that he believes the Chinese habits of obedience and respect for authority, which are instilled in children, are extended to the entire political system, so that emperors treat their subjects as if they were children. This means that even adults fail to exercise their autonomy and remain little more than grown children (437). And the reason that he condemns the

Egyptian pyramids and mummification is that it was all to the glory of an absolute ruler (503). Rather than admiring the pyramids for their aesthetic qualities, or because they are enduring monuments of a past civilization, Herder sees in them nothing but the sweat, tears and sacrifice of the peoples who were forced to build them. Similarly, the reason Herder criticizes the papacy is that he finds that it has such overwhelming power over the inner life of human beings that it squelches their own autonomy and use of reason. The papacy was a *spiritual* despotism because it made obedience to its rituals, beliefs and institutions into the very condition of salvation (811–13).

One of the most important Books of the *Ideen* is Book 15 where Herder addresses the question of the meaning or purpose of history. The Prologue states the case for the meaninglessness of history (627–30). Herder notes how everything in history is transitory, coming into being and passing away. The inscription over the temple door of history reads: “Nothingness and Decay.” All the mighty civilizations of the past have perished. Egypt, Athens and Rome are now only ruins. We have no guarantee that the next civilization will be better than the past, or that it will learn anything from its ancestors; often it is simply worse (628). Thus the human race seems doomed to the labor of Sisyphus. The misery, folly and passion in history far outweighs its happiness, wisdom and reason (629). While people find evidence for the divine in nature, they do not see it in history, which seems to be nothing more than “a battle ground of senseless passions, wild forces and destructive arts with no enduring good purpose” (630).

Herder's aim in Book 15 is to answer these doubts. He had raised them before in *Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit* only to resolve them through faith in providence.¹³⁸ But in the *Ideen* Herder makes no appeal to faith; his argument is based on the general economy of nature, just as it had been in his treatise on the origin of language. The transcendent perspective of the earlier work, which took us beyond history to find meaning within it, now disappears and we are to find meaning entirely within history itself. Hence the very first sentence of chapter 1 states that the purpose of something, which is not a mere means to something else, must lie within itself (630). Nature has given us certain basic powers, and it has formed and organized us so that we can realize them. The end of nature is that we realize these powers; and this is the goal of providence itself which works through the analogy of nature. Hence there is no higher law for humanity than humanity itself (631). The standards of good and evil are relative to human beings. Whatever good happens in history is for the sake of humanity, and whatever evil happens is contrary to the ends of humanity. The chief natural law that governs history is this: “Man should be man! He forms himself according to what he thinks best in his circumstances.” (632). God has given man sufficient freedom to realize his nature according to how he sees fit; he has created him so that he becomes a God on earth (633).

Herder thinks that his argument so far has already gone a long way toward settling doubts about the meaning of history (634). If we see that the end of history is to realize our humanity under the specific circumstances in which find ourselves, we recognize that this has been in fact what has normally happened in history. The various peoples of the earth, each in its own way, have realized their humanity according to their different climates and circumstances. History only seems meaningless if we measure it by false standards, viz., religious standards that place the highest values beyond this world, or ethnocentric standards applicable only to one time and place. Skeptics about meaning in history, Herder implies, presuppose such narrow standards and then find, not surprisingly, that nothing in history can or does match them. We can avoid such skepticism if we only drop such standards and measure it according to what people can achieve, and indeed have achieved, in the very different climates and circumstances in which they find themselves. History has meaning as long as we view it, in different ways and under different circumstances, as a striving to realize our humanity. To see meaning in history, Herder thinks, we should view it as “a contest to attain the most beautiful prize of humanity and the dignity of human beings” (635).

As it stands at the close of chapter 1, Herder's argument is not entirely convincing. Granted that the end of history is to realize nothing more than diverse forms of humanity, a quick survey of history shows that it seldom achieves even that. Rarely are people able to develop their essential human powers, either because of inhuman political arrangements or because of the climate or circumstances in which they live. All too many lead lives of drudgery and misery. So Herder has still not answered the heavy doubts raised in his prologue. There is also ambiguity in his argument. Sometimes he stresses that man realizes his humanity of necessity, that everything man *can* become he *will* become;¹³⁹ but sometimes he states that whether man realizes his humanity depends on his free will, because man can be lazy and choose not to develop his powers (634–5). Only the first claim is sufficient for Herder's argument. Simply recognizing what people *can* do will not reconcile us to the actual course of history, to what people as a matter of fact have done in the past.

The argument of the later chapters in Book 15 fills this gap in reasoning left in chapter 1. In chapters 2 and 3 Herder argues that the basic laws of history ensure that, of necessity, people must realize their humanity in history, that reason and justice must prevail. The basic premises of his argument are that the laws of nature inevitably produce order, harmony and perfection, and that these same laws of nature also apply to the human world. In chapter 2 Herder's account of the laws of nature is derived from Kant, more specifically from Kant's cosmology in the *Allgemeine Naturgeschichte*, according to which the laws of attraction and repulsion produce order out of chaos, viz., they so act upon the primal mass of matter to produce the regular structure of the solar system (636–7). In chapter 3 Herder's account of the laws of

nature is borrowed from Lambert.¹⁴⁰ Here he argues that the opposing forces of nature (attraction and repulsion) constantly move toward a balance, harmony or equilibrium; although this balance is sometimes briefly disturbed or interrupted, the forces work to restore it, through either a process of oscillation or an asymptotic movement toward the original state (647–8). These laws mean that the destructive powers in nature are not only subordinate to the productive ones, but that they ultimately also work toward the best formation of the whole (636–8). Herder thinks that these same laws are active in human beings, who also of necessity produce order from chaos. Just how they operate within human beings is a point about which Herder is somewhat ambiguous. He implies that they work through human beings unconsciously, so that even if they do not want to act according to them they still do so (641). But he also states that these laws manifest themselves through rational activity, which involves conscious planning and intention (649, 651). Whatever the mechanism by which these laws work upon human beings, Herder thinks that the result is the growth in the reason and justice characteristic of humanity (651). Reason and justice follow the same basic laws that operate in nature: they strive toward an equilibrium of forces among human beings (655). Reason measures and compares the connection of things, so that there is some lasting balance between them; and justice is nothing more than the state of balance produced by reason, the proper formula for the equilibrium of opposing forces (655).

The chief argument of Book 15 is that history is governed by moral laws that operate with all the force of natural laws, or natural laws that have all the effects of moral ones. There is no separation of the moral and natural, the normative and factual, for Herder. Nowhere is the connection of the normative and factual in Herder's philosophy of history more evident than in his theory of revenge, which plays a major role in the many moral judgments he casts on history. This theory holds that the laws of history are such that grave wrongs never go unpunished. A wrong or injustice creates an imbalance of power that the forces of nature will work to right; the scales return to even only when the perpetrators of misdeeds are punished. The best illustration of this theory appears in Herder's account of the decline and fall of the Roman empire, where he maintains that the Romans essentially brought their dire fate upon themselves. Because the Romans built their empire by enslaving, pillaging and murdering other peoples, it was only fitting that they should themselves eventually become the prey of these peoples, who only avenged the many wrongs done to them (601, 606).

From a Kantian or Humean perspective Herder's equation of the normative and natural seems like a complete farrago, a confusion of distinct discourses. Herder's confusion of "ought" and "is" is especially evident when he seems to equate justice, a normative principle, with the equilibrium of forces in nature (655). It is insufficient, however, to dismiss Herder's theory on these grounds alone. For Herder believes that his metaphysics gives him a right to wed what Hume and Kant have so unwarrantably

sundered. What justifies his connection of the normative and natural is his organic view of the universe, which makes nature a teleological system. The ends of nature are not only what they should be but also what they must be. Of course, such teleology is controversial, and it was indeed questioned by Kant in his *Kritik der Urteilkraft*. But Herder, and the post-Kantian generation, had their reasons for not accepting Kant's regulative strictures, which we cannot discuss now. The only point here is that it is not enough to claim that Herder just confuses "ought" and "is"; within the context of Herder's metaphysics, there is no confusion at all.

Although Herder's equation of the normative and natural is not as problematic as it seems, there are other more basic difficulties with his argument for meaning in history in Book 15. The chief problem with Herder's argument is that it proves too much. If the laws of nature work with necessity toward order and perfection, and if human beings are no exception to these laws, there should be *no* disorder and imperfection in history. One wonders why there is evil at all. Whence these destructive tendencies within nature and society, such that from time to time the equilibrium of things becomes disturbed? There is also a problem of consistency. How do the laws working inevitably toward equilibrium and perfection cohere with the laws of organic growth and development, whose validity Herder also claimed for history? According to these organic laws, we should expect a process of birth, growth, maturity, decline and decay. Applying the organic theory consistently to history would result in a very different theory about its meaning. Rather than the optimistic picture of progress that Herder paints, it would stress the tragedy inherent in history, the hard fact that all cultures decline and disappear in the general cycle of life.

Now, finally, we bring our treatment of the *Ideen* to a close. It should be obvious that it provides little more than a rough idea of its major philosophical ideas. Despite its flaws in argument, inconsistency and incompleteness, the *Ideen* still stands as one of the great monuments of the historicist tradition. Its achievements fully vindicate Dilthey's assessment that Herder was the father of German historicism.

Notes:

- (1) *Studien zur Geschichte des deutschen Geistes*, Band III of *Gesammelte Schriften* (GS) (Leipzig: Tuebner, 1942), pp. 206–68, esp. 268. See also Dilthey's appraisal of Herder's legacy in *Aufbau der geschichtlichen Welt in den Geisteswissenschaften*, GS VII, 95, and *Einleitung in die Geisteswissenschaften*, GS I, 102. In his "Die Einbildungskraft des Dichters," GS VI, 120, Dilthey refers to Herder simply as "der Begründer der historischen Schule."
- (2) See Rudolf Stadelmann, *Der historische Sinn bei Herder* (Halle: Niemeyer, 1928); Josef Nadler, "Herder oder Goethe?," in *Deutscher Geist—Deutscher Osten* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1937), pp. 127–50; Theodor Litt, *Die Befreiung des geschichtlichen Bewußtseins durch J.G. Herder* (Leipzig: E.A. Seemann, 1942); and Benno von Wiese, *Herder—Grundzüge seines Weltbildes* (Leipzig: Bibliographisches Institut, 1939), pp. 80–122.
- (3) Erich Rothacker, *Einleitung in die Geisteswissenschaften* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1930); Friedrich Meinecke, *Die Entstehung des Historismus* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1965), pp. 355–444; R.G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 89–93; and Georg Iggers, *The German Conception of History* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1968), pp. 34–38. Although none of these scholars mention Dilthey, they agree with his assessment of Herder's importance; and they were very likely, if only indirectly, influenced by it.
- (4) Claus Träger, *Die Herder-Legende des deutschen Historismus* (Frankfurt/Main: Verlag Marxistische Blätter, 1979).
- (5) In March 1933 Hans-Georg Gadamer, Erich Rothacker and Theodor Litt signed the *Bekanntnis der Professoren zu Adolf Hitler*. See Monika Leske, *Philosophie im Dritten Reich* (Berlin: Dietz, 1990), p. 110. This colors all their work on Herder from this time. Benno von Wiese's *Herder* also claims Herder for the national-socialist cause.
- (6) See his "Herder und die Geschichtliche Welt," in *Gesammelte Werke* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1967) IV, 318–35. First published as "Nachwort" to his edition of Herder's *Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1967), pp. 146–77. Gadamer's earlier interpretation of Herder was in the service of the national-socialist cause. See his *Volk und Geschichte im Denken Herders* (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1942), which was excised from the *Gesammelte Werke*. Very different from the later essay, this work stresses Herder's value for German identity and his differences with the *Aufklärung*. It was based on an earlier French essay, also omitted from the *Werke*, "Herder et ses théories sur l'Histoire," in *Regards sur L'Histoire*, ed. Karl Epting (Paris: Fernand Sorlot, 1941), pp. 9–36.
- (7) Meinecke, *Entstehung des Historismus*, p. 408.
- (8) See Introduction, section 1.
- (9) Kant, "Recension J.G. Herders Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit," *Schriften* VIII, 43–66.
- (10) This felicitous phrase is from Rudolf Haym's magisterial biography, *Herder: Nach seinem Leben und seinen Werken* (Berlin: Aufbau, 1958) I, 55.
- (11) Meinecke fails to see the significance of Herder's anthropology and underplays the religious dimension of Herder's thinking. He also does not attempt to explain some of the remarkable reversals in Herder's development.
- (12) Haym, *Herder* I, 110–12. Contemporary scholarship has only vindicated Haym's assessment of the centrality of this philosophy. See, for example, Wolfgang Pross, "Herder und die Anthropologie der Aufklärung," in the "Nachwort" to *Johann Gottfried Herder, Werke* (Munich: Hanser, 1987), II, pp. 1128–229; and John Zammito, *Kant, Herder, & The Birth of Anthropology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), pp. 1–15, 309–46.
- (13) *Johann Gottfried Herder, Briefe, Gesamtausgabe*, ed. Karl-Heinz Hahn (Weimar: Hermann Böhlhaus Nachfolger, 1977–96), I, 120.

(¹⁴) “*Abschiedspredigt von Riga*,” in *Johann Gottfried Herder Werke*, ed. Günter Arnold, et al. (Frankfurt: Deutsche Klassiker Verlag, 1985–2000) IX/1, 52–4. Henceforth this edition will be abbreviated “DKV.”

(¹⁵) *Werke* (DKV) I, 101–134.

(¹⁶) On the importance of Rousseau for the young Herder, see Haym, *Herder*, I, 47, 62, 64, 366–9, and II, 109, 282, 492; and Hans Wolff, “Der junge Herder und die Entwicklungsidee Rousseaus,” *PMLA*, LVII (1942), 753–819.

(¹⁷) Kant, *Schriften* XX, 44.

(¹⁸) Wolff, *Philosophia rationalis sive Logica*, §§30–32, in *Gesammelte Werke*, ed. Jean Ècole et al. (Hildesheim: Olms, 1968) II/1, 4. See Herder's critical commentary on this text, “Ueber Christian Wolfs Schriften,” in *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. Bernhard Suphan (Berlin: Weidmann, 1899), XXXII, 156–9. Henceforth all references to this edition will be designated SWS.

(¹⁹) Eighteenth-century German anthropology has recently become the subject of intensive investigation. See, for example, Mareta Linden, *Untersuchungen zum Anthropologiebegriff des 18. Jahrhunderts* (Frankfurt: Lang, 1976); *Der ganze Mensch: Anthropologie und Literatur im 18. Jahrhundert*, ed. Hans-Jürgen Schings (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1992); and *Anthropologie und Literatur um 1800*, eds. Jürgen Barkhoff and Eda Sagarra (Munich: Iudicium Verlag, 1992); Karl Fink, “Storm and Stress Anthropology,” *History of the Human Sciences* 6 (1993), 51–71; and *Anthropology and the German Enlightenment*, ed. Katherine Faull (Leisburg: Bucknell, 1995).

(²⁰) See Johann Christian Adelung, *Grammatisch-Kritische Wörterbuch der hochdeutschen Mundart* (Vienna: Bauer, 1811), p. 392.

(²¹) From the subtitle of the first edition of *A Treatise of Human Nature* (London: John Noon, 1739).

(²²) On the importance of this text for the young Herder, see Emil Adler, *Der junge Herder und die Aufklärung* (Vienna: Europa, 1968), pp. 56–9.

(²³) Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, *Aesthetica* (Frankfurt an der Oder: Kleyb, 1750).

(²⁴) *Ibid*, 685, 687.

(²⁵) See “Bruchstück von Baumgartens Denkmal,” *Werke* (DKV) I, 693.

(²⁶) *Werke* (DKV) I, 57–99.

(²⁷) *Werke* (DKV) I, 163–649.

(²⁸) In his detailed commentary on the *Fragmente*, Haym repeatedly stresses the influence of Hamann. See his *Herder*, I, 155, 157, 162, 163.

(²⁹) See especially “Versuch über eine akademische Frage,” *Kreuzzüge des Philologen*, in Hamann, *Werke*, ed. Josef Nadler (Vienna: Herder, 1950), II, 122–13.

(³⁰) Kant, *Untersuchung über die Deutlichkeit der Grundsätze der natürlichen Theologie und der Moral*, *Schriften* II, 285–6.

(³¹) *Werke* (DKV) I, 149–60.

(³²) Cf. *Fragmente*, *Werke* (DKV) I, 371–2; and the fragment “Von der Verschiedenheit des Geschmacks und der Denkart unter den Menschen,” *Werke* I, 150–1.

(33) On Herder's training at the University, see Wilhelm Dobbek, *Johann Gottfried Herders Jugendzeit in Mohrungen und Königsberg* (Würzburg: Holzner, 1961), pp. 91–6.

(34) Haym, *Herder* I, 304. The text is in SWS I, 28–42.

(35) *Schrift- und vernunftmäßige Erläuterung der Lehre von der heiligen Dreifaltigkeit*, sine loco, 1766. The author was Gotthard Friedrich Stender.

(36) The review of Stender appeared in Easter 1766, the first edition of the first part of the *Fragmente* in November of the same year.

(37) Haym, *Herder*, I, 303.

(38) The *Archäologie* appears only in SWS VI, 1–129; the *Anmerkungen*, a text discovered only in 1980 by Günter Arnold, appears only in *Werke* VI (DKV) VI, 9–178. There are important differences in formulation and emphasis between these drafts. Their argument reappears, though now significantly diluted and distorted, in the first two chapters of the 1774 *Älteste Urkunde des Menschengeschlechts*.

(39) Hamann, *Werke* II, 199.

(40) *Werke* (DKV), IX/2, 19–44.

(41) See Herder to Nicolai, December 27, 1768, *Briefe* I, 125–6; and Herder to Hamann, End of August, 1769, *Briefe* I, 164.

(42) The evidence for this is assembled in Haym, *Herder* I, 321–4.

(43) Section III.1. *Werke* (DKV) I, 600–5.

(44) *Werke* (SWS), XXXII, 85–140. On the dating of this manuscript, see Haym, *Herder* I, 134. Haym places the dating between 1766 and 1767.

(45) *Werke* (DKV), II, 565–608.

(46) This letter, “An den Herrn Direktor der historischen Gesellschaft in Göttingen” was first published by Regine Otto in her 1990 edition of the *Kritische Wälder* (Berlin: Aufbau, 1990) I, 684–91. It is a more compressed and direct statement of some of the methodological issues discussed in the *Älteres Wäldchen*. The *Älteres Wäldchen* also contains additional reflections on Winckelmann not in the earlier letter.

(47) Johann Christoph Gatterer, “Von der Evidenz in der Geschichtskunde,” in *Die allgemeine Welthistorie die in England durch eine Gesellschaft von Gelehrten ausgefertigt worden* (Halle: Gebauer, 1767), I, 3–38.

(48) *Werke* (DKV) II, 11–35.

(49) See J.J. Winckelmann, *Geschichte der Kunst des Altertums*, in *Johann Joachim Winckelmann, Schriften und Nachlaß* (Mainz: Phillip von Zabern, 2002), IV/1, xvi. Grimm, *Deutsches Wörterbuch* (Leipzig, 1854), VI, Sp. 572, defines a *Lehrgebäude* as “das ganze einer wissenschaftlichen lehre einem gebäude verglichen.”

(50) “An den Herrn Direktor,” p. 685.

(51) Gatterer, “Vom historischen Plan und der darauf sich gründenden Zusammenhang der Erzählungen,” in *Allgemeine historische Bibliothek* I (1767), 15–89, esp. 77–8.

(52) For this kind of interpretation of Herder, see Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1973), pp. 69–80.

(53) *Werke* (SWS), III, 462–71.

(54) *Werke* (DKV) IX/2, 19.

(55) *Werke* (DKV) I, 695–810.

(56) On the context of the competition, see Hans Aarsleff, “The Tradition of Condillac: The Problems of the Origin of Language in the Eighteenth Century and the Debate in the Berlin Academy before Herder,” in *Studies in the History of Linguistics*, ed. Dell Hymes (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1974), pp. 93–156.

(57) J.P. Süßmilch, *Versuch eines Beweises, daß die erste Sprache ihren Ursprung nicht vom Menschen, sondern allein vom Schöpfer erhalten habe*. (Berlin: Buchladen der Realschule, 1766).

(58) *Briefe* I, 168.

(59) Aarsleff, “Tradition of Condillac,” pp. 139–43, has argued that Herder misinterprets Condillac, whose approach was not so reductivist; he explains Herder's misinterpretation on his ignorance of volume I of Condillac's *Essai*. While Aarsleff is perhaps correct, our task here is only to describe Herder's own intentions and interpretation of the dispute.

(60) Rousseau, *Discours sur l'origine, et les fondemens de l'inégalité parmi les hommes*, in *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), III, 151, 147.

(61) *Ibid*, 152.

(62) Herder refers to them explicitly, *Werke* (DKV) I, 710.

(63) This is the thrust of the first two sections of Süßmilch's *Beweis*, pp. 19–58, §§4–25. It is unclear to what extent Süßmilch's argument was actually influenced by Rousseau. He refers to Rousseau on several occasions (e.g., pp. 42, 74, 93), and in the argument of the final sections of section III (pp. 88–93) he takes over Rousseau's theses that men in the state of nature do not need language, and that it is a mistake to attribute to natural man the characteristics of civilized man (pp. 74, 88–93).

(64) Rousseau, *Discours sur l'origine de l'inégalité*, *Œuvres complètes*, III, 152.

(65) Herder's concept of rationality here seems to follow Aristotle's account of the soul in *De Anima*, III, 8, 431b–432a, according to which the soul is a “the form of forms.” Ironically and unfairly, Hamann would appeal explicitly to this concept of the soul in his *Philologische Einfälle und Zweifel* to counter Herder's own “Platonic” conception. See Hamann, *Werke* III, 39.

(66) *Philologische Einfälle und Zweifel*, *Werke*, III, 42.

(67) Süßmilch does allow for some degree of gradual development, but the main thrust of his argument is that the essential structure of language has to be complete and given. See *Beweis*, §§12, 24, pp. 28, 52–3.

(68) For a good brief portrait of Herder's situation in Bückeburg, see Horst Stephan, *Herder in Bückeburg* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1905), pp. 68–85. See also Haym, *Herder* I, 523–51. A very different account is given by Clark, *Herder*, pp. 180–7.

(69) On the importance of Pascal for Herder during these years, see A. Gillies, *Herder* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1945), pp. 57–9. Herder praised Pascal in the *Ältestes Urkunde*, *Werke* (DKV) VI, 288–9n7.

(70) *Briefe* II, 244.

(71) See Herder to Merck, October 15, 1770, *Briefe* I, 261.

(72) *Archäologie*, SWS VI, 38.

(73) *Werke* (DKV) VI, 179–659.

(74) *Briefe* II, 130.

(75) *Ibid.*, II, 132–3.

(76) Haym, *Herder* I, 525.

(77) The review appeared March 30, 1772 in the *Königsbergsche Gelehrte und politische Zeitung*. See Hamann, *Werke* III, 17–19. A little later Hamann wrote a “Beylage” containing a “reproof” (*Abfertigung*) of the earlier review for its derisory tone. See *Werke* III, 20–4.

(78) Herder to Hartknoch, May 1772, *Briefe* II, 175–6.

(79) Hamann, *Werke* III, 35–53. See too *Des Ritters von Rosencreuz letzte Willensmeynung*, *Werke* III, 25–33.

(80) See Hamann, *Des Ritters von Rosencreuz letzte Willensmeynung*, *Werke* III, 27. Herder told Hamann that he never intended to question this principle. See to Hamann, August 1772, *Briefe* II, 209. See also Herder to Nicolai, July 2, 1772, *Briefe* II, 188.

(81) Haym, *Herder* I, 532.

(82) Such was the assessment of Stadelmann, *Der historische Sinn bei Herder*, p. 28. It has been endorsed by Litt, *Befreiung des geschichtlichen Bewußtseins durch Herder*, p. 82; by Meinecke, *Entstehung des Historismus*, pp. 358, 408; and even by Gadamer, “Herder und die geschichtliche Welt,” p. 318.

(83) On the precedents for Herder's themes, see Erich Hassinger, “Zur Genesis von Herders Historismus,” *Deutsche Vierteljahrschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte* 53 (1979), 251–74.

(84) See Jürgen Jacobs, “‘Universalgeschichte zur Bildung der Welt.’ Die Problematik des Historismus beim frühen Herder,” in Bollacher *Herder: Kultur und Geschichte*, pp. 61–74. After a careful survey of the sources, Jacobs comes to a similar conclusion.

(85) Clark, *Herder*, pp. 188–9, sees Iselin as Herder's chief antagonist. Michael Maurer, “Die Geschichtsphilosophie des jungen Herder in ihrem Verhältnis zur Aufklärung,” in *Johann Gottfried Herder 1744–1803*, ed. Gerhard Sauder (Hamburg: Meiner, 1987), pp. 141–55, takes Voltaire to be central.

(86) All references are to *Werke* (DKV), IV, 9–107.

(87) It is a mistake to read this argument as an endorsement of Machiavellian politics. See Meinecke *Entstehung des Historismus*, p. 389. Herder is saying that virtue and vice are complementary, not that the end justifies the means. See his comments on Friedrich's Machiavellianism in section III, *Werke* (DKV) IV, 99.

(88) The fundamental role of this principle was stressed by Meinecke, *Entstehung des Historismus*, pp. 399–404.

(89) Christian Garve, “Johann Gottfried Herder: Über die neuere deutsche Literatur,” *Neue Bibliothek der schönen Wissenschaften und der freyen Künste*, IV (1767), 40–78; V (1767), 241–91.

(90) Zammito, *Kant, Herder & Birth of Anthropology*, p. 159, claims that Garve convinced Herder of the limitations of his analogy. Nevertheless, it is difficult to see how this is so, given that Herder explicitly defends the analogy and continues to use it in his 1774 tract.

(91) Clark, *Herder*, pp. 192–3, maintains that Herder's use of the metaphor in the 1774 tract is ironic and that it is meant to be “a *reductio ad absurdum* of the Rousseau-Iselin scheme.” But this does not consider Herder's defense of the metaphor and the deeper reasons why it is so attractive to him.

(92) See Herder to Mendelssohn, April 1769, *Briefe* I, 137–43. On Herder's exchange with Mendelssohn on the vocation of man, see Alexander Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohn* (University, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1973), pp. 167–79; and Marion Heinz, “Historismus oder Metaphysik? Zu Herders Bückeberger Geschichtsphilosophie”, in *Johann Gottfried Herder: Geschichte und Kultur*, ed. Martin Bollacher (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1994), pp. 75–85.

(93) Haym, *Herder* I, 573.

(94) *Aus Herders Nachlaß*, eds. Heinrich Düntzer and F.G. von Herder (Frankfurt: Meidinger Sohn, 1856), II, 110.

(95) On the differences between Herder's views and those of the romantics, see Meinecke, *Entstehung des Historismus*, pp. 404–6.

(96) Of all Herder scholars Haym was the most sensitive to the changes in Herder's development. He would have been the first to dispute the value of a debate about Herder's ultimate allegiances. His explanation for these changes are scattered throughout his work. See, for example, the valuable insights in *Herder* II, 153–6, 182.

(97) The formal title of the work is *Ein Mehreres aus den Papieren des Ungenannten, die Offenbarung Betreffend*, from *Zur Geschichte und Literatur, Aus den Schätzen der Herzoglichen Bibliothek zu Wolfenbüttel*, in Lessing, *Werke und Briefe*, ed. Wilfried Barner et al. (Frankfurt: Deutsche Klassiker Verlag, 1989), VIII, 171–350.

(98) *Ibid*, VIII, 312.

(99) *Briefe* IV, 74.

(100) *Ibid*, IV, 98.

(101) *Werke* (DKV), II, 689–708.

(102) Herder to Gleim, November 26, 1781, *Briefe* IV, 195.

(103) Haym, *Herder* II, 182.

(104) *Werke* (DKV) IX/1, 139–607.

(105) *Beweis des Geistes und der Kraft, Werke und Briefe* VIII, 439–45.

(106) On Lessing's attitude toward orthodoxy, see his February 2, 1774 letter to Karl Lessing, *Werke und Briefe* XI/2, 615.

(107) *Werke* (DKV) IV, 363.

(108) *Briefe* III, 151.

(109) Herder seems to have in mind 2 Corinthians 3, 17: “...where the spirit of the lord is there is liberty...” *New English Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 229

(110) SWS VII, 462.

(111) See Herder to Jacobi, February 6, 1784, *Briefe* V, 28.

(112) Jacobi, *Werke* (Leipzig: Fleischer, 1819), IV/1, 55.

(113) Herder, *Briefe* V, 28.

(114) All references to this work are to *Werke* (DKV), Band VI. Herder divides the work into parts, books and chapters. Following this edition, these will be designated as follows: capital roman numeral for a part, Arabic numeral for a book, and a small roman numeral for the chapter.

(115) I agree here with the assessments of Haym, *Herder* II, 221, and Meinecke, *Entstehung des Historismus*, p. 431.

(116) Suphan demonstrates in detail how the plans for the *Ideen* goes back to the notebooks of the Königsberg years. See *Sämtliche Werke* XIV, 654–5.

(117) Kant, *Schriften* VIII, 54, 55.

(118) W.H. Walsh, *Philosophy of History* (New York: Harper & Row, 1960), pp. 132–3.

(119) Some scholars maintain that Herder's position in the *Ideen* is more dualistic than in *Vom Erkennen und Empfinden*. See, for example, Clark, *Herder*, p. 315, who writes about Herder's "introduction of an immaterial soul"; and Nisbet, "Herders anthropologische Anschauungen in den *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit*," in *Anthropologie und Literatur um 1800*, p. 9, who claims that Herder now stresses the *opposition* between force and organ. Both these interpretations are falsified by the texts: Herder states explicitly that we have no reason to assume pure spirits (171), and that forces, although identical with their organs, are "most intimately joined" (*innigst verbunden*) with them (173).

(120) On this dispute, see John Yolton, *Thinking Matter: Materialism in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983).

(121) See chapters iv, v and vi of Book V, Part I.

(122) See the "Beschluss" to his *Allgemeine Naturgeschichte*, Kant, *Schriften* I, 366–7.

(123) On this topic, see the A. O. Lovejoy's "Herder and the Enlightenment Philosophy of History," in *Essays on the History of Ideas* (New York: Capricorn, 1960), pp. 166–82.

(124) Herder explicitly refers to Wolf's work in II.7.iv, *Werke* (DKV), VI, 270–1. He appeals to the phenomena of magnetism, electricity and galvanism in his *Gott, Einige Gespräche*, SW XVI, 453–4, 551–60.

(125) Pace A. Gillies, *Herder*, p. 83.

(126) Kant, *Schriften* VIII, 38.

(127) Part I of the *Ideen* appeared in Easter 1784. Kant's essay appeared in the *Berlinische Monatsschrift* in November 1784. How much it was inspired by the appearance of the first part of the *Ideen* is a matter of speculation.

(128) On Wolf, see Shirley Roe, *Matter, Life and Generation: 18th Century Embryology and the Haller-Wolff Debate* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

(129) See James Larson, "Vital Forces: Regulative Principles or Constitutive Agents? A Strategy in German Physiology, 1786–1802," *Isis* 70 (1979), 235–49.

(130) Kant, *Schriften*, VIII, 23.

(131) *Ibid*, 19.

(132) This seems to be a misreading because Kant in the "Second Proposition" is writing abstractly about humanity in general. It is only humanity as such that creates everything out of itself, not each individual. Yet Herder's attribution of

individualism to Kant was not incorrect. For Kant thinks that the progress of history is not the result of education but the natural workings of our passions, viz., the desire for possession, power and honor. See the "Vierter Satz" of the "Idee," *Schriften* VIII, 20–2.

(¹³³) Ibid, 18–19.

(¹³⁴) Cf. Kant's "Muthmaßlicher Anfang der Menschengeschichte," *Schriften*, VIII, 115–8, where Kant writes that the progress toward perfection in history works for the species and not the individual.

(¹³⁵) Ibid, 22. Cf. Herder's *Ideen*, II, 8, v, *Werke* (DKV), VI, 335.

(¹³⁶) See section 8, above.

(¹³⁷) This is the solution to the problem Haym raises, *Herder* II, 251, whether the goal of history is the humanity of the individual or the species. Herder would reply that the individual is both means and ends.

(¹³⁸) See section 7.

(¹³⁹) See III, 12, vi, p. 510. Herder repeats this argument at the close of III, 14, vi, p. 623.

(¹⁴⁰) The inspiration of Lambert is confirmed by the passages Herder cites in *Gott, Einige Gespräche*, SWS XVI, 469–70.

Humboldt the Proteus

1. The Bacon of history

In 1867, in the preface to his *Grundriß der Historik*, Johann Gustav Droysen, one of the leading historians of his age, paid handsome tribute to that thinker who showed him the way forward in history: *Wilhelm von Humboldt* (1767–1835).¹ He called Humboldt nothing less than “the Bacon of the historical sciences.” It was Humboldt, he claimed, who had created “the organon” of historical thought, the method for history to be a science. Coming from such an eminent historian, Droysen's judgment has to be taken seriously. But it raises difficult questions, which Droysen himself scarcely answers. Why should Humboldt be deemed the Bacon of the historical sciences? What claim did he have to such an imposing title? Or, in short, what role did he play in the development of historicism?

In canonizing Humboldt, Droysen laid great weight upon his methodology. Humboldt, in his famous 1821 essay “Über die Aufgabe des Geschichtschreibers,” had formulated a methodology that typified much of the thinking of his age. That methodology seemed the perfect synthesis of empiricism and rationalism.² Humboldt stressed the importance of carefully examining facts and conducting surveys, and he warned against the dangers of hasty theorizing and *a priori* speculation; but he also emphasized the crucial role of creative thinking in formulating questions and in organizing the data of experience into a meaningful whole. Such a methodology seemed to satisfy perfectly the principles of Kantian epistemology, which had preached against the blind induction of empiricism as well as the empty speculation of rationalism. This was indeed no accident, since Humboldt had declared, in the “Vorerrinerung” to the 1830 edition of his correspondence with Schiller,³ that Kant's method should be the basis for all future philosophy in Germany. For the young Droysen and Ranke, the blunt advocacy of such a neo-Kantian methodology would have seemed very timely indeed; for it was in the 1830s that Hegelianism was on the rise in Berlin, and Hegelian dialectic represented to its opponents precisely what Bacon had banished:

“scholasticism,” the application of *a priori* concepts and reasoning to history. The suspicion of speculative philosophy of history, which was so important to Ranke, Droysen and Dilthey, has its source in Humboldt.⁴ When Ranke, Droysen and Dilthey launched their campaign against the philosophy of history they marched under a Humboldtian banner.

Another reason for Humboldt's importance in the historicist tradition was his timely vindication of the historian's vocation relative to other disciplines. Not the least reason for the renown of Humboldt's 1821 essay, which we will consider in detail below, is that it bestowed upon the historian hitherto unheard of stature relative to the philosopher and artist. Humboldt's praise of the historian was indeed revolutionary, breaking with both the rationalist and romantic traditions. The rationalist tradition had demoted the historian vis-à-vis the philosopher because the historian knew only particular and contingent truths whereas the philosopher knew universal and necessary ones. The romantic tradition had lowered the status of the historian vis-à-vis the artist because the artist could grasp the ideal with his imagination, free from the constraints of experience, whereas the historian had to confine himself to its instantiation in particular things. In one deft move Humboldt raised the historian above both philosopher and artist by arguing that the historian alone could grasp the ideal in its reality, as it existed in particular and concrete things. The historian did not simply describe the particular appearances, nor did he escape from them into some ideal realm of being, like the philosopher or artist; rather, he showed how the ideal is embodied and realized in time, in the changing particulars of experience. Only the historian could grasp both realms of being—universal and particular, ideal and temporal—in their unity and give reality to ideals that otherwise, in the hands of artists and philosophers, were only fantasies or abstractions. Never before were historians so elevated in their calling and stature as in Humboldt's 1821 essay, which represents the self-confidence of the new historical age. Thus Humboldt played for the historians in the nineteenth century something like the role that Bacon played for the natural philosophers in the seventeenth century: he was Tyrtaeus, the poet whose war songs inspired the Spartans to victory.⁵

Apart from his methodology and apology for history, Humboldt made another important contribution to the historicist tradition in developing its principle of individuality. This principle, which Meinecke traces back to Ranke, really has much deeper roots, and we have already found it more or less explicitly in Chladenius, Möser and Herder. It was Humboldt, however, who made the principle thematic for the human studies, especially history. The task of the historian was to provide what Humboldt called a “*characteristic*,” i.e., an account of the specific character of a person,

event, nation, epoch or culture. Hence the goal of enquiry was to determine the *principium individuationis*, i.e., that central principle from which all its distinctive traits flow. This was indeed the point behind Humboldt's famous *Ideenlehre*: the "idea" behind a person, nation or epoch was nothing less than its individuating principle, what makes it this unique or distinctive person, nation or epoch. Humboldt's focus upon individuality as the goal of historical enquiry was the precedent for Ranke, Droysen, Dilthey, Windelband, Rickert and Weber.

While most scholars have accepted Humboldt's founding role in the historicist tradition, it has not gone entirely unchallenged. In an interesting and important article Peter Hanns Reill has recently argued that Humboldt falls outside the historicist tradition because, unlike most historicists, he did not develop alternative models of explanation of human action from those in the natural sciences, and because his own models of explanation came more from the late science of the Enlightenment.⁶ So, in Reill's view, Humboldt belongs more to the Enlightenment than the historicist tradition: "In goal, method and scientific assumptions, Humboldt developed the late Enlightenment project of creating a science of humanity (*science de l'homme*) to its highest degree."⁷ We have already found strong reasons to reject a sharp distinction between the methods of the natural sciences and those of the historicist tradition.⁸ But we will lay aside these broad questions here and simply focus upon Humboldt. There are two purely historical questions to consider: First, was Humboldt a complete naturalist about the explanation of human action? Second, did he have no conception of non-naturalistic forms of explanation? The answer to both questions is "no." Regarding the first question, Reill is certainly correct that Humboldt attempts to build his science of anthropology and linguistics upon a naturalistic foundation, and that, at least in some places, he sees little difference in principle between the sciences of humanity and the natural sciences.⁹ In these respects Humboldt falls in the same tradition as Chladenius, Herder and Möser. However, Humboldt, unlike the mature Herder, was not a radical or complete naturalist. While he always held that natural explanation is a *necessary* condition of the explanation of human action, he did not always regard it as a *sufficient* condition. In some of his most important writings, as we shall see below,¹⁰ he exempted human rationality and freedom from explanation according to natural laws and insisted that their ultimate origins were mysterious and inexplicable. The reason for this hesitancy before a complete naturalism lay with Humboldt's adoption of a Kantian conception of freedom and responsibility, which

required placing reason and freedom outside the natural order. Regarding the second question, Reill is also incorrect in claiming that Humboldt did not develop alternative forms of explanation. As we shall see below,¹¹ he anticipates in interesting ways the later theory of understanding of the historicist tradition, and in some places he even distinguishes it from natural explanation. It is true, however, that Humboldt did not develop these hints and suggestions into a full scale model of explanation. This was a development that would take place later in the century in the hands of Droysen and Dilthey.

Ultimately, though, the question of Humboldt's naturalism is not decisive. Even if Humboldt were as radical a naturalist as Herder, we would still have good reason to place him within the historicist tradition given his other contributions to it. We do well to examine in detail, then, the genesis and development of his historicism.¹² We shall find that Humboldt's intellectual development was no less turbulent than Herder's, though for very different reasons. Humboldt was the most protean of spirits. All his life he suffered from an identity crisis: he did not know who he was or what his real interests were. His intellectual obsessions shift constantly: first he wants to be an anthropologist; then he becomes a classical scholar; finally, he devotes himself to linguistics. In each case it is as if he has finally found his true love and calling, only for him to have another epiphany years later. For just this reason, it is important not to expect complete consistency from Humboldt, as if he held one worldview all his life. No less than Herder, his intellectual life is characterized by fundamental contradictions. One of the most important, as we shall see below, is that he could never reconcile his neo-classicism, which made the Greeks the model of civilization, with his cultural pluralism and sense of history, which saw all cultures as individual and incommensurable wholes. Humboldt too faced the horrible specter of relativism, which was implicit in his concept of individuality; but he never squared that concept with his abiding faith in absolute moral values.

2. Early philosophy of history

The origins of Humboldt's theory of history are obscure. We know very little about his earliest interests in history, when, why or how they were formed. It is surely significant, however, that, as a student in the late 1780s at the University of Göttingen, Humboldt attended the lectures of A.L. Schläzer.¹³ For the study of history, Göttingen was then

the pre-eminent university in Germany, and Schlözer was one of its guiding lights.¹⁴ Humboldt was a great admirer of “*der verewigte Schlözer*,” whose *Nordische Geschichte* he regarded as a model for research on obscure stretches of history.¹⁵ Since his lecture notes do not survive, it is difficult to determine what precisely Humboldt learned from Schlözer. We therefore have to resort to conjecture. There are several respects Schlözer could have influenced him. First, Schlözer's conception of world-history is very similar to Humboldt's. Like Humboldt, Schlözer insisted that world history should be more than chronology and compendium, and that it should treat mankind as a unity. Second, Schlözer was also a master of the new *Statistik*, whose task was to collect all notable data (political, economic, domestic) on the life of a nation. It is likely that this had some effect on Humboldt, who would later stress the value of using statistics to describe the character of a nation. Third, Humboldt learned from Schlözer how to use languages to study remote stretches of history. Schlözer was famous for his mastery of languages, and for his use of them as a tool in the study of the origins of a culture.¹⁶ This did not go unappreciated by Humboldt, who praised Schlözer for being the first historian to recognize the significance of the American languages; he even went so far as to claim that, after Leibniz, the most important thinker for the development of *Sprachkunde* was Schlözer.¹⁷

Another obvious influence on the young Humboldt would seem to be Herder, whose *Ideen über die Geschichte der Menschheit* appeared from 1784 to 1791, just as his own interests in history were forming. Surely, there are remarkable affinities between Herder and Humboldt. They share the same devotion to the ideal of humanity, the same organic conception of nature and history, the same emphasis on individuality, the same love of cultural pluralism, the same ideas about the origin of language. On these grounds Herder is sometimes held to be a central figure for the development of Humboldt's own theory of history.¹⁸ At the very least one would expect Humboldt to have been an admirer of Herder. However, the very contrary is the case. The young Humboldt was very critical of Herder and seemed to have an aversion for his writings. When the fourth part of the *Ideen* appeared he did not have a kind word to say about it. First he made a slighting allusion to it in his November 19, 1793, letter to Körner: “We are missing a philosophy of history, not in title, but surely in spirit.”¹⁹ A month later he explained his reaction in more detail to Brinkmann: “There is no more interesting

subject than the philosophy of history. But it still totters without a foundation...What a sad experience it is to have read recently the fourth part of Herder's *Ideen*. Apart from some fine points about Christianity and a well told history of the Arabs, its all pure twaddle and comes to no result, other than one learns that all flowers wilt."²⁰

These lines suggest that the source of Humboldt's animus was his own ambition: he wanted to write the philosophy of history that Herder had already written. But academic politics also played its role. For Herder's hostile review of Schlözer's *Universalhistorie* formed battle lines in Göttingen; and, given his sympathies, Humboldt would have stood firmly in Schlözer's camp.

Certainly more than Herder, and even more than Schlözer, the most important influence on Humboldt's budding historical views was Georg Forster, the explorer, writer and anthropologist. When Humboldt first met him in 1788, Forster was already famous for his *Reise um die Welt*, his account of his travels around the world with Captain Cook on the second voyage. From 1788 to 1790 Humboldt and Forster were closest friends.²¹ Whether through conversation or letters, there was a constant exchange of ideas between them; their views were very close on a variety of subjects, especially politics, religion and ethics. The older and wiser of the two, Forster was more giver than taker, not least with regard to history. All his life Humboldt saw history from the perspective of anthropology, a perspective formed for him by Forster, who had already sketched his anthropology in a series of brilliant essays written in the 1780s.²² That we should treat cultures as organic wholes; that there is a single core of humanity throughout the variety of history and culture; that there should be no rigid separation between culture and nature; that anthropology should proceed empirically rather than according to *a priori* constructions; that the highest end of human life is the all-rounded development of human powers; that the distinctive worth of a human being resides in his individuality—all these are central themes of Forster's anthropology, and all were crucial for Humboldt. Whatever affinity there is between Humboldt and Herder most likely came through the mediation of Forster, who was sympathetic to Herder and defended him in his controversy with Kant.²³

Both in title and conception, Humboldt's first essay on history shows Schlözer's and Forster's influence upon him. This essay, the 1791 fragment "Über die Gesetze der Entwicklung der menschlichen Kräfte,"²⁴ sketches a plan for a much larger anthropological

project, whose aim was to determine “the laws of the development of human powers” (93). Although Humboldt did not complete the project, his short draft anticipates many themes of his later work.

While Humboldt's avowed aim in this essay is “the discovery of the laws of the development of human powers on earth,” it soon becomes evident that his main concern is more epistemological than historical: it is to determine not *what* are the laws of history, but *whether* there are any such laws and how we know them (93). Humboldt finds it remarkable that, though mankind has now determined the laws of motion for planets millions of miles away, it is still a stranger to the laws by which it acts on earth (89). The explanation for this paradox lies in the special subject matter of history: the individual, the concrete. The reason the natural sciences have been so successful, he explains, is because they formulate general laws concerning exact quantifiable relationships in space and time; these laws can be so precise and universal just because they abstract from all the detail and determinacy of the empirical world. What the natural sciences want to abstract from, however, is precisely what history wants to know. It is the task of history to know the concrete and individual, i.e., this particular event, person, culture or epoch, and so generalizations become more hazardous (89). Despite this difficulty, Humboldt is still optimistic that there can be general laws of history. There must be such laws, he argues, for several reasons: because the powers of human nature are the same, because the necessity of maintaining these powers produces the same needs, and because from these needs spring the same passions and desires (89–90). Since there is a great uniformity among the causes of human actions—the same passions and desires—there should also be a great uniformity among their effects, which are the events of human history (90). In such reasoning Humboldt reveals his confidence in the *Aufklärung's* faith in a uniform human nature. He would have been strengthened in this belief by Forster, who, even after his voyage to some of the most exotic places on earth, still maintained that there is a common human nature, even if different cultures realize it in different ways according to their material circumstances.²⁵

Already in this early essay Humboldt has a very specific conception of the laws of history. These laws concern the development of specific human powers, how they rise and fall, or how they are promoted or hindered under certain conditions. Since they are not chronological, following the course of events themselves, the historian will have to skip entire generations, even whole epochs or cultures, and focus instead only on those periods where these powers were especially developed (94–5). Such laws will be formulable only under two conditions, Humboldt says. First, that the progress of one generation proceeds directly to another; second, that the events themselves are pure effects of these powers (95). Since these conditions never take place exactly in the actual world, Humboldt admits that his laws will find only approximate application to real events. Are these laws mechanical or teleological? Do their origins lie in efficient

causes or in providence? On this fraught question Humboldt keeps a discreet silence, stating only that there is great difficulty regarding whether the chain of events moves toward a goal, and whether there is progress in history (88–9).

Although confident that there are historical laws, Humboldt stresses the obstacles in trying to know them. It is very difficult to discover the general powers behind all change, and it is almost impossible to distinguish cause from effect in the tangled web of events (90). These laws will never be so precise and rigorous that they will determine necessary connections between events; at best they will have a kind of probability. And so a universal history, one that determines the laws of world history, seems to Humboldt a mere ideal. If we imagine world history to consist in many individual series of events, he argues, we can know at best the laws of a single series; but we cannot know the general laws of the whole, those connecting the series themselves (94). Above all, Humboldt is skeptical of attempts to know world history through *a priori* means or reason alone. Without mentioning them by name, he distances himself from Kant's and Lessing's efforts to determine *a priori* the fundamental goals of providence (87–8). Even if reason could know the general laws of history, he claims, it cannot, without the aid of experience, determine their specific form. How, then, are we to know the general laws of history? Experience alone should be our guide, Humboldt says (89). Careful observation of ourselves and others, and the use of written history, should bring us closer to our goal, even if we cannot attain it.

One of the more interesting facets of Humboldt's early essay is his brief sketch of a method of understanding.²⁶ We find in it one of the earliest statements of a method that will later be developed in much greater detail by Droysen, Dilthey, Simmel and Weber. Given his emphasis on laws in the essay, one does not expect Humboldt to advance such a method. Nevertheless, it appears all the same, briefly but unmistakably. Humboldt states that since his subject matter is another living being like himself, the historian has the power to put himself in the place of others, so that he can know their life not only as it appears to him but also as it is experienced by them (91). We have the power, in other words, to relive the experience of others, to know the world from their point of view. The basis of this power is that we are all living beings, so that others have analogous feelings to ourselves. In this respect, Humboldt says, the historian has an advantage over the natural scientist. Since the natural scientist's subject matter is inanimate nature, he has no power to understand how things are inside themselves, and so he remains forever limited to their external appearances. Hence the inanimate world, however much we quantify it, will remain utterly alien to us. We should regard inanimate nature, Humboldt advises, like an island nation sees a ship of strangers: with utmost suspicion; for we have no *a priori* guarantee that mountains do not fall upon us,

or that the earth does not open underneath our feet. However, the human world is our home, familiar and accessible to all of us, because we all share it from within. Here, in these significant but little regarded lines, Humboldt had reversed the traditional order of precedent that had favored the natural sciences over the human studies. Now, it seemed, on the basis of empathetic understanding, the human sciences could know reality more directly than the natural sciences. In this regard it is not misleading, then, to see Humboldt as a founder of *Geistesgeschichte*.

3. Humboldt's concept of individuality: fons et origo

Already in his 1791 essay, Humboldt is very clear that the subject matter of history is the individual. Although he is confident that there can be laws of history, the difficulty in formulating such laws comes from the concrete and particular subject matter of history. But what, precisely, did Humboldt mean by individuality? Given the importance of his concept of individuality, both for his thought and the historicist tradition as a whole, it is worthwhile to investigate its origins and precise meaning. This is all the more necessary because the concept has been frequently misinterpreted.

Humboldt's concept of individuality came to him from the Leibnizian–Wolffian tradition, the intellectual nursery of his early years.²⁷ It was Christian Wolff, the great system builder of German rationalism, who gave the concept its basic meaning. In his *Ontologia*, his most fundamental work, Wolff defined the individual as whatever is completely determinate in every respect, and he identified the *principium individuationis* with the reason why something is just this singular thing and no other (*cur ens aliquod singulare*).²⁸ While Humboldt upholds this classical sense, he also gives the concept of individuality a much deeper and richer meaning, one that goes back more to Leibniz than Wolff. Humboldt understands the individual in terms of the Leibnizian concept of an *entelechy*, i.e., the striving of a thing to realize its determinate nature or character. According to this concept, there is for every individual thing a notion or idea, its *principium individuationis*, which makes it just this thing and nothing else. This notion or idea is inherent in the thing, though at first it is only potential or inchoate. The goal of the thing is to realize this notion or idea, i.e., to make what is potential actual, what is implicit explicit, what is inchoate determinate. Humboldt's own explicit definition of the individual shows his debt to this Leibnizian concept: "An individual is an idea present in reality..."²⁹The "idea" here is best understood as the Leibnizian concept or notion of a thing. Still following Leibniz, Humboldt identifies each individual with its characteristic drive (*Trieb*) or striving (*Streben*) to realize its inherent idea; he gave this

concept a more romantic flavor when he defined it as longing (*Sehnsucht*), which he preferred over drive or striving because it had less practical and utilitarian connotations.³⁰

Behind Humboldt's concern with individuality lay another basic motif of Leibniz's thought: the principle of plenitude. This principle states, in one of its many formulations, that "the greatest possible quantity of essence exists" or that "all things would exist if it were possible for them."³¹ This principle follows straightforwardly from Leibniz's concept of perfection, according to which perfection consists in the greatest possible unity amid the greatest possible variety. Since perfection requires the greatest possible variety, and since variety increases with the number of individuals, it is better that the greatest possible number of individuals exist. This principle has weighty moral and political implications, for it means that individuality, being integral to the perfection of things, is worth preserving for its own sake. We should, therefore, cultivate our individuality, and respect ethnic and national differences. Though never made explicit, Leibniz's principle of plenitude forms part of the background to Humboldt's concept of individuality. It helps to explain the great value and importance he laid on individuality as a moral and political ideal.

Humboldt understood his concept of the individual in the context of a general metaphysics which he sketched in some fragments from the mid-1800s, but which he had first formulated in 1795.³² This metaphysics, which seems very indebted to Herder, is essentially a vitalistic pantheism. It combines Spinoza's monism with Leibniz's concept of an entelechy, so that Spinoza's single universal substance becomes infinite force or energy realizing itself in and through the totality of finite things. We must not hypostasize the infinite, Humboldt warns, as if it were a separate self-sufficient thing apart from its creation. The divine relates to its creation as force to its manifestation, as idea to its appearance, which are inseparable because the manifestation or appearance only makes the force or idea more determinate and organized. In these fragments Humboldt is firm on a monistic conception of the world, according to which there are no fundamental divisions between mind and body, infinite and finite. He insists that the individual energy of one thing is ultimately identical with all others; and rather than talking about distinct substances, he writes of manifold facets or aspects of a single fundamental force. The crucial question remains of the one in many: How and why this single infinite force manifests itself as so many individual forces? In the face of this classical conundrum Humboldt could only admit his ignorance and declare it inexplicable.

A crucial part of Humboldt's monistic metaphysics—one of some significance for his concept of individuality—is his denial of mental–physical dualism. According to his vitalism, there is no real difference in kind between mind and matter, ideal and real, because they are only different degrees of organization and development of one and the same living force. The mental is the invisible self-conscious form of the powers inherent in the body, whereas the physical is the visible subconscious form of the powers inherent in the mind. Anticipating Schelling, Humboldt formulated the point as follows: nature and the idea are one and the same; nature is the idea as active power; and the idea is nature as self-reflective power.³³ Applied to the conception of the individual, this conception of mental–physical relations means that the physical, external or spatial features of the individual should be understood as externalizations or manifestations of its living forces; they make actual, determinate and concrete what is only potential, indeterminate and inchoate on its own. Hence the inner and outer are not in a merely external causal relation where each retains its separate identity apart from their interaction; rather, they are in an internal essential relation where one only makes more manifest, determinate and organized what is already inherent in the other. This process of making determinate is nothing less than one of individuation, so that individuality should be understood more as activity than entity. As we shall soon see, Humboldt applies this conception of mental–physical relations to his philosophy of language, where it forms the basis of his views about the relationship between meaning and sign.

As explained so far, Humboldt's concept of individuality is so richly metaphysical that it seems impossible to square it with another profound influence on his thought: Kant's critical philosophy. A great admirer and student of Kant, Humboldt had read thoroughly in his early years all the major critical writings, which he regarded as the “*Kodex*” for modern philosophy.³⁴ It was Kant who confirmed his misgivings about the Wolffian method of demonstration, which seemed to him barren and pointless. It was also Kant who gave him the basic principle of his own epistemology: that knowledge depends on the interplay of thought and experience, concepts and intuitions. But if Humboldt accepted Kant's critical doctrine, how could he continue to espouse a metaphysics, especially one so heavily indebted to Leibniz? For just this reason, it has been said that the mature Humboldt broke with the rationalist tradition entirely and became a critical epistemologist by the early 1800s.³⁵ There is, however, no need to assume a basic rupture in Humboldt's intellectual development, as if his Kantian principles led to a complete purge of his metaphysics. The solution to the mystery is simple: though Humboldt retained some of Leibniz's basic principles, he no

longer believed that the old dogmatic methodology could support them; he accepted, indeed stressed, the tentative and proleptic character of these principles, believing that they could be eventually verified by experience. His attitude toward these principles was similar to that of Herder, who also believed that empirical methods could salvage the better part of the Leibnizian heritage. In sum, the baby of Leibnizian principles should not be thrown out with the bathwater of Wolffian syllogistic.

Whether Leibniz's principles are so salvageable is, of course, a moot question. It is noteworthy that Kant himself had the gravest doubts about Humboldt's project. In his March 30, 1795, letter to Schiller,³⁶ the old sage of Königsberg could only shake his head at the bold metaphysics of a recent anonymous article in the *Horen*. Stumped at the author's claim that nature must have both masculine and feminine principles, Kant could only mutter: "*Man weiß nichts daraus zu machen.*" The article in question was "Über den Geschlechtsunterschied und dessen Einfluss auf die organische Natur," in which the author applied Leibnizian principles to explain sexual differences in nature. The author, of course, was Humboldt, who was deeply upset to learn of Kant's opinion.³⁷ He believed that Kant had misunderstood him, assuming, falsely, that his methodology was entirely scholastic. Whatever the merit of Kant's criticism, his reaction to Humboldt's essay shows how far Humboldt was from being a textbook Kantian in the 1790s.³⁸

Because of his concept of individuality, Humboldt is sometimes seen as a founder of the "irrationalism" of the historicist tradition.³⁹ It is easy to see the basis for such an interpretation. Since Humboldt holds that the individual is the subject matter of history, and since he also states that the individual is inexplicable and inconceivable, a limit to all description and explanation,⁴⁰ he seems committed to the view that history is ultimately inexplicable by reason. Further evidence for this interpretation seems to come from Humboldt's early relation with F.H. Jacobi, who was notorious for his "irrationalism". After visiting Jacobi in 1788 in his home in Pempelfort, Humboldt came under his influence, and even, for a short while, regarded him as his "teacher". He endorsed Jacobi's general principles that existence has to be experienced and cannot ever be demonstrated, and that reason determines only the formal relationships between propositions.⁴¹ So, putting together the Jacobi influence with

Humboldt's views about the ultimate ineffability of the particular, he does seem to endorse a kind of irrationalism.

While there is something to be said on behalf of the irrationalist interpretation, it is important to keep it in perspective. Although Humboldt thinks that the individual is ultimately inexplicable, a limit to all enquiry, he does not maintain that enquiry into it is futile, as if one had recourse only to intuitions. After all, the very purpose of his anthropology, linguistics and history was to describe the individual, to provide a characteristic of the specific character of a language, people or epoch. While Humboldt holds the individual to be *ultimately* inexhaustible in conceptual terms, he also insists that progress can and should be made toward its description and explanation, even if *full* description and *complete* explanation are only regulative ideals. It is noteworthy that, for all his sympathy with Jacobi, Humboldt never accepted his theory of immediate knowledge, according to which we know individuals *only* through intuition. True to Kant, he held that intuitions without concepts are blind and mute. Hence he bluntly told Jacobi that he had no taste for the mystical side of his theory of knowledge.⁴²

4. Ambivalence about natural law

Nothing better marks Humboldt's status as a transitional figure between *Aufklärung* and historicism than his ambivalent attitude toward natural law. While he had the greatest doubts about natural law, both its applicability and theoretical foundation, he never abandoned his faith in it.⁴³ All the failures of the French radicals to redesign France according to natural law, and all Burke's criticisms about its ultimate basis, never shook his belief that there are universal and necessary principles that should be guidelines of political practice. As he wrote his friend Karl Gustav Brinkmann, November 1792, about the principles of the National Assembly: "The truths of the French Revolution remain eternal truths, even if 1200 fools desecrate them."⁴⁴

Humboldt's persistent faith in natural law came from his early education. He was raised in the natural law tradition of the Leibnizian–Wolffian school. A training in natural law doctrine was essential for a law career, the standard profession for a young aristocrat like Humboldt. Sure enough, sparing nothing for his education, the Humboldt family hired as a tutor no less than Ernst Ferdinand Klein, one of the most prominent natural law theorists of his day and collaborator with Cramer and Svarez on

the formulation of the *Allgemeine Landsrecht*.⁴⁵ Following a standard natural law textbook,⁴⁶ Klein gave private lectures on the subject to Humboldt from March 1785 to February 1786. Humboldt's notes on Klein's lectures show his thorough familiarity with questions of natural law, and a remarkably precocious talent in discussing them.⁴⁷

Soon, however, Humboldt began to have doubts about natural law. As early as February 1789, five months before the Revolution, he wrote Jacobi that the more he studied moral philosophy, the more he became uncertain about it, and he felt this way especially about *Naturrecht*.⁴⁸ The attempt by traditional natural law theorists to base right on happiness was an utter failure, he argued, because they could not refute the simple point that people might be happier if they were deprived of their rights. This was an objection often made by Kantians; but Humboldt was no more satisfied with Kant's moral philosophy. He complained that Kant had made morality depend on freedom, though he only postulated freedom and did not demonstrate it. Happy with neither traditional *Naturrecht* nor Kant's ethics, Humboldt confessed he was near skepticism.

During this early skeptical phase, Humboldt wrote an interesting essay on natural law, his 1791 essay "Ideen über Staatsverfassung, durch die neue französische Constitution veranlasst."⁴⁹ The occasion of this essay, as the title suggests, was the French Constitution of 1791.⁵⁰ The essay bears the intriguing subtitle "Aus einem Briefe an einen Freund vom August 1791." The friend was no less than Friedrich Gentz, the conservative publicist and diplomat.⁵¹ Often regarded as one of the first historicist reactions to natural law doctrine, Humboldt's essay certainly does anticipate many of the themes historicists would later play off against the rationalism of the French Revolution. It is noteworthy that it appeared before Rehberg and Gentz wrote their

attacks on revolutionary ideology, and indeed before Gentz's translation of Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* appeared in Germany.⁵²

Humboldt's essay expresses his profound skepticism that any constitution founded solely on principles of natural law will last. The aim of the National Assembly was to establish a completely new constitution for France, one founded entirely on the principles of reason. "But no constitution that reason founds, as it were *a priori*, according to some preconceived plan, can succeed—even assuming that it has unlimited power to give reality to its ideas; only that constitution can prosper that grows out of the struggle between reason and a more powerful contingency." (78). In defending this point, Humboldt was very careful not to impugn the principles of the National Assembly, still less their applicability. For the sake of argument he assumes that (1) the constitution of the National Assembly is founded on the principles of reason, and that (2) the members of the National Assembly were careful in how to implement their constitution, not neglecting to consider the present circumstances of France (78–9). The crucial question, Humboldt argues, is not whether this constitution is applicable to real conditions, still less whether it is rational in principle, but whether it can last, i.e., whether it can provide an *enduring* constitution for France. And here he has the gravest doubts. The problem is that there is no historical continuity between the new constitution and the past one. The new constitution is supposed to follow directly from the older one; but these constitutions are utterly opposed to one another. There is no bridge, no transition between them (79). The people of France have been accustomed for centuries to the old, and no one can expect them to change their beliefs and traditions overnight. Yet all enduring change has to proceed from the inner disposition of the people (79–80).

Apart from the lack of historical continuity, Humboldt, like Möser, has more general doubts about the powers of reason to direct and control the social and political world. Reason provides at best only the most general principles; but it cannot derive the particular cases that fall under it (79). These particular cases belong to the realm of contingency or accident (*Zufall*), which falls outside the jurisdiction of reason. It is just this realm of accident, however, that is so powerful in the social and political world. How the future is shaped by the present, and the present by the past, is determined largely by accident. A wise reason recognizes these limits: it does not attempt to change the course of history but adapts to it and does nothing more than stimulate the powers already inherent in it (80). Humboldt envisages history as a constant struggle between domination and liberation (81–2). People sometimes subjugate themselves to a ruler in order to achieve their ends; but once they attain their goal, they regain the feeling for their own worth and power, and soon get rid of their masters. Since this pattern often

recurs, we must assume that the state is not the product of rational plan but only the result of history (82).

The need for historical continuity for political stability, the inescapably contingent realm of particularity which escapes rational control, the state as the product of history rather than reason—all these were central themes of the historicist critique of natural law. From the argument in “Ideen über Staatsverfassung” one would expect Humboldt to fall in line with the later historicists (Savigny, Ranke and Droysen) who rejected the natural law tradition entirely. But it is in just this respect that Humboldt foils our expectations; he was still too much a child of the eighteenth century. Only a year after writing his essay, in considering the relation between theory and practice in his *Ideen zu einem Versuch, die Grenzen der Wirksamkeit des Staats zu bestimmen*, Humboldt came to altogether more optimistic conclusions about the powers of reason in politics. Now that the ideals in question were his own, it seemed, the whole question of the relationship between theory and practice had to be rethought. Rather than stressing the impotency of reason to control the social and political world, as he did in the earlier essay, Humboldt now does the very opposite: he emphasizes that historical change is the result of human reason. We are now told that the greatest revolutions in history came from the periodic revolutions in the human spirit (237), that all the major changes in the shape of the earth have stemmed from human activity, and that these changes are good simply because they derive from our “inner” (i.e., rational) powers (238). Humboldt continues to teach that people are formed by social and political conditions, which should be carefully taken into account before introducing broad reforms (238–9); but he now warns more against thinking that people cannot be changed at all and that we must just accept the status quo. Reformers will affect lasting and stable change, he argues, provided that they first work on people's inner character and dispositions; once people's attitudes change, they will be prepared for the change in their social and political institutions (239). Humboldt then lays down two general precepts to achieve lasting reform according to general principles: first, apply principles of pure theory to reality only when sure they will achieve their intended consequences; second, make certain that each reform is preceded by change in the character and ideas of the people (239). Nowhere does Humboldt question the principles of natural law; indeed, they are now made into the ideal toward which every state should strive. He reminds us:

It should never be forgotten that natural and universal law is the only foundation for all positive law, and that it must therefore be constantly referred to, and—to invoke a principle of right that is the basis of all others—no one, ever and in any matter whatsoever, can have the right to direct the person or property of others without their consent. (243)

Humboldt's faith in natural law was not simply a lingering relic of the *Aufklärung*, a doctrine dispensable to the central direction of this thinking. Rather, it was the foundation for his own ethics. Humboldt famously wrote in the *Ideen*: “The true

end of a human being...is the highest and proportional development of his powers to a whole.” (106). The development of one's powers as a whole means, he then explained, realizing one's unique character, developing one's individuality (*Eigenthümlichkeit*). The basis of this individualist ethic, it turns out, is nothing less than natural law. For, in defending this ethic, Humboldt firmly endorsed the central principle behind the natural law tradition: “The best human operations are those which most truly imitate the operations of nature.” (101). Since the nature of things consists in their ideas, i.e., the concept or notion of each individual thing, it follows that right conduct should consist in realizing those ideas, i.e., in developing the form of our individuality.⁵³ Hence, for Humboldt, unlike Kant, the basis of ethics derives from metaphysics, which teaches us the nature of things.

5. Neo-classicism and hermeneutics

After abruptly quitting his post with the Prussian government in 1791, Humboldt resolved to devote himself entirely to his own education. Although he had little schooling in ancient Greek, he resolved to acquire a mastery of the classics. To this end, sometime in the summer of 1792, he made a trip to Halle to see F.A. Wolf, professor of classics and foremost philologist of his age.⁵⁴ Soon Humboldt became Wolf's friend and favorite student; for the next year and half he would devote himself entirely to classical studies.⁵⁵ Under Wolf's close supervision, Humboldt acquired a thorough training in ancient Greek. As a result, like Ranke and Droysen after him, Humboldt came to history from the perspective of classic philology. It was from studying ancient Greek literature that he learned to understand the past, which was for him just another text.

Wolf taught Humboldt not only classical literature but a whole approach to understanding history. Raised in the hermeneutical tradition,⁵⁶ Wolf had stressed the great importance of placing a work in its historical context. He taught that the proper understanding of a text required not only knowing the niceties of the original language, but also putting oneself in the same position as its author, seeing the world as he saw it from a Roman or Greek perspective. The first rule of textual interpretation was “Place yourself in the condition and the sequence of thought of he who is

writing.”⁵⁷ The goal was to enlarge ourselves, to widen our horizons, to view things from the standpoint of another age and culture. The great sin was therefore anachronism, imposing upon the past the values and prejudices of our own day. Although Humboldt had already professed such a method in his 1791 essay, it was Wolf who would teach him how to practice it on specific texts.

Despite such a valuable training, Wolf's legacy proved ambivalent for Humboldt, for it contained a profound and inescapable tension. Wolf was a champion not only of the method of understanding of the hermeneutical tradition, but also of Winckelmann's and Lessing's neo-classicism. According to their neo-classicism, the ancient Greek classics have a canonical status, i.e., they set standards of aesthetic excellence for all cultures and epochs. For Winckelmann, the only path forward for modern painting and sculpture was the imitation of the ancient Greeks; and for Lessing, modern tragedy could do no better than follow the principles of Aristotle's *Poetics*. Such neo-classicism clashed, however, with the hermeneutical tradition. For that tradition demands understanding a past author from his own standpoint, according to the values and beliefs of his own culture, and it forbids setting up some other culture as a tribunal of criticism. Since that method demands accepting *any* culture on its own terms, it would seem to make the ancient Greeks just one culture like any other. More simply, the hermeneutical tradition recommends seeing each culture as a unique, incomparable whole; but neo-classicism makes ancient Greek culture the standard for all others. We have already seen how Herder, who had also been schooled in the hermeneutic tradition, made it a weapon to criticize neo-classicism and the aesthetics of imitation.⁵⁸

The young Humboldt was torn by the tensions in Wolf's legacy. Like Wolf, Humboldt had affirmed not only the hermeneutical method, but also Winckelmann's and Lessing's neo-classicism. No one in the *Goethezeit*, not even Friedrich Schlegel, was so enraptured by the cult of *Hellas*. What Schiller once said about Schlegel—that he suffered from “*Griechomanie*”—applied many times over to the young Humboldt. In Humboldt's case, the tension was even more taunt, even more inescapable, because of his advocacy of the principle of individuality. This principle requires that each nation, like each person, should develop its own unique individuality, that it should realize the “idea” behind its cultural values and traditions. But if this is so, does not following a neo-classical model involve self-betrayal, a forfeiture of cultural autonomy? All this left Humboldt with a disturbing question: How to square his neo-classicism with his hermeneutics? How to reconcile neo-classicism with the principle of individuality? Painfully aware of the tension, Humboldt struggled to resolve it in some of his early neo-classical writings.

The earliest and most important of these writings is his 1792 “Über das Studium des Alterthums, und des Griechischen insbesondere.”⁵⁹ The aim of this short and crude sketch, which grew directly out of Humboldt's collaboration with Wolf,⁶⁰ was to explain the value of studying antiquity, especially the ancient Greeks. One major reason to study the ancient Greeks, Humboldt argues, is that it provides all the advantages of studying history in general: it widens one's knowledge of humanity, sharpens one's power of judgment, improves one's character. The greatest advantage of all, however, is that gives insight into the “*biography of a nation*.” By the “biography of a nation” Humboldt means “its [a nation's] character in all its aspects, and in its whole context, not only the reciprocal relations of individual characteristics among one another, but their relations to external circumstances, whether as causes or effects” (256). What, we might ask, is the value of knowing such a biography? Humboldt explains that it is not simply *what* we learn but *how* we learn that proves so beneficial. To know the character of a whole nation it is necessary to bring all of our powers into motion. We have to learn a language, refine our aesthetic sense, sharpen our intellect, widen our imagination. Whoever studies an entire culture will enlarge himself: “The apprehender must make himself in a certain manner similar to what he wants to apprehend.” (262)

Apart from all these advantages, Humboldt saw the study of antiquity as the starting point for a much wider knowledge of humanity, for what he called a “philosophical knowledge of man.” He was referring, of course, to his philosophical anthropology, which he had already sketched in his 1791 essay. Such an anthropology, he explained, would consist in “knowledge of the various intellectual, sensitive and moral human powers, the modifications they acquire through one another, their possible kinds of correct and incorrect relations, and their relation to external circumstances” (257). This knowledge, Humboldt argued, would be of value for the historian, philosopher and artist (258–60). But its greatest value would be in promoting the highest good itself: “the highest proportional development of all human powers” (261). Hence Humboldt believed that the study of antiquity would promote nothing less than the highest good; through examining the culture of the ancient world, we would see how it is possible to cultivate the intellectual, moral and aesthetic powers of all human beings.

As stated so far, Humboldt's argument seems scarcely convincing. It seems vulnerable to two objections. First, granted that there are such values in studying a foreign culture, why is it necessary to study the ancient Greeks? It would seem that the same values could be promoted by studying any past culture. Second, it seems a stretch, to

say the least, to claim general anthropological knowledge simply on the basis of studying the ancient Greeks. The ancient Greeks were after all only one culture, so that the study of them should give knowledge of only one form of humanity.

Aware of these objections, Humboldt devotes much of his essay to replying to them. He admits that, to some extent, the same values could be achieved by studying other cultures; and he also concedes that a general knowledge of humanity is best fostered by “the comparison of all nations from all places and times” (264). Nevertheless, he insists that there is something special about the ancient Greeks, such that if we study them we will develop our powers to a greater degree and acquire a more direct knowledge of humanity. The ancient Greeks were, Humboldt contends, paragons of humanity, and as such represent humanity in general (264). To support this bold claim, Humboldt lays down criteria a nation must satisfy to be such a model, viz., a refined aesthetic sense, the great importance given to *Bildung*, its character shows unity-in-variety, and so on (264–5). The Greeks alone, he argues, satisfy all these criteria. He also gives several reasons why the ancient Greeks were unique in the preeminence they gave to *Bildung*, viz., their religion tolerated dissent and fostered an aesthetic sense, their political institutions required participation, the competition among the city-states fostered physical and intellectual achievement (271–5).

All these arguments on behalf of the Greeks are rather weak, however. On the basis of Humboldt's own criteria, it would be easy to make the case for the equal merits of other cultures—say, the French in the Age of Louis XIV, the English in the Age of Elizabeth—because they too showed aesthetic sense, cultivated to a high degree their moral and intellectual powers, and so on. Like Winckelmann, Humboldt claimed that, because they were innocent of the corruptions of modern life, the Greeks were closer to nature (268–9). But this raised the troublesome question of how any culture is more *natural* than another, especially when all educate and cultivate people to the same extent?

Among those unconvinced by Humboldt's arguments were his friends. Asking for comments, he sent his manuscript to Wolf, Schiller and K.T. Dalberg, who all proved frank with their criticism. Skeptical of Humboldt's extreme neo-classicism, Schiller and Dalberg pointed out the tension with his principle of individuality. Dalberg recommended that each nation study its own literature rather than that of a foreign culture; otherwise, he said, one would be like that well-travelled Leipziger who knows much about the deserts of Araby but nothing about Leipzig.⁶¹ While Schiller acknowledged the pre-eminent virtues of the Greeks, he added that the moderns had some virtues all their own, and that the ultimate goal of humanity should be to combine ancient with modern ideals.⁶² Rather than feeling defensive about these remarks, Humboldt took them in good part and resolved to take them into account in his later work.

Schiller's critical comment proved fateful and fruitful, both for himself and Humboldt. They were the starting point for Schiller's famous essay "Über naive und sentimentalische Dichtung," which he would write several years later.⁶³ Schiller's tract was first and foremost a critique of neo-classicism, not least that espoused by Humboldt. Its central argument is that ancient or naive poetry and modern or sentimental poetry represent complementary but equally valid aesthetic attitudes toward nature, so that one should not be judged by the standards of the other. Naive poetry imitates a nature that is given or present to it; sentimental poetry idealizes, and expresses a longing to return to, a nature that has been lost. While naive poetry is characteristic of the ancients because they lived in immediate harmony with nature, sentimental poetry is characteristic of the moderns because, with the growth of culture, they have lost that harmony but strive to return to it. Since these forms of poetry have distinct aspirations, arising from distinct cultures, one alone cannot be the canonical form of all poetry.

While writing his essay Schiller was in frequent correspondence with Humboldt, who commented at length on his argument. Seeing Schiller's point, Humboldt began to soften his classicism and to recognize some of the *sui generis* values of modern culture. He now admitted that there was "a single, but essential flaw" to Greek poetry: that because it carefully reflected the object as it is given in nature, it failed to completely refashion it in a new form, and so was less creative than modern poetry.⁶⁴ Remarkably, when Humboldt finally received Schiller's essay, he expressed his complete agreement with it.⁶⁵ It would seem safe to infer, therefore, that Schiller had convinced Humboldt of the characteristic aesthetic virtues of modern culture. But, as we shall soon see, Humboldt's neo-classicism would prove incurable.

6. Aims and methods of anthropology

As important as classical philology was for Humboldt, the field was not entirely suited to him and did not address his deeper interests. What especially attracted him to Greek culture in the first place was his anthropological interests. The point of the study of the Greeks was to show "humanity in antiquity," and as such its task was only to provide material for an anthropology. It is not surprising, therefore, that Humboldt began to turn more toward anthropology itself, which was the basis for all his interest in antiquity and history. In December 1796 he wrote a revealing letter to Wolf where he set forth the reasons for this turn in his studies.⁶⁶ He confessed that he was ashamed

by his lack of productivity, especially after Wolf had done so much to help him; but he felt that this had much to do with not finding his true interests. These did not lie in classical philology, as he originally thought, because he did not have the requisite historical learning of someone like Wolf; they also did not lie in philosophy, because he had no real talent or taste for analyzing concepts. His special interests and strengths, he now realized, lay in “knowledge and judgment of human character in all its diverse forms.” He then told Wolf that his most important project now lay in “a comparative anthropology,” whose task would be the comparison of “the differences of mental organization of the different classes of human beings and individuals.”

The letter to Wolf was more retrospective than predictive, more a statement of interests already pursued than those still in gestation. For already in the late summer of 1795 Humboldt had sketched the general principles of his anthropology in a short essay, “Plan einer vergleichenden Anthropologie.”⁶⁷ True to title, this essay outlines a plan for a comparative anthropology. It was the first attempt to realize that project Humboldt had conceived years earlier, and that had already made its appearance, if only implicitly, in the “Studium” essay. Now, however, Humboldt was much more explicit about the goals, methods and problems of such a science, and outlines them in some detail. But, as usual, Humboldt's “Plan” remained just that: the project was never executed, the essay never published.

The aim of comparative anthropology, Humboldt wrote, is to ascertain “the individuality of the moral characters of the diverse forms of humanity” (377); it is to discover “the character of whole classes of people, especially those of nations and times” (384). The comparative anthropologist would presuppose knowledge of the generic traits of humanity; but his specific goal was to know the individual differences between its various forms (377). He would distinguish between the accidental and essential traits of an individual form, determine the causes of its essential traits, and then trace the course of their development. Humboldt's anthropologist had not only a scientific but also a moral mission; his aim was not only to know but also to promote individuality, i.e., to encourage the development of the most diverse forms of realizing humanity (384). Hence the comparative anthropologist would seek in each form of humanity its implicit “ideal” (*Ideal*). This ideal would be not only the specific character but also the goal for a specific nation or culture; it was the unique form of its individuality that it *should* cultivate and propagate.

Prima facie Humboldt's comparative anthropology has no direct relevance to history. Its subject matter need not be in the past; and, in principle, the comparative anthropologist can limit himself to treating cultures of the present alone. Nevertheless, Humboldt insists that there is the most intimate connection between comparative anthropology and history: namely, the former is really the foundation for the latter. In other words: although anthropology is not always nor necessarily historical, all history is

always or necessarily anthropological. History is indeed only a branch of anthropology: it is the anthropology of the past. While the characteristic subject matter of anthropology is the character of a nation, that of history is a nation as it develops in time. Hence Humboldt's remark in the "Studium" essay that the subject matter of history is "*the biography*" of a nation.

Given the importance of comparative anthropology for history, Humboldt's theory about the methods and problems of anthropology are crucial for his historiographical views. What Humboldt wrote about these methods and problems in 1795 he later applied to history in 1821. To achieve his goal of determining the specific character of a culture or nation, Humboldt insisted that the comparative anthropologist follow a method that is both philosophical and empirical, a synthesis of thinking and observation. He stressed that in proper science the intellect and senses are closely interdependent; each has a necessary role to play, and neither achieves its task without the other. In effect, he endorses the old Kantian adage: concepts without intuitions are empty; intuitions without concepts are blind (386). The anthropologist has to follow a philosophical method because the character he studies is never given directly in experience; it is an ideal that is abstracted from the contingencies and details of sensation and that unifies a variety of distinct characteristics into a meaningful whole (388–9). The anthropologist proceeds like a philosopher, insofar as he uses his intellect more than his senses. He employs his powers of abstraction, which remove the irrelevant details of experience; and he wields his powers of conception, which grasp all these details into a meaningful whole. Humboldt also insists, however, that his anthropologist also has to follow a strict method of observation. After all, the ideal is only nature insofar as it is extended in all directions and freed from all limitations (389). The anthropologist has to determine the character of classes of people with as much care and strictness as the botanist determines races and varieties in the plant and animal world (390). If he is hasty in abstracting and conceiving his kinds, he will be in danger of forcing nature into a pro-Crustean bed. Still, Humboldt is more concerned about the opposite danger: that the observer will not use sufficient powers of abstraction and as a result he will conceive of certain accidental and external characteristics as necessary and internal (390–1). To ensure that his method achieves the proper mix of the philosophical and empirical, Humboldt lays down specific methodological guidelines. His most basic rules are as follows: (1) the anthropologist must take data from all sources, so that they cover the human being as a whole; (2) he must focus on individual traits, those which concern the relation and direction of his powers; (3) he must consider a human being in his intrinsic qualities and not in his usefulness for external ends; (4) he should treat character in a genetic manner; (5) he should proceed from facts and utterances to general qualities, and from these to his inner character; (6) the contingent qualities must be distinguished from the necessary ones; (7) he must grasp together all the individual characteristics and find the general concept behind them (391–2). Not surprisingly, this combined philosophical and empirical method will later appear in Humboldt's later essays on historical methodology.

In "Plan" Humboldt formulates more explicitly a major problem that had already troubled him in the "Studium" essay: how to reconcile the universal with the individual in history? The goal of his comparative anthropology, as he sometimes puts it, is to show how the single ideal of humanity is presented throughout the multiplicity of its individual forms (379, 388). Each of these individual forms is a subordinate form of the single ideal of humanity, which somehow appears in each individual form. One of the primary problems of comparative anthropology is therefore to show how there can be identity-in-difference: one single ideal of humanity behind all these individual forms. For Humboldt, this problem was not only intellectual but moral, rooted in the most basic demands of everyday life. He points out that every person faces in their life two conflicting demands: on the one hand, every person wants to develop their individuality, to realize their unique traits; on the other hand, they also want to remain true to reason, the ideal of humanity, which aspires toward universality. We achieve individuality only by embracing limitation, by accepting the specific ways of life of our community; but we achieve universality only through freedom, by lifting ourselves above the limitations of our specific way of life and seeing things from a broader and more cosmopolitan perspective (385). How are we to resolve the conflict between these demands? In "Plan" Humboldt still has no answer to this intractable issue; we will see how he eventually dealt with it in his philosophy of language.

7. The spirit of the age

Shortly after writing "Plan" in the late summer of 1795, Humboldt conceived a way of realizing his project for a comparative anthropology. On February 2, 1796, he wrote Schiller that, after reading a book entitled *Geist des 18 Jahrhunderts*, he had the idea for a series of essays for the *Horen*, the literary and historical journal that they were now co-editing.⁶⁸ The task of these essays would be to take stock of the state of humanity as it neared the end of the century. They would consider the progress of humanity until now, how far it had come since antiquity and how far it still needed to go to realize its ideal: the full and harmonious development of all human powers. Humboldt stressed that this would be not merely an *historical* project, one that would simply describe the present state of humanity, but also a *philosophical* project, one that would attempt to determine the very idea of humanity amid its various appearances. Initially, he conceived his project as collaborative, a series of essays written by himself and others; but, fearing that this would dilute and confuse the central idea, he eventually resolved to write a single work by himself.⁶⁹ The work would appear in two parts: the first would describe the general spirit of the age; the second would examine in detail its various aspects. It was only with the greatest difficulty, however, that Humboldt found time

and energy to turn to the task. Only in the early winter of 1797, a year after its initial conception, did he put pen to paper.

The product of Humboldt's efforts was his largest and most substantive work on history, *Das achtzehnte Jahrhundert*.⁷⁰ It too was unfinished; all that Humboldt wrote for it was a draft for the introduction. The title is misleading. Humboldt does not sketch the spirit of his age, but attempts to determine whether, and how, it is possible for the historian to describe the spirit of any age. The task of the introduction, he explains, is to examine the problems and difficulties of writing a characteristic (6). Hence, Humboldt's concern is not, strictly speaking, historical at all, but philosophical, a reflection on the aims and methods of writing history.

Humboldt begins his work by sketching a general concept of world history. Since it contains no reference to divine design, this concept is not providential; but it is decidedly teleological, referring to the ends of humanity. It is humanistic eschatology in the mold of a Condorcet, Kant, Schiller or Herder. Humboldt sees all history as following a plan, as moving toward a single end or common goal: "the continuous progression toward the perfection of man through the activity of reason." (6). He is confident that there can be progress toward the achievement of human perfection provided that reason takes increasing control over human affairs. The goal that reason sets for us, Humboldt argues, is "the highest, most determinate and harmonious development of all human powers" (15). The general striving of human reason, he explains, is the subordination of everything under laws. This subordination takes place in the realm of theory and practice: in theory, by explaining all events in nature according to general laws; and in practice, by making all human actions conform to general norms. When reason achieves its ideal, it will have finally eliminated "contingency from human life" (6). All actions will automatically conform to laws, just as all events in nature will be predictable according to them.

Unlike his later work, where he makes a sharp distinction between philosophy and history, Humboldt now thinks that the ideal historian is a *philosophical* historian, which he distinguishes from the historian proper. The task of the philosophical historian is to grasp the ideal of humanity, and the spirit or character of his age, the particular manner in which it realizes this ideal (2–3). While the historian proper has the task of determining the facts, the philosophical historian has to determine the spirit within them, the universal ideal behind them (3, 44). To grasp humanity in all its depth and breadth, Humboldt says, we need a combination of the philosophical and the historical, both "speculative reflection" and "practical observation" (3). Reflection is necessary to see the ideal or spirit behind events, whereas observation is necessary to know its external manifestations. So Humboldt's philosophical historian is essentially an historical anthropologist: just as the anthropologist defines the specific character of a people, the philosophical historian defines the specific character of his age. No less than the

anthropologist, the philosophical historian must grasp the general ideal of humanity, its inner essence, and see how it appears in many distinct forms. He must attempt to see how the single ideal of humanity differentiates itself into its varied shapes according to changing circumstances.

But Humboldt's philosophical historian has to do more than determine the general ideal of humanity. As if that were not enough, he also has to identify the specific form of humanity at a definite time and place. This form has its own unique identity, which it is the business of the historian to characterize. It is in *Das Achtzehnte Jahrhundert* that Humboldt goes to greatest pains to explain his central concept of the character or spirit of an age. Nowhere else does he give such a detailed explanation and justification of what it means to apply the concept of individuality to entire nations, cultures or epochs.

What, then, does Humboldt mean by the character or spirit of an age? He defines character (*Charakter*) as "those distinctive traits (*Eigenthumlichkeiten*)...that characterize human beings, considered as physical, intellectual and moral beings, not only in general but also in particular" (55). Character therefore comprises not only what distinguishes human beings from other species, but also what distinguishes a particular form of humanity from another. Humboldt further explains that character does not consist in the *specific kind* of power. Since all people possess the same basic powers, there is no difference between them regarding their kinds of powers (58–9). The specific differences between peoples consists more in the *relation* and *movement* of their powers (59). The relation between powers concerns which are active or passive, or which are dominant or recessive. The movement of our powers is the *manner* in which they are deployed, *how* they are exercised or developed (62); more precisely, it consists in the rapidity (how quickly or slowed they are used) or in the direction (whether toward ourselves or others) of their deployment. To describe the characteristic spirit of an age, then, the historian must focus upon the specific relations and movements in human powers, and more precisely how they differ from one age to another. Humboldt's explanations are suspect for the readiness with which they move from the individual to the general level. What would seem to be true only of individuals—the rapidity and direction of their powers—is applied on the level of the whole.

Although Humboldt sometimes wrote as if the task of the philosophical historian were only to describe the character of his age, there can be no doubt that he conceived his philosophical history not only as a scientific but also as an ethical enterprise. Its aim was not only to describe, but also to promote the development of humanity. We know how to contribute toward the progress of humanity, Humboldt believes, only if we know the characteristics of our age, how it differs from the past, its unique strengths and weaknesses. Only then will we be able to orient ourselves in history, to take stock of our situation, seeing how far we have come and where we need to go (15–16).

But the ethical dimensions of Humboldt's philosophy of history does not end here. He also saw his philosophical history in a *critical* role; its task was to provide universal rational standards to assess current social and political institutions. What should serve as

the philosopher's standard of judgment? Nothing less than the ideal of humanity, that common human essence that persisted throughout all the diverse forms in history. Despite Herder's warnings, Humboldt shows remarkably little concern that the philosopher's standards could be ethnocentric or historically conditioned, the values of his own age and culture generalized for all ages and cultures. He is confident that reason has the power to determine universal standards that hold for all times and places. Hence he states, as if it went without saying, that the philosopher should evaluate all epochs "according to the eternal laws of the good, true and beautiful." (37) He characterizes the universal criteria of judgment as follows: "Classical correctness, correspondence with the laws, which immediately flow from the nature of our soul's powers, and the higher and original perfection which imparts impulse to spirit and feeling." (41). Here again we witness the continuing hold of the natural law tradition on Humboldt's thinking.

But such confidence inevitably invites the question: How can the philosopher justify his standard of critique? How does he know that ideal of humanity that lies underneath so many different cultural and historical forms? Sometimes Humboldt writes as if this ideal were to be determined *a priori*, through rational reflection alone.⁷¹ But he also doubts that reason alone can determine anything specific about its ideals; and he is painfully aware of the pitfall of imposing *a priori* ideals upon the variety of empirical facts. The worst philosophical sin of them all, he writes, is when we measure the depth and breadth of reality according to the narrow compass of *a priori* concepts (87). So, to avoid this pitfall, Humboldt advises the philosophical historian to study all the details of history. We can determine the human ideal, he insists, only from what man has been or done (34). The historian should embark upon a study of statistics, but not in the haphazard manner in which it is usually pursued, but in a systematic manner, so that one examines and collects in an organized fashion all data regarding the economy, politics and domestic life of a nation (33). But as much as Humboldt recommends intensive empirical research, he is also aware that it is not sufficient for the general conclusions he desires. Simply recording and collecting facts does not allow us to see their broader significance. So we now bump up against the perennial dilemma behind all historical writing: one either imposes artificial concepts on a wealth facts, or one simply records facts without seeing their wider importance. The only middle path between these extremes, Humboldt argues, is a constant interplay between empirical research and conceptual formulation. The historian should begin with a close study of the facts, which he then attempts to formulate in general concepts; he should then refine these concepts after checking them against a closer study of the facts; and so on, until concepts and facts eventually match (47, 49–50, 57–8). Hence, just as in the anthropology essay, Humboldt again insists upon the complementary role of philosophical reflection and observation. Without such reflection, the historian cannot grasp

the inner forces of history or understand their moral and political significance; and without experience or observation, he indulges in sterile speculation (52). In the past, philosophers have treated the spirit of an age in a much too general manner, whereas historians have dwelled too much on the details. The ideal would be to combine the two approaches, so that one focuses only on those facts that illustrate general themes, and accepts only those general ideas that are confirmed by extensive induction.

Of all tasks of the philosophical historian, the most difficult for Humboldt is to determine the *essential* characteristics of humanity, an epoch or a particular person. To know the essential characteristics presupposes that we can distinguish the constant and necessary from changing and accidental ones (96–7). There are two dangers here. One, we abstract from all individual differences, as if the only essential characteristics were very general. Two, we elevate an individual case into a general kind, as if its accidental and changing features were necessary and permanent (58). We know from our everyday experience how difficult it is to determine the truly essential characteristics of a particular person. People are often oppressed by circumstances, they are distracted by routines and obligations, and lack the means to pursue their greatest aspirations (96). It is indeed impossible, Humboldt thinks, to distinguish between nature and nurture (91). We know a person's character only after it has been formed, when it is impossible to separate the effects of environment from those of birth.

After reading Humboldt's detailed and vivid account of all the problems of determining essential characteristics, it would seem as if the whole enterprise were doomed; but no sooner does Humboldt finish his account than he throws out a remarkable proposal for solving them. To know the essential characteristics of a person, he suggests, it is only necessary to seek the *best* and *highest* things they have achieved in their lives; one should then put all these things together into a single concept; that will be their essential attribute (98). Why should the essential characteristics of a person correspond to their highest ambitions and achievements? A moment's reflection reveals the rationale behind Humboldt's proposal. The essential characteristics of a person are those that promote his ideal of humanity. Hence the rationale behind Humboldt's proposal is moral rather than metaphysical. There are indeed passages in *Das achtzehnte Jahrhundert* where Humboldt seems to endorse just this conclusion, where he implies that the criteria of essentiality depend on the ends and interests of the historian. Hence he writes that the concept of the contingent in human character is relative, becoming narrower or wider in meaning according to the standpoint of the historian (109). The problem of determining essential characteristics—an apparently insolvable metaphysical conundrum—is then resolved through invoking a moral principle.

Arguably, though, Humboldt's problem has only been thrown back another step. For the question still remains: How does he justify his ideal of humanity? There is a circularity in his argument: we justify essential powers in terms of some ideal of perfection; but we justify that ideal of perfection in terms of some essential powers. We cannot determine perfection simply through the realization of *any* power, given that realizing some would be harmful or even immoral. Nowhere in *Das achtzehnte*

Jahrhundert does Humboldt provide a solution to this circularity. For that reason his account of essential human powers is left hanging in mid-air.

This is not, however, the only problem with his theory of history. Another issue concerns his conception of the powers of reason: whether reason has the power to explain, control or direct the events of history. Despite Humboldt's faith in the universal status of reason, and despite his belief that progress in history depends on guiding human affairs according to reason, he still believes that the powers of reason are ultimately very limited. There is an important extent to which reason will never be able to eradicate contingency, either in its ability to understand or to control human beings. This is because Humboldt firmly believes that the inner self, the heart of human character, is ultimately inexplicable and mysterious, forever inaccessible to rational comprehension or control. Echoing Kant's famous statement in the *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* that the real morality of our actions are hidden from us,⁷² Humboldt writes that the final source of a person's most important ideas, the ultimate reason behind their most weighty decisions, remain forever obscure, and indeed to the person himself (88). Like Kant, Humboldt was an incompatibilist about human freedom. He held that our decisions and deliberations have their origin in a power of spontaneity and choice that does not fall under universal laws of nature (7, 89). This incalculable power served as a constraint upon the statesman, who could never hope to direct all human actions; and as a limit upon the historian, who could never hope to predict them. Although Humboldt maintains that the historian can determine general laws, he is careful to limit the validity of these laws to general trends or collective bodies; he denies that they apply infallibly to particular actions; given that a person always has the power to do otherwise, we can never be sure that a generalization will work on a specific occasion (90).⁷³ Hence, ironically, for all Humboldt's faith in the powers of reason to explain and control human affairs, there remained something radically contingent, something reason could never explain or control: the inner core of the personality, the source of reason itself.

8. The unrepentant classicist

From 1802 to 1808 Humboldt held a post in Rome as Prussian ambassador to the Papal See. He felt entirely at home in Rome, which was for him the visual, palpable embodiment of the ancient world. Under these circumstances, it is not surprising that Humboldt was inspired to return to classical studies. He again took up his earlier projects of translating Pindar and Aeschylus, and he renewed his interest in ancient history. Several books on ancient history were planned, whose aim was to characterize the Greek spirit or character, to explain how its art, poetry, religion, customs and institutions differed from those of other peoples. Although these books were never

completed, a few fragments remain—*Latium und Hellas* (1806), *Ueber den Character der Griechen* (1807), and *Geschichte des Verfalls und Unterganges der griechischen Freistaaten* (1807)—which give us a good idea of his thinking.

Given the critical reaction to his earlier “Studium” essay, and given his agreement with Schiller's argument in *Über naive und sentimentalische Dichtung*, one would expect Humboldt's perspective on the ancient world to be reformed, at the very least more realistic and restrained.⁷⁴ But the very opposite is the case. Such was the inspiration of Rome, and such was the hold of Winckelmann and Wolf upon him, that Humboldt does not retreat at all from his older views; he only reaffirms them, and indeed in the most uncompromising manner, making few or no concessions to the values of the modern age. The central thesis behind all these surviving fragments is that the ancient Greeks achieved the height of perfection in all fields of culture, so that they are still models for us in the modern age.

Humboldt's apotheosis of the Greek culture appears in its most exaggerated and excessive form in the introduction to his *Geschichte des Verfalls der griechische Freistaaten*.⁷⁵ Here we are told that the Greeks attained human perfection in everything regarding the “highest and richest of human existence,” and that they are “models of beauty and greatness” (188). But Humboldt now goes so far as even to divinize the Greeks: “Every breath of the ancients is a breath of humanity brightly illuminated by divinity...” (195). Since they were divine, we should not even compare ourselves with them, because “*mit Göttern/soll sich nicht messen/irgend ein Mensch*” (196). Rather than treating the ancient Greeks as one culture like all others, Humboldt insists that they were a unique, exceptional people, and as such cannot be studied in the same manner as we would study all other peoples (188). Of course, the ancient Greeks were really mortal and they too knew all the troubles of life; but there was something about them that elevated them above the commonplace, and indeed above all other peoples. What was this something? It was, Humboldt reveals, the “idealistic in their nature” (*das Idealische in ihrer Natur*). The Greeks touch us so deeply because they embody that ideal after which we ourselves strive (190). They are a model for us, because their ideals—freedom and the development of all our human powers—are also *our own*. Humboldt concedes that we should be able to strive after these ideals in our own way, along different paths than the Greeks (190). But this is the only concession that he makes to the rights of modern individuality. Although we have the same ideals as the Greeks, we should never hope to realize them to the same degree, and we still cannot compare ourselves with them. The moderns and the ancients, Humboldt maintains, belong to completely different spheres (191). They stand to one another as art does to reality: the Greeks represent all the perfection of art, the ideal, whereas the moderns are only a pale

imitation of them, the crude reality (193). The Greeks gave a full expression to the ideal, whereas we moderns can only point to it.

Now and then, amid all this Grecomania, a defensive tone appears in Humboldt's *Geschichte des Verfalls*. He was self-conscious that his paean to the Greeks would seem like "a partisan exaggeration" (190; cf. 197); indeed, he was almost embarrassed to make it the introduction to what was intended to be an essentially historical work. And so, time and again, he attempts to convince his reader that his encomium is entirely justified. We are told that the Greeks are exceptional because they realize the ideal, because they are perfectly natural, because they achieve a harmony of sense and reason, and so on. But all these general concepts only push the demand for explanation back another step; they do not answer the critical reader's question why *only* the Greeks achieved these ideals, and why other cultures could not have realized them to the same degree in very different ways. There is a remarkable passage where Humboldt appears to concede to modern culture a singular virtue: passion (192). Here one detects the lasting effect of Schiller's argument in *Über naive und sentimentalische Dichtung*. However, this concession is almost lip-service, overshadowed by Humboldt's overwhelming preference for the Greeks.

Humboldt's account of Greek culture in *Latium und Hellas* is remarkable for its willingness to turn a blind eye to some of the more morally questionable aspects of Greek culture. After praising Greek poetry, religion and manners, Humboldt comes to the awkward subject of Greek pederasty or *Knabenliebe* (III, 158). He admits that no one nowadays would want to defend it. But he still finds it excusable, even admirable, in its context, because it was "a source of beautiful feeling and great feelings and ideas." Fortunately, the Greeks were free of "a certain pedantry and gravity of morality," and they were willing to let their imaginations and passions roam "in free play"; for, by this means, they were able to scale the ladder of all human feelings that eventually lead to the noblest and highest. Some, Humboldt notes, have tried to explain Greek pederasty from the limited education of women in Greek society. But he does not accept this explanation because he thinks that history shows examples of highly educated and talented Greek women (159). The source of the custom rather lies in "the richness of Greek sensibility" and the fact that women were excluded from gymnasia and schools. Humboldt admits that the ancient Greeks did not fully respect women, and that in this regard the Romans proved more noble than they; but he immediately limits the force of this concession by saying that at least the Greeks did not give men unlimited rights over women, as the Romans had done. Regarding slavery, Humboldt has little to say, except that the Greeks treated their slaves gently (160). He admits that the cultural achievements of the ancient Greeks were possible because of slavery, which permitted free men to devote themselves to politics and the life of the mind. But the crucial question whether slavery is the necessary price to pay for cultural achievement and self-realization he does not address.

Given his faith in the superiority of Greek culture, one would expect Humboldt to provide some kind of general explanation for its superiority, some account of the social,

political or natural factors that favored the remarkable achievements of Greek culture. There are passages in *Latium und Hellas* where Humboldt implies—much like Winckelmann before him—that the superiority of Greek culture lay in its closeness to nature (148, 161, 162). The Greeks were more natural than other peoples because their free institutions allowed them to express their feelings, to direct their energies, and to develop their potentialities. But this Winckelmannian doctrine is more implied than stated, let alone argued for. When Humboldt does come to the question of how to explain Greek superiority he leaves his reader with nothing more than mystery and tautology. Greek character, like all character, is *sui generis*, and its origins are inexplicable. Attempts to explain the origins of national character are always failures, he argues, because the things that are supposed to be the causes of character are all too often its effects, or because other nations develop in different ways under the same conditions (164). The superiority of a nation lies in its individuality, he assures us, and it is precisely individuality that arises “by itself and through a miracle” (165). And so Humboldt concludes that the question really cannot be answered and leaves us with a trite tautology: “To the question, how that fascinating form of humanity blossomed only in Greece, there is no satisfactory answer. It was because it was.” (165).

In reading Humboldt's *Geschichte des Verfalls*, and indeed all his classical writings, it is impossible to suppress the suspicion of ethnocentrism, i.e., that he read into the Greeks his own cultural ideals. One suspects that what Humboldt writes about Greek culture does not derive from an objective study of Greek history, from considering Greek culture and character in all its facets and then making an impartial judgment about it. If this were so, it would be hard to ignore the more brutal facts of Greek life and culture, viz., its militarism, pedophilia, slavery and misogyny. Suspicion of ethnocentrism grows when we consider Humboldt's views about the special affinity between Greeks and Germans. In *Geschichte des Verfalls* Humboldt praises his compatriots for being not only the first but the only nation to have really fathomed the Greeks. Though separated from the ancient Greeks by more than 2,000 years, the modern Germans could understand them better than any other nation, even the ancient Romans (215). Such superior understanding, Humboldt surmised, rested on the close affinity between modern Germans and ancient Greeks. No nation was so close to the ancient Greeks in history, language, political constitution, manners and aesthetic sense than the Germans (185). Because of such deep affinities in culture, and because of such a deep understanding, the inevitable result was a profound Hellenic–Teutonic bond: “The Germans have attached themselves to the Greeks with an incomparably stronger and tighter bond than any other proximate time or nation.” (184)

After reaffirming his neo-classicism in Rome, Humboldt remained unrepentant for the rest of his life. His admiration for the Greeks never ceased, his belief in their canonical stature never wavered. This is all the more remarkable, because in his later years his admiration grew for two very different cultures. One of these cultures was ancient India. Like Friedrich Schlegel, Humboldt was amazed by the wisdom of ancient Indian poetry. He regarded Sanskrit as the mother tongue of all higher culture,

and the *Bhagavad-Gita* as one of the great masterpieces of world-literature.⁷⁶ The other culture was that of early Christianity. The older he became, the more he appreciated the Bible, which gave him solace. There was for him no richer and wiser book than the Bible, and no greater source of wisdom in times of trouble.⁷⁷ Nevertheless, though Humboldt's perspective widened, his faith in the Greeks stood firm and rigid. Even in his later years he does not question their canonical status.⁷⁸ Indeed, as we shall soon see, it will be part of the agenda of his philosophy of language to prove the superiority of ancient Greek, and with it classical civilization.

9. Philosophy of language

During the first years of his stay in Rome, 1802–8, Humboldt began to realize that his chief interest, and indeed vocation in life, lay with the study of language. All his earlier interests in philology, anthropology, philosophy and history seemed to revolve around the theme of language, so that he now found himself completely absorbed by the subject. He revealed to Brinkmann, October 22, 1803, his growing fascination with language:

My study of languages consumes me more than ever...The inner, secret, wonderful interconnection of all languages, and the great pleasure of entering into a new system of thought and feeling with each new language, attracts me immeasurably. Nothing has been so poorly studied as language; I believe that I have found a key that will show each of them to be interesting, and that will ease the path to all of them; you can find something of this in my little work on the Basques, but by far not everything. I must study an infinite amount, and it will probably never come to writing it down.⁷⁹

After the stay in Rome, language would remain, barring the inevitable distractions of politics, Humboldt's consuming interest for the rest of his life. From 1820 to 1835, in seclusion at his estate at Tegel, he would devote all his time and energy to the study of language. As it happened, Humboldt did write much about the subject; but, as usual, little was published. His main work, *Über die Kawi Sprache auf der Insel Java*, a three-volume tome of 2,000 pages, was incomplete and published posthumously from 1836 to 1839.⁸⁰

The concern with language grew gradually and naturally out of Humboldt's earlier interests. Its origins lay with his classical studies. Questions about translating Homer, and about how to learn Greek, made him reflect on the specific qualities of ancient Greek. This eventually led him to ponder how one could describe the specific qualities of any language. It was no easy matter to describe the unique qualities of a language: it was, he often said, like describing the distinctive characteristics of a face. This problem began to occupy Humboldt already by the 1790s. Hence he wrote Schiller, November 20, 1795: "I have long been concerned to find the categories that define the individualities of a language, and to seek the manner in which one can describe its specific character."⁸¹ Hence the earlier historical and anthropological problems of how to describe the individuality of an epoch or a culture were now extended to language. Humboldt's interest in language grew when he went to Paris in the autumn of 1797. Here Humboldt read the new editions of the works of Diderot and Condillac, and he met two French writers who had been working on language, Marie-Josph Degérando and Joseph-Dominique Garat.⁸² All these thinkers stressed the importance of an empirical study of language, and its significance for thought and culture, in ways that could have only stimulated Humboldt. His travels to Spain in 1799, and in the Basque country in 1801, extended his interest in other languages, especially Provençal, Basque and Spanish, which now seemed to him no less worthy of study than ancient Greek. From Madrid in December 1799 he wrote Wolf about his project for a comparative linguistics: "In the future I feel that I shall devote myself more exclusively to the study of language, and that a thorough and philosophical comparison of several languages is a work that my shoulders might bear after several years of study."⁸³

A decisive factor behind Humboldt's new interest was his growing recognition that language is the key to a nation's identity. The importance of language for a culture was an old theme of Hamann and Herder, and Humboldt would have found it restated by the French writers. His travels to Spain and the Basque country would have taught him the same point from direct personal experience. Whatever the origin of the theme, it meant that all his older anthropological and historical interests would now have to focus on language. If it is the task of the anthropologist to determine the unique qualities of a people, and if it is the business of the historian to determine the distinctive

characteristics of an epoch, then both anthropologist and historian have to study language, given it is so central to the mentality of a people and an epoch. The study of language now had to become an integral part of anthropology and history. Sure enough, in one of his first programmatic writings on language, his 1801/2 "Fragmente der Monographie über die Basken," Humboldt stressed the significance of language for history. After remonstrating against the common view that one should study only those languages which possess a good literature, he insisted that all languages, even the most "primitive", are worth examining for their own sake because they express the entire spiritual energy of a people. This was the pluralist, non-classicist side of Humboldt speaking. He summed up his new perspective in a single compelling sentence: "The study of [all] the languages of earth is the world history of the thoughts and feelings of mankind."⁸⁴

Another driving force behind Humboldt's devotion to language was his firm and old conviction about the close connection between thought and language. His earliest fragment on language, "Über Denken und Sprechen,"⁸⁵ which was written in the winter of 1795/6, took issue with Fichte's theory that thinking is possible without language, and that language consists in only arbitrary signs for pre-existing thoughts.⁸⁶ Like Herder, Humboldt argued that a person comes to self-awareness only through sensible signs, and that thinking has to be objectified in them. Language was for Humboldt, just as it was for Hamann and Herder, the meeting point of the mental and physical; the subjective or mental becomes objective or physical in the form of words.⁸⁷ *Pace* Haym and Cassirer, who overstate Humboldt's debts to Kant,⁸⁸ the close connection between thinking and speaking is not a Kantian theme but the very opposite: it was the stick with which Hamann and Herder beat the "purism of pure reason."⁸⁹ The source of this theme lies less in Kantian epistemology than in Humboldt's early vitalistic metaphysics, which made the mental and physical simply different degrees of organization and development of living force. According to this metaphysics, mind and body, and thinking and speaking as instances of them, are related to one another not as distinct, causally related events but as force and its manifestation.

The close connection between thinking and speaking made the study of language central to all the human sciences. All these sciences, in one form or another, treat human thinking; but since the chief instrument, expression and embodiment of

thinking is language, they will all have to focus, in one form or another, on language. It was Humboldt's insistence on the close connection between thinking and language, Droysen later argued, that placed the human sciences on a secure foundation.⁹⁰ For if the inner realm of thinking and feeling is embodied in the external signs and sounds of language, there is a reliable basis of inference from the latter to the former. If, *per contra*, following the old Cartesian dualism, signs are only effects of inner causes, there is no guarantee for the truth of our inferences; for the same causes can have different effects, the same effects different causes.

Because of its fundamental importance, Humboldt spent much effort trying to characterize the connection between thought and language.⁹¹ He realized that it is not one of simple or strict identity, as if thoughts just were words and conversely. This could not be the case because words are sometimes incorrect or poor expressions of thoughts. He also recognized that it is not merely causal, as if thoughts were causes of words and as if reading and listening to words were the cause of thoughts. Since cause and effect are logically separable from one another, this made the relationship too contingent and accidental. Humboldt's most common formulation for the connection is his thesis that "Language is the forming organ of human thought" (VII, 53). Language is the organ of thinking in the sense that it is an instrument that creates and fashions it. Just as a tool shapes its material, so language shapes thought. This means that thought becomes determinate—takes on a specific existence and meaning—only through its embodiment in words. Apart from words, the thought is only potential, inchoate, vague; but with words, it becomes actual, organized, determinate. In other words, true to Humboldt's basic theme, language *individualizes* thought.

Humboldt attempts to explain the precise mechanism by which thinking becomes language. His starting point is perfectly Kantian: that the objects of representation are not given to us but created by us (VII, 55). The explanation he gives of how we make the objects of representation is not, however, so Kantian, following more his own vitalist principles. If we are to have a thought or representation, Humboldt argues, it is necessary that we objectify it; but we objectify it when it becomes embodied in some visible or audible sign. Such is the connection between mind and body for Humboldt that thinking naturally expresses itself in sound; just as the thought captures the attention of the mind, so the sound focuses the nerves and energies of the body (VII, 53–4). So, when Humboldt states that speech is the organ of thinking he means this quite literally: it is the *physical tool* of thinking, i.e., the parts of the body (nerves, vocal chords, muscles) that fashion a sound. Once a speaker's sounds or signs are accepted and used by others, they become part of a system that has a power in its own right and that now guides the thinking of the speaker.⁹² Hence Humboldt stresses that language is

both dependent on, and independent of thought, that it has both subjective and objective status. It is dependent on the thinking of individuals, because a language exists and lives only through the speakers and writers that use it; but it is also independent of them because it has a structure of its own that governs their thinking, and that persists after them and indeed continues for whole generations (VI, 180–1).

Regarding the origin of language, Humboldt, like Herder, takes a middle position, opposing both the supernaturalist theory, which claims that language has a divine origin, and reductivist naturalistic theories, which hold that language arose either from convention or from the expressions of physical needs. His own theory is naturalistic but non-reductivist. With Herder, he holds that language originates from our characteristic nature as thinking or rational beings, and not from the expression of physical needs. We invented language, he claims, because we wanted to exercise our power of thinking, and because we wanted to communicate our thinking to others. Rather than arising from the expression and communication of animal needs, the creation of language requires nothing less than genius.⁹³ Since each language is an organic unity, he likens it to a work of art; and just as genius is required for the creation of art, so it is necessary for the creation of language (VII, 595–6). The genius is not, however, someone who has extraordinary non-human powers, but someone who expresses in words for the first time the ordinary human powers of thinking.

Against reductivists, Humboldt maintains that language arose all at once, that it is not the result of a natural evolution. Since each language is an organic unity, it cannot arise by slow accumulation, by adding one part to another over the centuries; rather, it is present as a whole, if only implicitly and potentially, so that when the first element was born all other elements were born with it.⁹⁴ The utterance of the very first word, as Humboldt puts it, presupposes and declares the whole language.⁹⁵ We understand the concept behind a single word only if we already possess the whole language. New material is not added; only what is already present is further refined and developed.⁹⁶ In making such bold claims, Humboldt does not mean to say that each language is complete and given, as if its entire structure and vocabulary were already latent in the mind; he does not deny that languages develop through stages, and that they become more complex and refined over time.⁹⁷ But he does maintain that its essential and characteristic structure is already potential and latent, so that the initial stages of its development are very rapid. Since language is crucial for our development as rational

beings, the capacity for it lies innate within all of us; it cannot be simply a form of learned behavior that gradually developed over the ages.

Although Humboldt's theory is naturalistic, it also lays down very definite limits to naturalistic explanation. While Humboldt stresses that the origin of language arises from all too natural, all too human powers, he also emphasizes that we cannot explain the origin of these powers themselves. The source of language ultimately lies for him in human creativity, whose causes we cannot penetrate and whose effects we cannot predict.⁹⁸ Since it arises from spontaneity and intelligence, language cannot be the product of nature or culture alone. For this reason, one cannot ask why there are not more or other forms of language.⁹⁹ In the end, all explanation comes to an "independent and original...cause," whose mysterious operations arise from a "freely developing principle of life" (*frei entwickelndes Lebensprincip*). Why this principle acts remains utterly obscure to us, because we cannot ascribe purposes or ends to this activity. So, just as in his theory of history Humboldt held that the ultimate causes of human actions are mysterious to us, so in his theory of language he maintains that the final source of language is obscure to us. In this respect Humboldt's theory of language is a remarkable relapse from Herder's, whose naturalism is more radical. As we have seen, in his 1772 treatise Herder had attempted a proto-Darwinian, naturalistic account of the origin of reason itself.¹⁰⁰

However eager Humboldt was to define the limits of the philosophy of language, he was also confident in its powers of explanation, especially its ability to shed light on some basic problems of anthropology and history. One of these problems, as we have seen, was unity-in-variety, i.e., how there is a single human nature amid all the changes of history and all the differences in culture. Now that he had investigated language, Humboldt believed that he had an answer to this question. The essential core of humanity he found in its innate and universal capacity for language. The most convincing proof for the unity of human nature, he wrote in his *Ueber die Verschiedenheit des menschlichen Sprachbaues*, lay with the common linguistic facility of all peoples (VI, 176). Although people speak very different languages, they still have the power to learn any language and to understand, more or less, whatever is said in it. Nowhere is this more evident, Humboldt pointed out, than in how quickly children learn foreign languages. This innate sense for language consists not simply in the capacity to learn any language, but also in the common structure for all thinking, i.e., that all grammars work according to the same basic logical laws. Attempting to find a general formula for the single core of humanity, Humboldt wrote that the unity of language is not a *compositum*, i.e., a whole made up of many independent individuals and cultures who happen

to have something in common, but *atotum*, i.e., a single indivisible whole that is participated in equally between different individuals and cultures (176).

Humboldt also saw the philosophy of language as the basis for hermeneutics, the explanation for how it is possible to understand past cultures and texts. His model to explain the historian's understanding of the past is the listener's ability to comprehend a speaker. Normally, listener and speaker comprehend one another because they share the same language; but even if they speak very different languages, they can still understand one another by virtue of their common linguistic facility, their shared intelligent capacity for language. They can understand one another because the meaning of the language they use does not consist simply in representations, in subjective states of mind, but in a common intersubjective structure that guides the understanding of both. Although the mind needs to understand everything from within, according to its own activity, its understanding is guided by general rules and common meanings. These rules and meanings transcend the generations, providing a source of continuity that links the present to the past. Even when the historian does not share the same language as his writer, there are often profound affinities between them, inherited structures and etymologies, that connect the present to even the most ancient past. That said, Humboldt was well aware of the limits of understanding a past or foreign culture. While he stressed that only language makes intersubjective understanding possible, he also recognized that language inevitably imposes limits upon it. The very spontaneous act by which we create language traps us inside it. We get out of it by learning a foreign language; but since we inevitably understand the foreign language in terms of our native tongue, we never fully escape the circle (180).

Humboldt's argument for a universal grammar was his way of upholding the *Aufklärung's* belief in reason. The question remains, however, how Humboldt could reconcile this argument with his principle of individuality, which held for his linguistics no less than his anthropology. Applied to languages, the principle of individuality means that languages are incommensurable with one another, that they all express equally, and in their own unique ways, the beliefs and values of their cultures. We should measure each language, then, by how well it serves the values and ends of its own culture, and not by the standards of another. As Humboldt himself formulated the principle: "Every language must be understood in the sense in which it is formed by a nation, not in a sense foreign to it."¹⁰¹ There are many passages in Humboldt's writings on language where he applies his principle of individuality in a very pluralistic manner. He claims that even the crudest and most barbaric languages possess everything necessary for their full deployment, and that they have sufficient forms to express their ideas to the fullest.¹⁰² He warns that we must not have prejudices against

languages that do not have literatures, and insists that even crude or primitive languages have rich enough matter for a delicate and varied culture.¹⁰³ And despite his classicism, he affirms the distinctive qualities and creative forces behind *modern* Greek and the *new* Latin languages, which have been the source of romantic literature.¹⁰⁴ Finally, he declares that each language involves its own worldview, and that the more such worldviews the better.¹⁰⁵

Nevertheless, despite his apparent readiness to embrace linguistic pluralism, Humboldt was determined that the principle of individuality not lead to a complete relativism. Although each language could express all a people needed to say, and although each language involved a unique worldview, some were superior to others in their power to promote intellectual development. There was in Humboldt's universe still an absolute scale, a universal standard, of intellectual and aesthetic perfection, which some languages satisfy more than others. It was simply not the case that the only standards of perfection were internal to each language. What makes for degrees of perfection in language, Humboldt believed, is the degree that it promotes intellectual clarity, distinctness and vivacity.¹⁰⁶ He went to great pains to show that, in this respect, not all languages are created equally. The maintenance of an intellectual absolutism, the refutation of a complete relativism, was indeed one of the central aims of his *Sprachlehre*. Hence in his 1824 "Ueber Buchstabenschrift und ihren Zusammenhang mit dem Sprachbau" his thesis is that alphabetic languages are far superior to non-alphabetic ones in their ability to formulate thought in a plain and clear manner.¹⁰⁷ Alphabetic languages designate directly the sounds that are the natural units of a language, and their words are more effectively and easily analyzable. And in his 1822 "Ueber das Entstehen der grammatischen Formen, und ihren Einfluss auf die Ideenentwicklung," his main argument is that inflected languages are superior to agglutinative in stimulating clear and distinct thinking.¹⁰⁸ Whereas agglutinative languages simply string together separate words, so that the grammatical form has to be read into them, inflected languages show their grammatical form through declensions and conjugations. It is noteworthy but predictable that Humboldt's criterion for intellectual perfection comes straight out of the rationalist tradition in which he had been trained: the perfection of a language should be determined by the degree to which it shows unity-in-variety. This criterion explains why Humboldt prefers inflected languages over agglutinative and incorporating languages. While agglutinative languages lack unity, because they simply string together words having separate meanings, incorporating languages lack variety, because they string together particles not having

separate meaning. Inflected languages, however, have unity-in-variety because, through declensions and conjugations, they show the unity or grammatical form between distinct words. It comes as no surprise that Humboldt thinks the most developed language, that showing greatest unity-in-variety, is ancient Greek.¹⁰⁹

Although Humboldt maintains that some languages promote intellectual development more than others, and although he thinks that the early creative stages of a language are the product of genius, it would be a mistake to charge his linguistic theory with "crypto-racism".¹¹⁰ The problem with this criticism is that it fails to recognize Humboldt's profound agnosticism about the origins of language and culture. He constantly maintained that there could be no way of ascertaining the relative role of nature over nurture,¹¹¹ and that the source of the human creativity, which is the true origin of language, will be forever unknown to us. If Humboldt is guilty of elitism in any aspect of his thought, it is in his Grecomania; but we have already seen how he refused to assign any ultimate cause for the superiority of Greek culture. The racial theories of the later nineteenth century would never have found his approval, because they would have seemed too speculative. It is unfortunate, therefore, to attribute to Humboldt a modern anachronistic label which needlessly compounds confusion and controversy.

10. The task of the historian

Humboldt's mature statement of his historiographical views is his essay "Über die Aufgabe des Geschichtsschreibers," which was first delivered as an address to the Academy of Sciences in Berlin, April 12, 1821.¹¹² It is the most famous, studied and influential of all his historical writings.¹¹³ Among its admirers were Ranke, Droysen and Dilthey. The essay has been seen as the *locus classicus* of historicism, the starting point for the idealistic theory of historiography.¹¹⁴ Certainly, it does anticipate some of the basic themes of later historicism: the theory of ideas, the principle of individuality, the role of providence, the rejection of philosophy of history. The essay was a crucial step toward the autonomy of history, liberating history from the hegemony of

philosophy; and it was a milestone in the reappraisal of history as a branch of learning, marking a critical break with rationalist and romantic attitudes.

Humboldt begins his essay with the prosaic statement that “the task of the historian is the depiction of the past” (*die Darstellung des Geschehenen*) (35). He declares that this is the first demand of the historian's vocation, and indeed his highest goal. Put so simply, history seems easy and straightforward; but, Humboldt warns us, nothing is so rare as the literally true narrative (36). Just to describe what has happened seems to limit the historian to a passive role, as if he must do nothing more than reproduce the given. But Humboldt very quickly corrects this impression. He stresses the active, creative role of the historian. The very problem of knowing the past makes it necessary for the historian to *recreate* it. The difficulty of knowing the past is that the past no longer exists, and as such is no longer given in our experience. It is perceivable only through a few remains, such as monuments or documents; everything else must be felt, inferred, conjectured. All that exists now is scattered, isolated and fragmentary pieces of evidence; and what joins them together into a coherent whole is forever lost to us, never an object of immediate perception. The real meaning of an historical event consists in its unity, in its connection with other events; but it is just this unity, this connection that has to be recreated by the historian. Hence Humboldt comes to the significant conclusion that the meaning of the past is not given to, but created by, the historian (35–6).

Since the historian has to recreate the past, Humboldt compares him to the artist. The historian is no less creative than the artist: he too has to order his materials into a whole through his imagination (*Phantasie*) (37). The fundamental law of both artist and historian is the imitation of nature (41). But, Humboldt notes, there are two kinds of imitation: that which simply reproduces appearances as they are given to our senses; and that which penetrates to the form beneath appearances, showing how they derive from the form by an inner necessity. Humboldt thinks that true art and history involve the latter form of imitation. In attempting to imitate nature, both artist and historian attempt to know the true form of things, to ascertain the necessary and to distinguish it from the contingent. Since this form is not given to the senses, they have to recreate it through the imagination. The point behind the analogy between art and history is to vindicate history. It is Humboldt's reply to Aristotle's famous claim in the *Poetics* that poetry is superior to history because the poet expresses universal truths whereas the historian expresses only individual ones.¹¹⁵ Against Aristotle, Humboldt is saying that the historian, no less than the poet, grasps universal truths, the forms behind things.

Having stressed the close affinity between artist and historian, Humboldt is no less insistent on pinpointing the difference between them. The basic difference, of course, is that the historian is limited to recreating facts, to imagining something that has actually happened. Although both artist and historian imitate nature by recovering its

underlying forms, the artist is free to create new forms whereas the historian must try to recreate forms as they once were (45). Hence the historian, unlike the artist, has to subordinate his imagination to the facts (38). Although the historian's imagination is therefore more limited than that of the artist, Humboldt stresses that the historian still has a unique talent of his own, which he suggests calling a "faculty of divination" (*Ahndungsvermögen*) or a "gift of connection" (*Verküpfungsgabe*) (38). After insisting that even these talents do not do full justice to the historian, Humboldt then makes a startling claim: "The truth of the past seems to be very simple, but it is the highest [object] that can be thought." (37). The last phrase—the highest object of thought—makes us pause. Here Humboldt was taking his polemic against Aristotle a step further. He was now elevating the historian to hitherto unheard of heights, placing him above the poet and on the same level as the philosopher himself. In knowing the truth behind the past, the historian grasps the laws, indeed the ideas, behind reality itself. Hence historian and philosopher are on the same level because both grasp the ideas behind reality itself.

Although Humboldt places the historian on the same level as the philosopher, he distinguishes the historian from the philosopher no less than the artist (46). Both historians and philosophers deal with ideas, the intelligible forms behind historical change; but they differ fundamentally in their methodology, in the way they justify these ideas. While the philosopher begins from general principles, which he justifies *a priori*, and which he then applies to the particular facts of history, the historian begins from particular facts and then attempts to justify general principles *a posteriori* from them. What is also characteristic of philosophical history for Humboldt—and what goes hand-in-hand with its *a priori* methodology—is its use of teleology (46). On *a priori* grounds the philosopher finds some end or purpose to world history, whether that is the development of human perfection, the cultivation and population of the earth, increasing culture and the unification of peoples, etc. Humboldt is suspicious of teleology not only on methodological but also moral grounds. Anticipating Kierkegaard's later critique of Hegel, he thinks that teleology tends to treat the individual only as a means for world-historical ends, whereas each individual is an end in himself and must find the meaning of his life "within his own fleeting existence" rather than in promoting the ends of world-history.¹¹⁶

Such was Humboldt's advocacy of history, such his belief in its supreme place in our mental economy, that he was not content simply to place the historian on the same

level as the philosopher. His argument went another giant step further, elevating the historian above both artist and philosopher (39–40). Both philosopher and artist work on a very abstract level and move in the realm of ideas alone: the philosopher seeks the first principles of things, and the artist strives after the ideal of beauty. For this reason both lose sight of the empirical world in all its particularity and contingency. What elevates the historian above both philosopher and artist, in Humboldt's view, is that he has to mediate ideas with empirical reality; he has to walk “that narrow middle path” between ideas and things. While the historian never loses sight of ideas, because he has to grasp the general meaning of things, he also has to be alive to the details of empirical reality. What distinguishes the historian from philosopher and artist—and what elevates him above both—Humboldt calls a “sense of reality” (*Sinn für die Wirklichkeit*). This sense for reality wavers between ideas and empirical reality. It consists in a feeling for the contingency of things, and for the transitoriness of all existence in time; but it also involves a recognition of the necessity of things, an awareness of how they depend on reason (40). Using a very redolent phrase, Humboldt would sometimes call this sense for reality “historical sense” or “sense for history.” Historical sense is the recognition that everything changes in history, that everything perishes and that nothing lasts forever. It is the awareness of the tragedy of history, acceptance of what Humboldt calls “the pitilessness of world-history,” the fact that even the greatest cultural achievements of mankind are doomed to eventual destruction.¹¹⁷

After distinguishing the historian from the philosopher and artist, Humboldt lays down some general methodological precepts for the historian. He maintains that the historian must follow two paths if he is to reach historical truth. The first path consists in the exact, non-partisan and critical sifting through of evidence; the second consists in combining this evidence, having an intuition for how things were connected and formed a whole (37). Each path is necessary, Humboldt insists. If we follow the first without the second, we do not really grasp the meaning of history, which consists in the *connection* between events; and if we follow the second without the first, we are in danger of creating an imaginary world rather than knowing the real one (38). For all his emphasis on the creative role of the historian, Humboldt stresses how the historian must “lose and dissolve” his own “opinions, feelings and claims” in the study of a past (39). Nothing should be invented, nothing should be imposed on the facts and everything derived from an impartial study of them (46).

Now, however, Humboldt seems to contradict himself. In stressing that the historian must derive his ideas from a study of the facts, he seems to violate his earlier insistence on the creative role of the historian. If the historian has to bring order and coherence into events through his ideas, and if this order and coherence is not a datum of experience, in what sense can he derive his ideas from the facts themselves? Noting the apparent tension, Humboldt struggles to remove it (47). The correspondence

between knower and known, he explains, does not arise from the activity of the subject alone, which gives general principles, or from the passive reception of the object alone, which supplies empirical data. Rather, it arises from the *interplay* between subject and object, between general principles and empirical data.¹¹⁸ To understand the significance of data, the historian must bring general principles to bear upon them; but when he investigates the data more closely, he tests and reformulates his original principles, which then leads him to reappraise the data, and so on. By this interplay, Humboldt says, the principles the historian *brings* to his subject matter he eventually *abstracts* from it (47).

While attempting to resolve this difficulty, Humboldt introduces an interesting general explanation of the possibility of historical knowledge. All knowledge presupposes, he assumes, some analogy between knower and known, some original correspondence between subject and object (47). If they were completely unlike one another, separated by a chasm, no bridge could ever lead from one to the other. Although knowledge arises from the interplay between general principles and empirical data, there must still be some basic correspondence between them in the first place for the interplay to end in knowledge. But what ensures that there is such a correspondence in the case of history? Humboldt explains that we can assume some correspondence between subject and object insofar as the subject stands within, and is formed by, his object, namely, history itself. The historical forces that the historian attempts to understand are still working within him. Hence the historian can understand the past insofar as that past is still present within him. And so Humboldt writes: “...everything that is active in world history moves itself within the inner depths of man.” (47)

One of the most salient—and problematic—features of Humboldt's essay is its introduction of the theory of ideas. Humboldt states that it is the central task of the historian to grasp the ideas behind history, which are its fundamental driving forces. What, exactly, Humboldt means by an “idea”, however, is very unclear from the essay itself. We have already seen in previous sections the meaning Humboldt gave to this concept in his earlier writings. Essentially, his ideas are both methodological and metaphysical principles. Methodologically, they are principles of holistic explanation. If we grasp the idea behind a phenomena, we understand its place in a whole. This methodological meaning resurfaces clearly in the essay. Hence Humboldt stresses the explanatory role of ideas when he argues that the historian must know not only the external sequence of events but their interconnection and interaction, how each is necessary within a broader context or whole; he then calls the universal under which they are all subsumed “the idea” (46). Metaphysically, the ideas are the principle of the individuality of a thing, i.e., what makes it just this thing and nothing else. This metaphysical meaning also reappears in the essay. Hence Humboldt writes that every

human individual has an idea that corresponds to it: "Each human individuality is an appearance of an idea..." (54). Furthermore, just as in the earlier writings, there are ideas on all levels of individuality, so that there are ideas not only for human beings but also for nations and cultures: "The life of nations themselves also has its organization, its stages of development, and its changes, just like the individual."¹¹⁹ The methodological and metaphysical meaning come together when we recognize that, for Humboldt, the concept of an individual thing is an organic whole or unity, i.e., a *totum* that determines the identity of its parts, none of which can exist apart from it, rather than a *compositum*, whose identity derives from the conjunction of its parts, each of which has an identity apart from it.

Given Humboldt's Kantian dispositions, and given his rejection of speculative philosophy of history, it is tempting to read his ideas as only regulative principles, as goals for enquiry rather than constitutive forces of history itself. But Humboldt's text flatly forbids a non-metaphysical interpretation. *Contra*Kant, Humboldt is perfectly clear that his ideas have a constitutive status, and that they are not simply regulative principles that provide systematic order for the multiplicity of phenomena. Hence he declares firmly and explicitly: "They [the ideas] are not read into history but constitute its very essence." (48) The ideas appear as the *active powers* behind history, which give not only direction to events, the goals to which they are heading, but also the energy and force to achieve them (51–2). The metaphysical side to Humboldt's ideas becomes all the more apparent from his obscure allusions to the idea of providence. Although Humboldt is skeptical of teleological or philosophical explanations of history, he still insists that history must be understood from a transcendent standpoint outside it, namely, that of providence. "World history is not comprehensible without providence," he bluntly declares (50). He admits that the historian, not being a mystic, prophet or theologian, has no means by which he can fathom providence. There are, however, signs in appearances that provide him with hints about its mysterious ways. These signs are nothing less than the ideas themselves (55). Although the ideas are immanent in empirical reality, they also have a transcendent dimension "outside the circle of finitude" which point toward their divine origin. The ideas are organized into a systematic divine plan, which we cannot really fathom. What justification there is for this belief in providence Humboldt does not further explain. His reason for its introduction has more to do with his Christian faith, which saw the idea of providence as the very essence of Christianity.¹²⁰

The fundamental problem with Humboldt's theory of ideas is how, and indeed whether, its metaphysical dimension can be reconciled with his empiricism. If the metaphysical dimension of the theory is indisputable, so is Humboldt's avowal of empiricism. His empiricism appears not only in his insistence that theories be based

on a careful study of facts, but also in his disapproval of all philosophies of history that impose principles upon experience rather than deriving them from it. The solution to the apparent contradiction is clear: though Humboldt insists on giving his ideas a constitutive status, though he refuses to regard them as mere methodological fictions, he still thinks that we can acquire some evidence for their existence, even if we will never attain a complete knowledge of them. Humboldt regards his ideas as postulates, i.e., tentative hypotheses awaiting confirmation or refutation. They rest on the assumption that behind each culture, epoch or personality there are a few guiding ideas that govern and explain all the various phenomena. There can be no *a priori* guarantee that such postulates are correct; confirmation for them would come from *a posteriori* investigation, i.e., seeing from detailed empirical investigation whether there really are such ideas. On this interpretation, even though both accept a doctrine of providence and theory of ideas, there is still a fundamental methodological difference between the Humboldtian historian and the Hegelian philosopher of history, namely, the Hegelian thinks that he has an *a priori* demonstration for the existence of the ideas and providence, whereas the Humboldtian holds that there can be no such demonstration, that his ideas are postulates that he can justify, if at all, only through empirical research.

Such, in crude summary, was Humboldt's final statement about the goals and methods of history. The essay is dense and obscure, and in many places raises more questions than it answers; yet its density and obscurity came from its suggestiveness, its sheer wealth of ideas. Humboldt's defense of the historian's vocation, and his concept of "historical sense", were invaluable in defining the new historical age. At the very least Humboldt gave courage, self-awareness and self-confidence to the up-and-coming historian. That, if nothing else, made him the Bacon of history.

Notes:

- (1) See J.G. Droysen, *Grundriss der Historik*, in *Historik*, ed. Rudolf Hübner (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1937), pp. 324, 331.
- (2) See “Über die Aufgabe des Geschichtsschreibers,” *Wilhelm von Humboldts Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Prussian Academy of Sciences (Berlin: Behr's Verlag, 1903–36), IV, 35–56. (Henceforth cited as GS).
- (3) See “Ueber Schiller und den Gang seiner Geistesentwicklung,” GS VI, 509–11.
- (4) Humboldt held a low opinion of Hegel's language and methodology. See his March 1, 1828, letter to Friedrich Gentz, in *Schriften von Gentz*, ed. Gustav Schlesier (Mannheim: Hoff Verlag, 1838) V, 298–9. Haym conjectures that the encomium of Kant in the “Vorerrinerung” was pointed against Hegel. See his *Wilhelm von Humboldt: Lebensbild und Charakteristik* (Berlin: Gaertner, 1856), pp. 614–5.
- (5) The metaphor is from E.J. Dijksterhuis, *The Mechanization of the World Picture* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961), p. 402.
- (6) See Peter Hanns Reill, “Science and the Construction of the Cultural Sciences in Late Eighteenth Century Germany: The Case of Wilhelm von Humboldt,” *History and Theory* 33 (1994), 345–66.
- (7) *Ibid.*, p. 366.
- (8) See Introduction, section 1.
- (9) The most naturalistic of Humboldt's writings was his 1820 “Betrachtungen über die Weltgeschichte,” GS III, 350–9. In his earlier 1794 essay “Ueber den Geschlechtsunterschied und dessen Einfluß auf die organische Natur” he states that physical nature forms a single whole with our moral nature. See GS I, 314.
- (10) See sections 7 and 9.
- (11) See sections 2 and 10.
- (12) The best account of Humboldt's intellectual development is still Haym. See note 4 above. Also see Eduard Spranger, *Humboldt und die Humanitätsidee* (Berlin: Reuther & Reichard, 1909). Though sometimes insightful, Spranger's work should be used with caution, because he often contradicts himself and makes questionable generalizations. A more reliable and valuable work, though having a narrower focus, is Robert Leroux's *Guillaume de Humboldt: La Formation de sa pensée jusque'en 1794* (Paris: Société de Édition: Les belles lettres, 1932). Also valuable, though also having a narrow focus, is Siegfried Kaehler's *Wilhelm von Humboldt und der Staat, Zweite Auflage* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1963).
- (13) See Humboldt's own *curriculum vitae*, GS XV, 524.
- (14) On Schlözer, see Herbert Butterfield, *Man on his Past* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1955), pp. 44–61. Fueter, Thompson and Srbik, who treat Schlözer as little more than a disciple of Voltaire, do him little justice.
- (15) See Humboldt to Goethe, August 23, 1804, in *Werke in Fünf Bänden*, ed. Andreas Flitner and Klaus Giel (Stuttgart: Wissenschaftlichen Buchgesellschaft, 1960–81)V, 219.
- (16) Eduard Fueter, *Geschichte der neueren Historiographie* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1911), p. 374.
- (17) GS VI, 136.

(18) See Leo Ehlen, "Die Entwicklung der Geschichtsphilosophie W. von Humboldts," *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 24 (1911), pp. 25–6, 29.

(19) See *Ansichten über Aesthetik und Literatur von Wilhelm von Humboldt. Seine Briefe an Christian Gottfried Körner (1793–1830)*, ed. Hans Jonas (Berlin: Schleiermacher Verlag, 1880), p. 11.

(20) Humboldt to Brinkmann, December 19, 1793, in *Wilhelm von Humboldts Briefe an Karl Gustav von Brinkman*, ed. Albert Leitzmann (Leipzig: Hiersemann, 1939), p. 72.

(21) The story of their friendship is best told by Haym, *Humboldt*, pp. 22–7.

(22) Among these essays are "Noch etwas über die Menschenrassen" (1786), "Cook der Entdecker" (1787), "Leitfaden zu einer künftigen Geschichte der Menschheit" (1789), "Ueber lokale und allgemeine Bildung" (1791). See, respectively, in *Forster, Werke in Vier Bänden* (Frankfurt: Insel, 1967–70), II, 71–102; II, 105–14; II, 79–89; II, 275–86. Forster's essay "Über Proselytenmacherei," *Werke* III, 93–120, was virtually a co-production with Humboldt, who discussed every line of it with him as he was writing it.

(23) On Forster's relationship with Herder, see Rudolf Haym, *Herder, Nach seinem Leben und seinen Werken* (Berlin: Aufbau, 1954), II, 455–6.

(24) GS I, 86–96.

(25) See Forster, "Ein Blick in das Ganze der Natur," *Werke* II, 487–8; and "Über die Beziehung der Staatskunst auf das Glück der Menschheit," *Werke* III, 713.

(26) On Humboldt's hermeneutics, see Joachim Wach, *Das Verstehen* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1926–33), I, 227–66. Though illuminating in places, Wach's treatment of this theme is arbitrary in its use of sources—important essays are completely neglected while less important ones are studied in detail—and it fails to consider in any depth Humboldt's philosophy of language.

(27) In his February 7, 1789, letter to Jacobi, Humboldt wrote: "Sie wissen es ja selbst, ich bin in der Wolffischen Philosophie gesäugt und gross gezogen worden..." See *Briefe von Wilhelm von Humboldt an Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi*, ed. Albert Leitzmann (Halle: Niemeyer, 1892), p. 6.

(28) Christian Wolff, *Philosophia Prima sive Ontologia*, in *Gesammelte Werke*, ed. Jean École and H.W. Arndt (Hildesheim: Olms, 1962), II/3, 188–9; §§227–8.

(29) See *Geschichte des Verfalls und Unterganges der griechischen Freistaaten*, GS III, 198.

(30) *Ibid*, GS III, 205.

(31) See Leibniz, "De arcanis sublimium vel De summa rerum," *Sämtliche Schriften und Briefe*, ed. Deutsche Akademie der Wissenschaften, (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1980), VI/3, 472–77, esp. 472.

(32) See the passages in *Latium und Hellas*, GS III 136–40; and *Geschichte des Verfalls und Unterganges der griechischen Freistaaten*, GS III, 198–218. Humboldt had already stated the essence of his organicist views in his 1795 "Über den Geschlechtsunterschied und dessen Einfluss auf die organische Natur," GS I, 311–34.

(33) *Geschichte des Verfalls*, GS III, 209. Schelling first formulated his view only in his 1799 *Ideen zu einer Philosophie der Natur*, well after Humboldt's 1795 "Über den Geschlechtsunterschied."

(34) See Humboldt to Körner, October 27, 1793, in *Briefe an Körner*, p. 2.

(35) Cf. Eduard Spranger, *Humboldt und die Humanitätsidee*, pp. 118, 224. Spranger overstates Kant's influence on Humboldt, claiming that, after Humboldt's first reading of Kant in the 1790s, Leibniz's metaphysics was "wie verfliegen und vergessen."

(36) See Kant, *Briefwechsel*, pp. 694–5.

(37) Schiller forwarded Kant's letter to Humboldt, whose reaction appears in his May 7, 1795, letter to Körner. See *Briefe an Körner*, p. 41.

(38) Kant's judgment on Humboldt's work makes it difficult to take at face value Spranger's account of the young Humboldt as essentially a Kantian after 1788. Spranger's claim, *Humboldt und die Humanitätsidee*, p. 115, that Humboldt's philosophy became metaphysical only in its second phase (1798–1809), is contradicted by the metaphysics of the 1795 *Horen* essay.

(39) See Georg Iggers, *The German Conception of History* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1968), pp. 56, 58.

(40) See, for example, *Latium und Hellas*, GS III, 138.

(41) See Humboldt to Jacobi, February 7, 1789, and June 3, 1789, in *Briefe an Jacobi*, pp. 7, 16.

(42) See Humboldt to Jacobi, June 3, 1789, and June 20, 1790, in *Briefe an Jacobi*, pp. 17–18, 30, 32.

(43) The standard view has been that Humboldt abandoned natural law, and that, if there are a few lingering statements about it, they are inconsistent with the general trend of his thought. See Spranger, *Humboldt und die Humanitätsidee*, p. 51; Kaehler, *Humboldt und der Staat*, p. 131; and Reinhold Aris, *History of Political Thought in Germany from 1789 to 1815* (London: Cass, 1936), pp. 142–4. Iggers, *German Conception of History*, pp. 48–9, claims that Humboldt's lingering adherence to natural law is undermined by his own individualistic ethic; he ignores Humboldt's explicit appeal to natural law to justify his ethic.

(44) *Briefe an Brinkmann*, p. 41.

(45) Klein's chief work was *Grundsätze der natürlichen Rechtswissenschaft* (Halle: Hemmerde und Schwetschke, 1797).

(46) The textbook was Ludwig Julius Höpfer's *Naturrecht des einzelnen Menschen, der Gesellschaften und der Völker* (Gießen: Krieger, 1780).

(47) The notes are in GS VII, 469–81.

(48) *Briefe Humboldt an Jacobi*, p. 10.

(49) GS I, 77–85. All references are to this edition. This essay was first published in the *Berlinische Monatsschrift* 19 (1792), 84–98.

(50) The French Constitution of 1791 was finally and formally approved by the National Assembly only on September 3, after the letter to Gentz. Humboldt was commenting upon developments that had taken place since 1789, and we can safely assume that he was fully aware of all of them. In August 1789 Humboldt visited Paris with his tutor J.H. Campe to Paris, and he witnessed at first hand some of the debates in the National Assembly. On Humboldt's early reaction to the Revolution, see my *Enlightenment, Revolution & Romanticism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), pp. 114–21.

(51) On Humboldt's relationship to Gentz, see Albert Leitzmann, "Politische Jugendbriefe Wilhelm von Humboldt an Gentz," *Historische Zeitschrift* 152 (1935), 48–89. Leitzmann's article contains the three extant letters between Humboldt and Gentz, which are of great interest for the development of his political views.

(52) Burke's *Reflections* were translated by Gentz and appeared under the title *Betrachtungen über die französische Revolution. Nach dem Englischen des Herrn Burke neu bearbeitet mit einer Einleitung, Anmerkungen, politischen Abhandlungen* (Berlin: Vieweg, 1793). Humboldt's disapproved of Burke's *Reflections*. On his reaction to Burke's book, see Humboldt to Brinkmann, November 9, 1792, in *Briefe an Brinkmann*, p. 41.

(53) Humboldt did not cease to reflect on the foundation of natural law. In his 1797 essay "Über den Geist der Menschheit" he attempted to provide a methodology for determining the highest good. See GS II, 324–34. However, this essay, which laid down the plan for a much larger work, was never completed and it is impossible to reconstruct what Humboldt intended by his *a priori* justification of natural law.

(54) On F.A. Wolf, see Mark Pattison, "F.A. Wolf," in *Essays*, ed. Henry Nettleship (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1889), pp. 337–414; and Anthony Grafton, " 'Man muß aus der Gegenwart heraufsteigen': History, Tradition, and Traditions of Historical Thought in F.A. Wolf," in *Aufklärung und Geschichte*, pp. 416–29.

(55) On Humboldt's relationship to Wolf, see Haym, *Humboldt*, pp. 69–87.

(56) On Wolf's hermeneutics, see Wach, *Das Verstehen* I, 62–81.

(57) F.A. Wolf, *Vorlesungen über die Enzyklopädie der Alterthumswissenschaft*, ed. J.D. Gürtler (Leipzig: August Lehnhold, 1831), p. 295.

(58) See chapter 2, section 3.

(59) GS I, 255–81.

(60) Humboldt sent the draft to Wolf, who later incorporated many of its points into his own account of the aims and methods of philology. See F.A. Wolf, "Darstellung der Altertums-wissenschaft nach Begriff, Umfang, Zweck und Wert," in *Museum der Altertumswissenschaft* (Berlin: Realschulbuchhandlung, 1807) I, 1–145. In two places (pp. 126–9, 133–7) Wolf cites letters from Humboldt without mentioning him by name. On the circumstances behind this, see the commentary by Giel and Flitner in *Werke in Fünf Bänden* V, 376–7.

(61) See GS I, 263n1.

(62) See GS I, 261n1.

(63) See Schiller, *Werke, Nationalausgabe*, ed. Benno von Wiese (Weimar: Hermann Böhlau Nachfolger, 1962), XX, 413–503.

(64) See Schiller to Humboldt, October 26, 1795; and Humboldt to Schiller, November 6, 1795, in *Der Briefwechsel zwischen Friedrich Schiller und Wilhelm von Humboldt*, ed. Siegfried Seidel (Berlin: Aufbau, 1962), I, 198, 208–11.

(65) See Humboldt to Schiller, December 14, 1795, *Briefwechsel*, I, 259.

(66) *Werke* V, 180–6.

(67) GS I, 377–410.

(68) *Briefwechsel* II, 22–4.

(69) See Humboldt to Schiller, May 31, 1796, *Briefwechsel* II, 63–4.

(70) GS II, 1–112.

(71) See Humboldt to Schiller, February 2, 1796, *Briefwechsel* II, 23.

(72) KrV, B 579.

(73) See “Plan einer vergleichende Anthropologie,” GS I, 395–7.

(74) Spranger makes just this inference, arguing that Humboldt not only anticipated Schiller's thesis but continued to uphold it. See his *Humboldt*, pp. 254–61. But Spranger does not consider the neo-classical essays of the early 1800s.

(75) GS III, 171–218.

(76) See Humboldt's “Über die unter dem Namen Bhagavad-Gita bekannte Episode des Mahabharata,” GS V. 190–232. On his early reaction to the poem, see Humboldt to Gentz, May 1, 1827 and March 1, 1828, in *Schriften von Gentz*, V, 291, 300.

(77) See Humboldt to Charlotte Diede, September 12, 1824 and November 8, 1826, in *Briefe an eine Freundin*, ed. A. Huhnhäuser (Berlin: Wegweiser Verlag, 1921), pp. 144, 222.

(78) See Humboldt to Charlotte Diede, September 12, 1824, *Briefe an eine Freundin*, p. 143.

(79) *Briefe an Brinkmann*, p. 157.

(80) The only English translation of Humboldt's writings on language is the second 1830–35 version of the introduction to this treatise, which bears the title “Über die Verschiedenheit des menschlichen Sprachbaues und ihren Einfluss auf die geistige Entwicklung des Menschen-geschlechts.” See *On Language*, translated by Peter Heath (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988). However, the first 1827–29 version of the introduction, which bears the same title minus the second phrase, is of greater philosophical interest.

(81) *Briefwechsel I*, 228.

(82) On the significance of Humboldt's stay in Paris for his study of language, see Hans Aarsleff's brilliant “Introduction” to *On Language*, pp. xxxii-lxv. Although Aarsleff has made an valuable contribution to Humboldt scholarship in stressing the significance of the Paris years, it must be said that he overstates his case. He claims: “It was during the Paris years that Humboldt entered the path of language study he followed for the rest of his life.” (p. xl). Yet, as the letter to Schiller makes clear, the interest in language antedates the Paris years; and it was only in Rome that Humboldt would devote himself more exclusively to language. Aarsleff's passionate polemic against Haym and Cassirer also leads him to exaggerate the influence of French writers. The significance of language for thought, and the importance of language for culture, were themes that Humboldt could have learned from Hamann or Herder, or picked up from German vapors, long before his reading of Degérando (p. xlvi).

(83) GW V, 214.

(84) GS VII, 602–3.

(85) GS VII, 581–3.

(86) See Fichte, “Von der Sprachfähigkeit und dem Ursprung der Sprache,” in *Werke VIII*, 301–41. Fichte's essay appeared in the *Philosophisches Journal* in 1795. Many of the terms of Humboldt's essay show that he was responding to Fichte. See the commentary in Flitner and Giel, *Werke V*, 640–2.

(87) *Ueber die Verschiedenheit des menschlichen Sprachbaues*, GS VII, 154–5.

(88) See Haym, *Humboldt*, pp. 446–63; and Cassirer, *Die Philosophie der symbolische Formen*, second edition (Oxford: Cassirer, 1954), I, 99–108.

(89) See Hamann, “Metakritik über den Purismus der Vernunft,” in *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. Josef Nadler (Vienna: Herder, 1949–57), III, 283–9.

- (⁹⁰) Droysen, *Grundriß der Historik*, preface, p. 324. See also below, chapter 7, section 2.
- (⁹¹) See “Ueber den Zusammenhang der Schrift mit der Sprache,” GS V, 31–106; and *Grundzüge des allgemeinen Sprachtypus* GS V, 374–99.
- (⁹²) GS VII, 53–5; and GS VI, 180–1.
- (⁹³) See “Fragmente der Monographie über die Basken,” GS VII, 595–7.
- (⁹⁴) See “Ueber das vergleichende Sprachstudium in Beziehung auf die verschiedenen Epochen der Sprachentwicklung,” GS IV, 3.
- (⁹⁵) *Ibid.*, 15.
- (⁹⁶) “Ueber die Verschiedenheit des menschlichen Sprachbaues,” GS VI, 227.
- (⁹⁷) “Ueber das vergleichende Sprachstudium in Beziehung auf die verschiedenen Epochen der Sprachentwicklung,” IV, 15. See also “Ueber das Entstehen der grammatischen Formen, und ihren Einfluss auf die Ideenentwicklung,” GS IV, 305–7, where Humboldt sketches the stages in the development of a language.
- (⁹⁸) See “Ueber die Verschiedenheit des menschlichen Sprachbaues und ihren Einfluss auf die geistige Entwicklung des Menschengeschlechts,” GS VII, 15.
- (⁹⁹) *Ibid.*, VII, 18.
- (¹⁰⁰) See chapter 2, section 6. Since Humboldt's position is less radical in its naturalism than Herder's, it is necessary to qualify Haym's judgment that Humboldt's philosophy of language is the scientifically more advanced version of Herder's. See his *Humboldt*, pp. 494–5.
- (¹⁰¹) “Grammatische Formen und Ideenentwicklung,” GS IV, 288.
- (¹⁰²) See “Über das vergleichende Sprachstudium in Beziehung auf die verschiedenen Epochen der Sprachentwicklung,” GS IV, 3. Cf. “Ueber das Entstehen der grammatischen Formen, und ihren Einfluss auf die Ideenentwicklung,” GS IV, 286–8.
- (¹⁰³) See “Ueber den Einfluss des verschiedenen Charkaters der Sprache auf Literatur und Geistesbildung,” GS VII, 643.
- (¹⁰⁴) See *Ueber die Verschiedenheit des menschlichen Sprachbaues*, GS VI, 257.
- (¹⁰⁵) See “Fragmente der Monographie über die Basken,” GS VII, 602–3.
- (¹⁰⁶) See “Grammatischen Formen und Ideenentwicklung,” GS IV, 287.
- (¹⁰⁷) GS V, 107–33; see especially V, 114–15, 121.
- (¹⁰⁸) GS IV, 285–313. See especially 288, 292, 300.
- (¹⁰⁹) GS IV, 294, 313.
- (¹¹⁰) Aarsleff, “Introduction,” p. lxiii.
- (¹¹¹) See, for example, *Das Achtzehnte Jahrhundert*, GS II, 91; *Latium und Hellas*, GS III, 164–5; and the “Einleitung” to the *Kawiwerk*, GS VII, 38–40.

(¹¹²) The essay was published in 1822 by the Akademie der Wissenschaften, *Abhandlungen der Königlichen Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin* (Berlin, 1822), 305–22. The essay is in *Gesammelte Schriften* IV, 35–56, which is cited in parentheses above. The essay has been translated by Georg Iggers as “On the Historian's Task” and it has appeared in *History and Theory* VI (1967), 57–71.

(¹¹³) Louis Erhardt, “Wilhelm v. Humboldts Abhandlung Über die Aufgabe des Geschichtschreibers,” *Historische Zeitschrift* LV (1886), 385–424; Eduard Spranger, “Wilhelm von Humboldts Rede Ueber die Aufgabe des Geschichtschreibers und die Schellingsche Philosophie,” *Historische Zeitschrift* C (1908), 541–63; and Eberhard Kassel, “Wilhelm von Humboldts Abhandlung über die Aufgabe des Geschichtsschreibers,” *Studium Generale* II (1949), 285–95.

(¹¹⁴) See Georg Iggers, *The Theory and Practice of History* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1973), pp. 3–4.

(¹¹⁵) See Aristotle, *Poetics* chap. 9, 1451b.

(¹¹⁶) Given his misgivings about Hegel in his final years, it seems plausible to read Humboldt's remarks about the philosophy of history as an implicit critique of Hegel. But chronology does not smile upon this hypothesis: Hegel gave his first lectures on world history in Berlin in the winter semester 1822/23, several months before Humboldt's address. Although Humboldt gives no example of a philosophical historian, it is likely that he had in mind Kant, Fichte or Schelling, who do employ an *a priori* method. In his earlier 1812 or 1814 “Betrachtungen über die Weltgeschichte,” Humboldt explicitly mentions Kant as an example of the philosophical historian. See GS III, 350. On Humboldt's reaction to Schelling's philosophy of history, see his March 31, 1804, letter to Brinkman, in *Briefe an Brinkmann*, p. 167.

(¹¹⁷) See “Betrachtungen über die Weltgeschichte,” GS III, 353–4.

(¹¹⁸) The passage in “Ueber die Aufgabe des Geschichtschreibers” is very obscure; it is best read in the light of Humboldt's methodology outlined in his earlier writings, especially “Plan einer vergleichende Anthropologie” and *Das Achtzehnte Jahrhundert*. See sections 6 and 7 above.

(¹¹⁹) These lines are from an earlier essay “Betrachtungen über die bewegenden Ursachen in der Weltgeschichte,” GS III, 363. But the same view reappears explicitly, if less quotably, in “Aufgabe,” IV, 54.

(¹²⁰) See his November 8, 1826, letter to Charlotte Diede, in *Briefe an eine Freundin*, pp. 222–3.

Savigny and the Historical School of Law

1. Savigny and the natural law tradition

A defining stage in the development of historicism in nineteenth-century Germany came with the “historical school of law.”¹ With the formation of this school, the nineteenth century began to become self-conscious as an historical age and to define itself against the age of Enlightenment, which seemed to have been oblivious to the decisive role of history in intellectual and cultural life. While Chladenius, Möser, Herder and Humboldt played no small role in the development of this self-consciousness, they worked alone and in no institutional context. But the leaders of the historical school worked in concert, as a self-conscious intellectual movement, and from a powerful institution, the newly founded and prestigious University of Berlin.

The official beginning of the historical school was the publication in 1815 of the first volume of the *Zeitschrift für geschichtliche Rechtswissenschaft*. The editors of the *Zeitschrift* were three professors from the law faculty at the newly founded University of Berlin: Friedrich Carl Savigny (1779–1861), Karl Friedrich Eichhorn (1781–1854) and Johann Friedrich Göbchen (1778–1837). Like true historians, they were very self-conscious of their place in history, and set about defining it in the preface of their *Zeitschrift*.² Their preface amounts to a manifesto of the historical school. To understand their movement, we do well to look at how the editors themselves define it in their manifesto.

Savigny, Eichhorn and Göbchen expressly called themselves “the historical school,” which they opposed to “the non-historical school,” or what was often called “the philosophical school.” Their account of the historical school consists in a threefold distinction between it and the non-historical or philosophical school. (1) The non-historical school holds that each generation has the power to create its world anew, whereas the historical school maintains that each generation finds its world given to it by history. (2) While the non-historical school regards positive law as the arbitrary creation of legislative power, the historical school sees it as part of the entire way of life

of a nation, the necessary result of its *Volksgeist*. (3) The non-historical school sees the individual as independent and self-sufficient, having its identity apart from its place in society and history; the historical school, however, claims that the individual derives its identity entirely from its place in society and history. These distinctions, though crude and simplistic, proved very influential, setting for generations the basic contours of the intellectual landscape. They would be replayed countless times in the nineteenth century by the legal historians themselves, and then in the twentieth century by the historians of the historical school. It has been said that they encapsulated “an entire worldview,” one so important that it deserves to be set aside that of Hegel.³

The founder of the *Zeitschrift*, and acknowledged leader of the historical school, was Friedrich Karl von Savigny. To contemporaries, it was no wonder that Savigny played such a prominent role in the formation of the historical school. Well before founding the *Zeitschrift*, Savigny had enjoyed great renown in the German legal world. He had a reputation as a prodigy, a *Wunderkind*. Born into a family of old German *Reichsadel*, he received from an early age an elite education in Latin and law. He was thought to show great promise; and he failed no one, least of all himself. In 1800, at the age of nineteen, he received his doctorate from the University of Marburg; and in 1803, at the age of twenty-four, he became extraordinary professor there. His first publication, *Das Recht des Besitzes*,⁴ which he wrote in his early twenties, was a brilliant success. Savigny's command of the Latin sources, his eloquent German, and his ability to capture the spirit of the law by cutting through jargon and scholastic artifice, won wide acclaim. His book went through seven editions, and became for generations the standard work in the field. Savigny soon acquired a reputation as the foremost expert on Roman law in Germany. By the age of 25 the academic world lay at his feet. He was regularly offered academic appointments, many of which he declined, none of which he needed (as the sole heir of the family fortune). The height of Savigny's career came in 1810 with his appointment to the new law faculty at the University of Berlin. He would remain there for the next thirty years, resigning only in 1842 to serve as minister to the government of Friedrich Wilhelm IV.

As chair for thirty years of the law faculty in Berlin, Savigny played a pivotal role in the institutionalization of historicist attitudes in the early nineteenth century. He exerted enormous influence over curricula, choice of faculty and university politics. Through these channels, Savigny made the Berlin law faculty the center of the historical school. Since Savigny insisted that the curriculum focus on Roman law, it was necessary to give his students a rigorous historical training. Understanding Roman law requires considerable historical and linguistic skills, the ability to interpret ancient and esoteric Latin texts, so that students had to learn the new critical and hermeneutical methods. Savigny insisted that students read original texts, and that they understand

them in the light of the original culture in which they were written. What Savigny wanted his students to learn, above all, was what he called “historical sense,” i.e., the awareness that law is the product of history, that it has to be interpreted in the context of time and place.⁵

Savigny's most important and controversial “achievement” in the development of historicism came with his powerful role in the demise of the natural law tradition. This was a feat of enormous historical importance. Since the end of the seventeenth century, the theory of natural law had played a central role in the German Enlightenment.⁶ To the *Aufklärer*, natural law represented that universal standard of reason, that impartial tribunal of criticism, by which one could judge the positive laws, practices and politics of different states. For generations, *Naturrecht* had become an established and central part of the legal curriculum in major German universities. There were special chairs for *Naturrecht*, which was generally regarded as the proper foundation for the study of law. A student could understand the spirit of the positive laws of a country, or the basis under which exceptions should be made to them, it was held, only if he had a proper grounding in natural law.⁷ Savigny broke utterly with this venerable tradition. He did so by taking to its conclusion a line of thought already present in the earlier historicists. Möser, Herder and Humboldt had always insisted that we can explain a human activity, product or institution only by understanding its individuality, by placing it within the context of its specific time and place and seeing how it is the product of a particular culture and epoch. If that line of thought were applied to jurisprudence, Savigny reasoned, it would show that laws too are individual or determinate, the product of their specific time and place. To assume that there is a natural law that transcends history, its specific time and place, is only an hypostasis, an illegitimate abstraction of a positive or customary law from its local origins and context. We have already seen how Möser, Herder and Humboldt, despite their important roles in developing this line of thought, still clung to the concept of natural law, which they were very reluctant to surrender for fear of relativism. In Savigny, there is no such reluctance, there is no such fear. He was indeed heartless and relentless in banishing the concept from his writings and the lecture hall. Only later in his career would he discover that the concept is not so easily abandoned.⁸

Savigny's contribution to the demise of natural law was not only intellectual but also institutional. When he designed the law curriculum in Berlin, he simply proscribed natural law, which he regarded as useless for legal training. After all, the business of legal

training is to know what the law *is*, not what it *ought to be*; and, given that there was no more contentious branch of jurisprudence than natural law, to teach it to beginning students was simply irresponsible, a sure way of entangling them in pointless and endless controversy. Not that Savigny's move against natural law was novel or revolutionary. When Johann Jakob Moser designed the law faculty at the University of Göttingen in the 1740s, he too left out natural law, which he found impractical and contentious.⁹ Gustave Hugo had continued Moser's campaign against natural law in Göttingen in the 1790s with his lectures on jurisprudence.¹⁰ Savigny simply completed what Moser began and Hugo continued, though he did so in an even more powerful and prestigious setting. Still, the impact of his role should not be underestimated. Banished from the University of Berlin, the most illustrious university in Germany, natural law suffered a serious loss of prestige. It had now become contraband, a non-subject, in legal faculties. Some philosophers would protest against its fate; but they were voices in the wilderness.¹¹ Only in the early twentieth century would the neo-Kantians attempt to revive natural law; but their efforts came to little.¹²

The historical importance of Savigny's attitude toward natural law inevitably raises the question why he opposed it in the first place. This, it seems, is a question of the first importance for the intellectual historian. Yet, surprisingly, for a long time, it was held that this is the wrong question to ask. It was conventional wisdom that Savigny had strictly pedagogical reasons for his hostility to natural law, and that he had no philosophical interest in the foundation of law. Thus in 1910 Erich Landsberg, the eminent legal historian, wrote that Savigny did not study philosophy, and that his historicism did not derive from any reflections on epistemological issues.¹³ And in 1912 Hermann Kantorowicz, one of the great Savigny scholars, wrote: "For his age, Savigny bothered himself with philosophy and legal philosophy to an unusually small degree."¹⁴ Last but not least, in 1920 Erich Rothacker said that that Savigny was no philosopher, because he lacked "speculative depth" and "ignored theoretical legal philosophy."¹⁵ All these assessments were utterly falsified, however, with the

publication from 1927 to 1939 of Alfred Stoll's three-volume edition of Savigny's correspondence.¹⁶ Stoll's work, a foundation stone of Savigny scholarship, shows decisively that Savigny, as a young man at the University of Marburg, was utterly devoted to philosophy, and that he was passionately involved in the central philosophical questions of his age, especially those concerning the foundation of the law. When one studies Savigny's correspondence, one quickly finds that his opposition to natural law theory was indeed based on philosophical grounds, first and foremost his objections to Kant's moral philosophy. Even more remarkably, Savigny's early correspondence shows that he was once a passionate champion of natural law, and that he intended to devote his entire life to it. It was for purely intellectual reasons that Savigny lost this faith and eventually turned to history as the only alternative foundation for the study of law. This leaves us with an even more intriguing question: Why did Savigny reverse course, abandoning natural law after having once advocated it?

Given our interest in the philosophical basis of historicism, we will attempt in this chapter to answer both these questions. We will reconstruct, as far as possible, the reasons for the young Savigny's rejection of natural law. For the same reason, we will also examine in some detail the basis of Savigny's own historicism, specifically his theory that the source of law lies in the *Volksgeist*.

2. The young romantic

The most formative years of Savigny's intellectual development were his student days at the University of Marburg, where he studied law from 1795 to 1799. During these years Savigny decided his future career, formed his closest friendships, developed his major interests, and formulated his worldview. Though enrolled in the law faculty, Savigny's chief interests were philosophy and literature. He spent most of his time reading the latest famous writers—Jacobi, Goethe, Jean Paul, Tieck, Schiller, Friedrich Schlegel, Fichte and Kant—and having intense philosophical discussions about them with his friends. It was only late in his university days, at the end of 1798 or beginning of 1799, that he decided to devote himself to law.¹⁷ Savigny's decision was probably inspired by his law professor, Phillip Friedrich Weis (1766–1808). Although Weiss wrote little, he was an engaging teacher, and it was most likely he who sparked Savigny's lifelong interest in the history of Roman law. One of Weis's passions was collecting old books and documents, an enthusiasm he imparted to Savigny, who in turn handed it down to two of his most famous students, Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm. Since Weis regarded Savigny as his most promising pupil, he suggested that he become

a law professor. This was an unusual suggestion because young aristocrats were not supposed to become academics, then not a very prestigious or remunerative calling. But, as the only heir of a large family fortune, Savigny did not have to worry about either prestige or money, which fortune had already supplied in full measure; he duly followed Weis's advice, which he never regretted.

In the late eighteenth century, Marburg was a provincial university, having none of the renown of Göttingen or Jena. Savigny went there only because it was close to home and offered him legal training. Yet, thanks to his inheritance, Savigny could afford *Bildungsreisen* to more illustrious places. In the winter of 1796/97 he spent a semester studying in Göttingen. There he attended regularly the lectures of Ludwig Spittler (1752–1810),¹⁸ which made a great impression on him. What exactly Savigny learned from Spittler is unclear. It was perhaps significant, though, that Spittler was one of the first German historians to revive the study of the German Middle Ages. Spittler combatted Voltaire's picture of the Middle Ages as an era of folly and superstition, and he championed a pre-romantic view of the Middle Ages as the idyllic embodiment of German *Kleinstaatleben*. It is perhaps no accident that Savigny's *Geschichte des römischen Rechts im Mittelalter* would make much use of Spittler's writings.¹⁹ While at Göttingen, Savigny also attended one lecture, but no more, of Gustav Hugo,²⁰ the critic of the natural law tradition. The failure to attend Hugo's lectures is puzzling, given that Savigny would later acknowledge Hugo as the founder of the historical school.²¹ Why this early lack of enthusiasm for Hugo? Apparently, the young Savigny was put off by Hugo's vanity.²² It was only after his conversations with Hufeland in the early summer of 1800, it seems, that he began to appreciate Hugo's work.²³ Since, by this time, Savigny was already disillusioned with natural law, it appears unlikely that this aspect of his intellectual development is due to Hugo's influence.

More important for Savigny's intellectual development than his semester in Göttingen were his pilgrimages to Jena, which was then the intellectual capital of Germany. In the summer of 1799 and spring of 1800, Savigny made several trips to Jena, and altogether spent almost two months there. He attended the lectures of A.W. Schlegel and Schelling, and conversed with many of the philosophers there, among them Niethammer, Hufeland and Schmid. He kept a travel diary of his first days in Jena,

which gives a vivid account of his first impressions and encounters.²⁴ Savigny was so delighted by the atmosphere there that he was tempted to register at the university.²⁵ It was obvious to him that Jena presented unique opportunities: “Certainly at no university does one find such a circle of genial and cultivated human beings as here.”²⁶

What was it that attracted Savigny to jurisprudence? *Prima facie* his decision to be a law professor is puzzling. The study of law in eighteenth-century Germany was notorious for its dreariness. It was generally regarded as a *Brotstudium*, a tedious but necessary step toward a career as a judge, lawyer or civil servant. The price for a secure vocation seemed relentless tedium, the rote learning of endless definitions, distinctions and cases in Latin.²⁷ The young Savigny, however, could see past this. For him, the study of law was no mere means to an end; it was nothing short of spiritual and intellectual salvation. Assiduous study of the law was the only path to a safe standpoint above the turmoil and insecurity of the revolutionary era. We get much insight into Savigny's choice of jurisprudence from his late 1798/early 1799 letter to his friend Christian von Neurath:

Now at a time when the old forms are threatened with universal destruction, it is more necessary than ever to seek a standpoint, independent of everything positive and conventional, grounded *within us*. Look at Paris— where philosophy supposedly dominates everything—and witness the screaming injustices, to convince yourself that the revolution created only a possibility [of lasting change] and that true reform must come from the inner sanctum of the spirit. There people remain *under* the events when we must strive to elevate ourselves *above* them. And if (as I hope and wish) the spirit of violent revolutions should be extinguished, that higher standpoint is still no less necessary—not, of course, so that we do not go under with the positive, but so that we raise it up to ourselves and ennoble it—to bring about through free activity that quiet reform which works more slowly and surely without having to pay a price in blood.²⁸

Savigny goes on to explain that this higher standpoint is provided by natural law (*Naturrecht*). Natural law, he believes, promises intellectual insight into eternal spiritual values, into universal rational standards, which transcend everything positive. If we only knew natural law, we could grasp those eternal values central to the human spirit, and we could stand above the bewildering flux of history, which consumes all values and beliefs in its vortex.

Such faith in natural law seems hopelessly naive. *Naturrecht*, in Savigny's day, was already in a sorry state. It had long been notorious as the most contentious field of jurisprudence. Every author, it seemed, had his own system of *Naturrecht*. Furthermore, natural law doctrine had become disreputable in the 1790s after French radicals

appealed to natural laws to justify their abortive and bloody attempts to redesign French institutions and government. Last but not least, the whole discipline had been shaken to its foundations by Kant, whose critique of metaphysics had undermined the old teleological doctrines behind most systems of natural law. The young Savigny, however, had no illusions about the discipline. These problems were only so many challenges for his youthful energies and ambitions. It was his goal to give a new foundation to natural law, to provide it with a “*metaphysische Rechtsbegründung*,” to become no less than “a Kant of jurisprudence.”²⁹ His foundation for natural law would be free of the metaphysics of the past, and it would pass muster before the standards of the Kantian critique. Rather than making grand assumptions about God and providence, it would demonstrate how law originates from the necessary laws of our own consciousness. It would provide, in other words, something like a “transcendental deduction” of natural law, showing how it is a necessary condition for the possibility of experience. Savigny's model for such a deduction of natural law seemed to be supplied by Fichte, whose writings he studied with the utmost devotion and diligence.³⁰ The philosopher who had come closest to providing a new foundation for natural law, he later wrote, was Fichte.³¹

Given Savigny's later attitude toward natural law, his early ambition is surprising, indeed astonishing. This ambition was no passing fancy because we find Savigny writing to his friends in January 1800 that he intends to give lectures on criminal law because it is the best preparation for “*das Studium des Naturrechts*.”³² Sometime between January 1800 and January 1802, however, the young Savigny had completely lost his confidence in *Naturrecht*. In his winter 1802 lectures on “Juristische Methodologie” he declares the discipline “empty and barren” and utterly useless as a foundation for jurisprudence.³³ What happened? The explanation is by no means simple, and it is necessary to reconstruct his reasons from the scanty evidence. Several factors seemed to work together to produce his change of heart. First and foremost, Savigny had lost confidence in the power of reason to provide substantive practical principles. He came to this conclusion chiefly through his critique of Kant's moral philosophy, which we will examine closely in the next section. Also important was Savigny's growing doubts about whether first principles could be grounded in inner consciousness in the Fichtean manner. Immediate consciousness proved to be, upon examination, not so immediate after all; it was not a self-evident basis for all deductions but based on questionable assumptions itself. Last but not least, Savigny began to recognize that legal doctrines

cannot be given a transcendental foundation independent of a particular society and state.³⁴ He now realized that traditional natural law doctrines, which assumed that human beings had a fixed identity and nature prior to their entrance into society and the state, began with a false abstraction. Human beings are social and political animals, whose very identity is determined by the specific society and state in which they live. Thus a natural law for all human beings seemed as plausible as the ideal of a single universal language.

That Savigny lost his confidence in natural law for these reasons shows that he was susceptible to the strains of another powerful intellectual movement which began in the late 1790s: *Frühromantik*. It is surely significant that Savigny's formative years so closely coincide with the growth of *Frühromantik*, whose heyday was from 1797 to 1802. His friends, the cousins Friedrich and Leonhard Creuzer, had been students in Jena, the hotbed of Romanticism, where they cavorted with Novalis and attended Schiller's lectures. Savigny's trips to Jena in 1799 and early 1800, and his meetings with A.W. Schlegel and Schelling, had placed him at the very heart of the early romantic movement. It is revealing that Savigny and Creuzer used to call their conversations "*Symphilosophie*", an early romantic neologism.

The influence of *Frühromantik* upon Savigny is profound and pervasive,³⁵ and it was indeed decisive in turning him away from *Naturrecht*. For the young romantics in Jena, especially Friedrich Schlegel and Novalis, had not only questioned the old social contract doctrines, but they had also engaged in a full-scale critique of foundationalism, especially Reinhold's and Fichte's attempt to base philosophy upon first principles. Savigny's loss of confidence in *Naturrecht* has to be seen in the context of the early romantic *Grundsatzkritik*.³⁶

Virtually every aspect of Savigny's early thought illustrates the early romantic spirit. His religious beliefs are typical of *Frühromantik*. They are close to, if not directly inspired by, the religious humanism of Friedrich Schlegel and Novalis. According to Schlegel and Novalis, the basic spiritual values of Christianity, which they refused to identify with any particular church, represent the highest form of human self-realization. The same doctrine surfaces time and again in Savigny's letters. In his April 27, 1799, letter to Friedrich Creuzer, for example, he wrote about "the spirit of humanity," which he identifies with a "*Christianismus*" not found in any church and whose basic value is "the education of the human race."³⁷ And in his March 1808 letter to Friedrich Creuzer, Savigny states the doctrine very precisely: "Without doubt, religion is the highest in

a human being; and whoever comes closer to it comes closer to becoming a human being.”³⁸ When Savigny wrote about the need to cultivate our inner self to get beyond the tumult of the age, and when he insisted that spiritual reform is the basis for all real political change, he was stating a conviction that could have come directly from the pages of Friedrich Schlegel or Novalis.

No less than his religious beliefs, Savigny's ethical views reveal the impact of *Frühromantik*. Rather than seeing duty for duty's sake as the sole motive having moral worth, as Kant insisted, Savigny finds the main moral motives in two great romantic passions: love and friendship.³⁹ One of the great shortcomings of philosophical ethics, he complains, is that it neglects the passions.⁴⁰ The search for systematic form has led ethicists astray, taking their attention away from the concrete human being and leading them to create “the greatest snowman out of pure abstractions.” It turns out that the only practical philosophers Savigny admires are two romantic favorites: Goethe and Jacobi. Like Friedrich Schlegel and Schleiermacher, Savigny also espouses an ethic of self-realization and individuality. Hence in his May 18, 1799, letter to Friedrich Creuzer, for example, he praises Friedrich Schlegel's essay “Über die Philosophie,” which he found an excellent account of “the best which is within us.”⁴¹ And in his June 21, 1799, letter to Creuzer he even defends Friedrich Schlegel's “divine egoism” in the *Athenäumsfragmente*—a notorious doctrine in the 1800s—on the grounds that it does not mean deviancy but “proper autonomy, i.e., determination from the most inner part of our own being.”⁴²

Finally, Savigny's political ideals are also typical of *Frühromantik*. Like Friedrich Schlegel and Novalis, Savigny looked back with nostalgia to the old constitution of the Holy Roman Empire, which was threatened with utter destruction by the French armies. This nostalgia for the old Empire did not derive from any reactionary hatred for the ideals of the Revolution, as so often assumed, but from the conviction that these very ideals were better ensured by the old constitution of the Middle Ages.⁴³ As Friedrich Schlegel once put it: “Never was there more liberty and equality in Europe than in the Middle Ages—and these were their best in Germany.”⁴⁴ The great advantage of the old medieval constitution was its institutional pluralism, its many independent sources of authority—the estates, guilds, town councils, an independent judiciary—that could serve as sources of local autonomy and belonging. For the early romantics, the chief evil of modern politics was centralization, the amassing of all power in a single executive and bureaucracy, which would crush all diversity and local

liberty. They found such centralization not only in the absolutist regimes of the eighteenth century, but also in the revolutionary government in France.

3. Early critique of Kant

It has been a pastime of Savigny scholarship to spy in every recess of his writings the influence of Kant.⁴⁵ This habit seems to have been inspired not simply by Kant's ubiquitous influence in the early nineteenth century, but also by the famous statement that Savigny wanted to be “*ein Kant in der Rechtsgelehrsamkeit*.”⁴⁶ But this metaphor, even if made by Savigny himself, is at best accurate only for an early stage of his intellectual development. It holds only for the period from 1799 to 1802, when Savigny was still enamored with *Naturrecht*. Even then, Savigny seemed to have envisaged a *Fichte*an foundation for natural law, and it is unclear how far he wanted to distinguish this from a *Kantian* one; for the romantics, the distinction between Kant and Fichte was very important and much to the advantage of his impetuous successor. In any case, the metaphor loses all validity by 1802, when Savigny finally abandoned his earlier efforts to provide a foundation for natural law.

The attempt to see Kant's influence in Savigny's writings is especially misleading because the simple truth of the matter is that the young Savigny was highly critical of Kant.⁴⁷ An examination of his early criticisms of Kant is important not only because it explains his reasons for turning away from natural law, but also because it illuminates the basis of his later historicism. Since Kant's rationalism was the antithesis of, and chief alternative to, Savigny's historicism, and since Savigny discusses Kant only in his early years, we have to reconstruct his early criticisms of Kant to understand the foundations of his historicism. These criticisms are strewn hither and thither in Savigny's early correspondence.

Savigny's critical attitude toward Kant first appears at the close of his student years in Marburg (1795–99). Kant's moral philosophy had been the subject of much lively “*Symphilosophie*” among Savigny, his teacher, Alexander Weinrich, and his friends, Christian Schwarz and Leonhard and Friedrich Creuzer.⁴⁸ While Leonhard Creuzer and Schwarz had passionately defended Kant, Savigny and Weinrich had ardently

criticized him. The first hint of these conversations appears in Savigny's May 10, 1799, letter to Leonhard Creuzer, where he praises a letter and an essay by Weinrich for their polemic against Kant's moral philosophy.⁴⁹ Though the letter and the essay are lost, it is still possible to reconstruct some of Savigny's thinking. For in his June 21, 1799 letter to Friedrich Creuzer, Savigny enclosed an essay of his own that discusses Weinrich's criticisms and the foundations of moral philosophy.⁵⁰ Savigny's essay is very sketchy and dense—he admits it was written in great haste—but it still indicates sufficiently clearly the thrust of some of his early objections to Kant. Savigny states with approval one of Weinrich's main objections to Kant: that Kant's attempt to answer the question “What is good?” through his first principle of morals (i.e., the categorical imperative) cannot succeed because it presupposes material outside the law itself.⁵¹ Though Savigny does not go into further detail, it is clear from the context that he accepts one standard criticism of Kant's categorical imperative: that it is empty because it is only a purely formal criterion. According to this criticism, Kant's categorical imperative—that I should act only on that maxim that can be universalized as a law valid for everyone alike—is an inadequate criterion to distinguish morally right from morally wrong maxims because *anymaxim* can be universalized without contradiction; hence all the criterion can do is formalize maxims whose validity have been justified on other material grounds, e.g., it increases human welfare or decreases human misery. Savigny's essay makes two further objections against Kant. First, Kant's “fact of practical reason”—that I have an immediate experience that I am free when I choose to act on moral principle over sensible inclination—is not really a fact at all, because such an experience does not demonstrate that I have a rational will in the requisite sense, i.e., a power to act undetermined by causes in the empirical world; for all we know, it is still possible that there are natural causes of our choice to act according to duty of which we are unconscious. Second, that Kant thinks actions done from a sense of duty have greater moral worth than those done from love or friendship; he treats love and friendship as if they were merely “pathological,” on par with selfish motives as natural inclinations, whereas they are in fact moral virtues that add greatly to the moral worth of actions. Of course, neither of these points were original. The first point was made by Fichte in his review of Leonhard Creuzer's *Skeptische Betrachtungen über die Freiheit des Willens*; and the second was made famous by Schiller in his *Anmut und Würde*.⁵²

Nevertheless, both show how well-versed Savigny was in current discussions about Kant's philosophy.

In the winter and spring of 1800 Savigny and friends continued their “*Symphilosophie*” about Kant's moral doctrines. As the discussions intensified, Savigny's reflections on Kant deepened in step with them. These reflections were now having a decisive effect on his nascent legal theory. Hence, in his January 3, 1800 letter to his friends, Savigny announced that he was now working on his lectures on criminal law, and that he was especially repelled by Kantian thinking in this field, which, he believed, needed to be countered with a strong antidote.⁵³ What this antidote should be Savigny does not explain; but in his later March 14 letter to his friends he sketches his objections against Kant's theory of punishment.⁵⁴ Following Leonhard Creuzer's interpretation,⁵⁵ Savigny says that Kant's theory reduces down to two premises: (1) that coercion against a person is right only if that person has done something wrong; (2) that the criterion for judging the degree of punishment is the degree of wrong. Regarding the first point, Savigny finds it a simple *non sequitur*: just because someone has done something wrong, it does not *ipso facto* follow that we have the right to punish them. Regarding the second point, he asks how Kant can determine the appropriate degree of punishment if he claims that real morality of our actions is hidden from us. Furthermore, while punishment is indeed a matter of degree, the rightness or wrongness of actions is not; so how does Kant measure the appropriate degree of punishment?

Later in the spring of 1800, Savigny wrote another long letter to his friends discussing Kant's moral philosophy. The opening paragraph is very revealing about Savigny's attitude toward Kant and his romantic leanings. For there he cites some of Friedrich Schlegel's latest aphorisms in the *Athenäum* to define his general position: “The demands and signs of a morals that would be more than the practical part of philosophy are becoming louder and clearer.” And: “The duty of the Kantian stands to the command of honor, the voice of conscience and divinity in us as the dried plant to the fresh flower on the living stem.”⁵⁶ These aphorisms reflect Savigny's views, stated in earlier letters, that moral worth came from passions, from love and friendship, and that moral philosophy had given no place to them. Rather than reflecting the concrete human individual, moral philosophy had created nothing more than an artificial abstraction.⁵⁷

By the summer of 1800 Savigny had developed a more tempered and balanced assessment of Kant's moral philosophy. Hence in his July 6, 1800, letter to Weinrich,

we find him both criticizing and defending Kant.⁵⁸ Although he accepts Weinrich's point that the reason for a moral action must be its goal, he does not agree with him that all moral actions have the same kind of goal, as if what makes them moral would be a specific kind of purpose or end, viz., happiness. To this extent, Savigny says, he is a Kantian. But he then turns around and declares that he is not a Kantian insofar as he does not think Kant provides sufficient reasons for a moral skeptic to act on the moral law. Though Kant is right to insist that moral laws should be universalizable, he cannot give a good reason for why we should act on universalizable maxims. Why, after all, should I be moral? Why should it trouble an egoist that, if his maxim were universalized, it would undermine the welfare of everyone else? I am obliged to care for the interests of others, Savigny argues, only if I have given my consent to a contract whose provisions are live and let live. But that leaves the crucial question: Why should I make such a contract? He then concludes that the demand that I universalize my maxims is nothing more than “a *salto mortale*.”

Such, in crude summary, were the young Savigny's main criticisms of Kant, which scarcely appear in his later writings. Although they are not decisive objections, they are at least plausible ones, and show at the very least that Savigny's rejection of the natural law tradition was philosophically motivated. Whatever their merits, they were crucial in turning Savigny away from the natural law tradition. Savigny's early interest in that tradition—his hope that it would provide him with a higher standpoint above all positive law—had now been utterly undermined by his own criticisms of Kant. The apparent emptiness of the categorical imperative, the alleged *non sequitur* in Kant's rationale for punishment, and the incapacity of Kant to provide a reason to act morally, had all convinced him that pure reason alone cannot be the basis for morals or the law. But if that is the case, what hope could there be for the idea of natural law? There could be no going back to the natural law tradition of Leibniz and Wolff, whose dogmatic metaphysics had been so thoroughly undermined by Kant's critique of metaphysics. But there could also be no way of going forward, of basing *Naturrecht* on Kantian criticism, which had been Savigny's earlier hopes. With Savigny's loss of faith in the categorical imperative his hopes in a new foundation for *Naturrecht* faded too. There would now have to be a completely new approach to, and foundation for, jurisprudence. Just what that these would be we must now consider.

4. First lectures

Savigny first reflections on the aims and methods of jurisprudence appear in some of his earliest lectures in Marburg, more specifically, his lectures on *Juristische Methodenlehre* which he gave in the summer semester of 1802 and the winter semester of 1802–3. These lectures, which were published in their original form only in 1993, are crucial for

an understanding of the genesis of Savigny's historicism.⁵⁹ It is in these lectures that Savigny first sketches his historical conception of jurisprudence, lays the foundation for his methodology, and turns his back on the natural law tradition.

The aim of Savigny's lectures was ambitious: to raise jurisprudence to the status of a science. There was nothing new to this ambition, of course, which goes back to his final student days. But Savigny now sets it in a new direction, because he no longer seeks the foundation for jurisprudence in *Naturrecht*. It was crucial to Savigny that jurisprudence be autonomous, a science in its own right, independent of the guidelines of other disciplines. One of these disciplines, it now turns out, is philosophy, which is responsible for *Naturrecht*.

The first prerequisite for jurisprudence to become a science, Savigny insists, is that it have a rigorous methodology. It is only by such a methodology, he argues, that it can become independent, operating according to "the laws of its own nature" (137). All disciplines have their methods, Savigny says, but they are seldom brought to self-consciousness and formulated into a system. It is now the mission of Savigny's lectures to do just that: they will make explicit and systematize the methodology of jurisprudence.

To that end, Savigny's first task was to define the subject matter of jurisprudence. Its specific subject matter, he tells us, is the legislative function of the state (139). Savigny simply equates jurisprudence (*Jurisprudenz*) with the science of legislation (*Gesetzgebungswissenschaft*). There are two parts to jurisprudence corresponding to the two kinds of legislation: criminal and private or civil law. Since the laws laid down by the state are positive laws, the specific subject matter of jurisprudence is *positivelaw*. Simply by definition, then, Savigny had excluded natural law from the realm of jurisprudence.

To justify this conception of jurisprudence, Savigny provides a brief analysis of the purpose of government. The state is necessary, we are told, to ensure the rights of individuals, to limit the arbitrary actions of one person against another. Its legislative function is therefore to prevent and resolve conflicts between individuals. Since conflicts have to be resolved in an objective and impartial manner, and since judges can be partial and arbitrary themselves, it is necessary that their decisions be governed by the law, which alone ensures impartiality and objectivity in government (140).

Hence the specific subject of jurisprudence is the law (*das Gesetz*). Since there are two kinds of law—civil and criminal—there are two corresponding branches of jurisprudence (139–40).

True to his narrow conception of jurisprudence, Savigny insists that constitutional law (*Staatsrecht*) has no place in the discipline (139). The stated reason for such gerrymandering is purely logical: that jurisprudence presupposes that the state already exists and that it is already performing its legislative function; the laws that it studies therefore take place within a constitution, and so do not define or make one. Savigny has a deeper reason, however, for excluding constitutional law: he wants jurisprudence to avoid all the difficult political issues about the proper form of government and who should be a ruler. If these issues were to be imported into jurisprudence, there would be no end to controversy, and thus no credible claim to scientific status. Hence Savigny insists that the jurist bracket intractable normative questions and focus instead simply upon the factual questions of what laws have been made. After all, the business of the jurist is to know what the law *is*, not what it *ought to be*.

It is important to see, however, that Savigny eventually abandoned his early narrow conception of jurisprudence. Indeed, the thesis that the realm of right is circumscribed by laws made by a legislative body was the very antithesis of his later historicist doctrine, according to which right is determined by the *Volksgeist*. Even in the 1802 lectures, however, there were signs that this narrow conception of jurisprudence would not last, for it clashed with clear anticipations of his later historicist doctrine. Hence Savigny states that one task of jurisprudence is to construct a *Rechtsgeschichte*, which explains the genesis of law by its social and political context (142). In later lectures the political aspect of jurisprudence will be even more emphasized. In the introduction to the summer 1809 lectures on the Pandects, for example, Savigny stresses the close connection between jurisprudence and the history of the state (226). This growing emphasis on the connection between law and political history doomed the narrow conception of jurisprudence. For if laws have to be understood in their political and historical context, how can one exclude constitutional law from jurisprudence?

To some extent, then, Savigny's later historicist doctrine is already fully developed in his early 1802 lectures. Although Savigny limits jurisprudence to the realm of positive law instituted by legislative power, he insists that its central task is to provide a *historical* account of that positive law. "The aim of jurisprudence," he states, "is to present historically (*historisch darzustellen*) the legislative function of the state." (139). The difference with his later doctrine is only that Savigny will expand his historical method so that it treats all forms of positive laws, whether laid down by the state or not. Though the method is the same, its domain is extended.

For his new historical conception of jurisprudence, Savigny provides an explicit argument, which deserves careful scrutiny. The argument has two premises, both explicit in Savigny's text. First, jurisprudence treats the law as given (139); and, second, all knowledge of the given is historical (140). Both premises emerge when Savigny

reasons: “All knowledge of something objectively given one calls *historical knowledge*; consequently, the whole character of legislative science is historical...” (140). Savigny's argument is at first sight puzzling, because it equates knowledge of something given with historical knowledge. Why should this be so? The missing premise to Savigny's argument has a venerable history, which we can ultimately trace back to Plato's *Republic*: that knowledge through reason deals with eternal forms, whereas knowledge through the senses concerns changing particular things, which therefore have a history. Plato's distinction was the beginning of a long tradition, which identifies knowledge of matter of fact with historical knowledge.⁶⁰ According to this tradition, the distinction between *cognitio ex datis* and *cognitio ex principiis*, factual and rational knowledge, is fundamentally a distinction between *historia* and *philosophia*. This classical distinction was upheld in modern philosophy. Hence Wolff gave it great prominence in his classification of the sciences;⁶¹ and Kant reaffirmed it in the *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*.⁶² While Savigny maintains this classical distinction, he breaks radically from Wolff and Kant in one crucial respect: his central thesis that *historia* can also be *scientia*. While Wolff and Kant were willing to grant the title of *scientia* only to rational knowledge, Savigny, following Chladenius and the historicist tradition, wants to extend it to historical knowledge. Only in that way could jurisprudence become a scientific discipline in its own right.

Savigny's historical conception of jurisprudence in the 1802 lectures goes far beyond, however, any simple equation of empirical with historical knowledge. There is a striking passage in the lectures where Savigny declares that jurisprudence should become “historical treatment in the proper sense,” which means that it should connect law with the history of the state and the people. Such an historical treatment will not regard legislation synchronically as a static or eternal system of laws, but diachronically according to the development of the legislative power of the state. The whole system of laws, which we reconstruct timelessly according to reason, must then be placed in history, so that it too is seen in development. And so Savigny writes, schematically but clearly:

A new perspective for the science: *historical* treatment in the proper sense, i.e., treatment of legislation as developing in a given time.—Connection of our science with the history of the state and people.—The *system itself* must be thought as in development. (93; cf. 142)

In the 1802 lectures Savigny goes into more systematic detail about his historical conception of jurisprudence. There are two parts to jurisprudence as an historical

science. There is the historical in the proper sense, and the exegetical or philological. The historical in the proper sense is essentially legal history (*Rechtsgeschichte*), which treats law within the history of the state and its people (142). The exegetical or philological consists in the interpretation of legal texts. Savigny then sketches his theory of interpretation—years before Boeckh's first Berlin lectures and Schleiermacher's earliest notes on hermeneutics.⁶³ He begins by raising the general Kantian-style question: How is interpretation possible? (143) All interpretation has to be both individual and universal: it has to be individual in reconstructing the particularity of a text, i.e., how it differs from other texts; but it also has to be universal in placing the text in its general context and seeing how it illustrates the thinking of its time and place (147). Here Savigny assumes, much like Boeckh and Schleiermacher after him, that interpretation moves constantly back and forth between part and whole, where we understand the part better from the whole and the whole better from the part. There are three aspects to all interpretation: logical, grammatical and historical. The logical is the understanding of meaning, the content of a statement or text; the grammatical is the understanding of the grammar and vocabulary in which a text was written; and the historical is understanding a text in its general context. Savigny stresses that the grammatical and historical aspects are the preconditions for the logical: without understanding the language in which it was written, and without understanding the context in which it is written, it is impossible to reconstruct the meaning of a text. Logical interpretation involves reconstructing the content of the law; i.e., it rethinks (*nachdenkt*) the thought (*der Gedanke*) that went into the law (143). Such understanding requires that the interpreter places himself in the standpoint of those who made the law, and that he not impose contemporary meanings upon it (144). But this does not necessarily require that one understands the psychological *intentions* behind the lawmakers themselves (144). There is no necessary correspondence, Savigny realizes, between the content of the law and the intentions of the lawmakers. What they mean and what they say, even if placed in its historical context, might differ. This distinction plays a more important role in Savigny than in Chladenius, where it is made only to be cast aside in favor of psychological interpretation.⁶⁴

Although Savigny assures us in the 1802 lectures that “the whole character of jurisprudence is historical,” his general conception of jurisprudence proves to be much more complicated. For he also tells us that jurisprudence is as philosophical as it is historical, and that there are two halves to jurisprudence, one historical and the other philosophical (141) While the historical side of jurisprudence deals with history proper and exegesis, the philosophical side deals with its first principles and systematic exposition. Savigny gives great importance to the philosophical side of jurisprudence because he, like most of his contemporaries, thinks that a discipline is a science only to

the extent that it is systematic. Without its philosophical element, then, jurisprudence would not be a science at all.

Though Savigny gives great importance to both the historical and philosophical sides of jurisprudence, his ultimate ideal is their synthesis. Jurisprudence should be a perfect union of historical and philosophical knowledge. Such an ideal was commonplace among eighteenth-century German jurists.⁶⁵ There was, however, something new and radical in Savigny's conception of this ideal: the lesser significance he gave to the philosophical side of jurisprudence. For many of Savigny's contemporaries and predecessors, the philosophical side of jurisprudence meant not only its formal and systematic aspect but also a more substantive one, i.e., natural law, which was given precedence over positive law and provided the foundation for it. For Savigny, however, the philosophical side of jurisprudence is strictly limited to its formal and systematic side. It provides no backdoor for the re-entry of natural law, which is now banished from the palace of jurisprudence. This was only in keeping with Savigny's more modest conception of the powers of reason, which we have examined in the previous section. According to that conception, reason has a strictly *formal* role, i.e., it systematizes and brings order into laws, which are strictly given to it; but it has no *material* or *substantive* role, i.e., it prescribes no laws of its own.

Savigny's critical stance toward the natural-law tradition appears in his discussion of the philosophical side of jurisprudence. We learn that the task of the philosophical jurist is to create a system, and that an adequate system is one where there is unity in multiplicity, i.e., where the formulation of general principles accurately reflects the variety of laws. There are two ways the philosophical jurist can fail in his role, Savigny says. One is to *undersystematize*, so that the multiplicity of given laws lacks unity; but the other is to *oversystematize*, so that one imposes unity upon the multiplicity of given laws (160–1). It is especially the second shortcoming that bothers Savigny. There is a tendency afoot nowadays, he complains, to oversystematize, to perfect jurisprudence through formalizing it (170). The operating maxim behind this tendency is “improvement of jurisprudence through its form.” This tendency, Savigny says pointedly, is sometimes called “*Naturrecht*” (170). The procedure used by these philosophers is to attempt a *deduction* of the law, i.e., they attempt to show how a given law is the necessary conclusion of certain premises (163). Hence, for these philosophers, the correct interpretation of the law consists in those premises from which the law follows as a conclusion. Savigny objects to this procedure on two grounds: partly because the construction is arbitrary—one adds or deletes premises to get the result one wants—but also because the premises used in the derivation need not be the actual reason for the law (164). There can be many purely logical derivations for the same conclusion, so that the formal procedure alone need not provide an adequate interpretation of the law. Savigny's objection here is not to derivation or deduction as such, for he realizes

that all systematization has to involve deduction, derivation of a law from higher principles; his point is only that these principles cannot be simply invented *a priori*; they have to be adequate to the totality of *given* laws. It is a telling indication of Savigny's philosophical loyalties that he refers approvingly to Jakob Fries, the nemesis of the formalists, Reinhold, Fichte and Schelling (106).⁶⁶ He endorses Fries claim that the *a priori* method used by these philosophers, which leads them to impose preconceived principles upon the multiplicity of empirical laws, is of little use in jurisprudence.

Toward the close of his discussion of methodology, Savigny finally settles his accounts with the natural law tradition (173). The usual view is that the study of natural law should precede positive jurisprudence. But Savigny begs to differ. He says that it would be a degradation of a philosophical science to make it a mere propaedeutic to an historical science. But his real concern is with the status of the historical science, which he does not want to be a mere ancillary to philosophy. It is not necessary to study philosophy before the law, Savigny insists, because we can understand what we need in jurisprudence without having to bother ourselves with philosophy. This is born out for him by the historical fact that the greatest periods of jurisprudence were those when philosophy was in decline. And so Savigny closes with this advice to the student: "Whoever is not driven to philosophy should leave it alone. Its study demands not only a half year but an entire life time." (173). These were fateful lines. With them, Savigny bid adieu forever to his first love, *Naturrecht*.

5. The codification controversy: legal and political issues

The historical school was born in the aftermath of the famous "codification controversy," or *Kodifikationsstreit*, which began in 1814. Not the least consequence of this dispute was Savigny's and Eichheim's decision to found the *Zeitschrift für geschichtliche Rechtswissenschaft*, which represented the standpoint of the newly baptized "historical school." After the publication of the *Zeitschrift*, the historical school became a self-conscious, organized and recognized force in German intellectual life.

The immediate question behind the *Kodifikationsstreit* was whether Germany, after the defeat of Napoleon, should have a new civil code or whether it should return to its old constitution, the collage of Roman, canon and customary law of the Holy Roman Empire. The chief antagonists in the *Kodifikationsstreit* were Savigny and Anton Friedrich Thibaut (1772–1840), professor of jurisprudence in Heidelberg, an old admirer and acquaintance of Savigny, and one of the leading experts on civil law in Germany. While Thibaut argued the case for a new civil code, Savigny defended the old system. The dispute began as an exchange between Savigny and Thibaut, but it soon gained the attention of the public at large, becoming a subject of discussion in

salons, journals and reading clubs. Both sides to the dispute had their allies: Hugo, Niebuhr and the Grimm brothers supported Savigny, whereas Anselm von Feuerbach and Hegel stood by Thibaut.

No mere academic dispute, the *Kodifikationsstreit* concerned pressing practical and political issues. After Napoleon's defeat at Leipzig in October 1813, French hegemony in Germany came to a complete and abrupt end. The Confederation of the Rhine, the association of German states allied with France, collapsed virtually overnight. The ensuing political vacuum raised a profound legal question: What should be the system of civil law for the German states? There were three options. First, one could return to the old order, i.e., the combination of Roman, canon and common law, which had governed Germany since the Holy Roman Empire. Second, one could retain the *Code Napoleon*, the new system of civil laws imposed by the French in 1804. Or, third, one could develop an entirely new legal code, one suited to the new age like the *Code Napoleon* but created by Germans themselves. Of all these options, the least tenable was the retention of the *Code Napoleon*. *Prima facie* this is surprising, since the *Code* was widely admired, hailed as a model of clarity and concision for summarizing all civil law in only 2281 Articles. In a stroke the *Code* had liberalized and modernized Germany, reforming it according to the principles of liberty and equality. Nevertheless, the *Code Napoleon* had one fatal drawback: it was not German. It had been imposed by the French, so that whatever its merits, it was tainted with the stigma of an alien conqueror. The first and third options also had their problems. The chief difficulty with the first was the disorder, complexity and obscurity of Roman law, which consisted in a vast collection of fragments and commentaries upon them, the so-called *corpus juris civilis*. To many lawyers and judges, these fragments were also hopelessly antiquated, more appropriate for the government of ancient Rome than modern Germany. What was one to do, for example, with Roman law on slavery? The third option, creating a completely new code for all the German states, seemed absurdly ambitious, indeed utterly quixotic. For when could all these states ever agree on anything? And how could they find and fund the expertise for such a monumental labor? Furthermore, creating a new legal code from scratch had all the associations of French revolutionary practice, which had been utterly discredited by the beginning of the nineteenth century. Still, there had been some noteworthy Germanic precedents for a new code, precedents which made it seem much less quixotic. In the 1780s Friedrich II established a new legal code for Prussia, his *Allgemeines Landrecht*; and in 1814 Austria had introduced a new system of laws, its *Allgemeines Bürgerliches Gesetzbuch*. It was on the basis of such worthy precedents that the champions of a new legal code could nurture their hopes. These reformers dreamed of doing for the entire German Reich what these codes had done for Prussia and Austria.

Though it was less apparent, the *Kodifikationsstreit* concerned much more than the system of civil law. Also at stake were profound questions of political sovereignty. The champions of codification held that the sole source of sovereignty should be the legislative power of the state, so that all legal questions should be determinable simply

by consulting the new legal code. An independent judiciary, which could interpret and apply the law, would therefore amount to a limitation of state sovereignty. The defenders of the old order, however, maintained that the ultimate source of the law lay with the spirit of a nation, which involved all its characteristic customs, laws and values, whether enshrined in a legal code or not. The chief representatives of the spirit of a nation were learned jurists, who, through a profound study of the origins of the laws, understood their meaning and purpose. The great advantage of the old constitution was that only these jurists had the right to interpret the law, which alone would ensure fairness in disputes between citizens and government; such an independent judiciary could then serve as a bulwark of ancient liberties against tyranny.

The case for a new legal code was put forward by Thibaut in his pamphlet *Über die Nothwendigkeit eines allgemeinen bürgerlichen Rechts für Deutschland*.⁶⁷ Thibaut believed that the political vacuum after the defeat of Napoleon presented Germany with not only unique challenges but also unique opportunities. Now was the time to reform its antiquated system of civil law, to create order and clarity where there had been for centuries chaos and darkness. After studying and teaching civil law for decades, Thibaut came to the conclusion that the system of civil laws in Germany was in need of “a complete quick reformation” (41), and that there should be a single simple and clear law book for all the German states. Thibaut took it as a given that Germany would have to remain divided into many small states; he was indeed opposed to the idea of a single national state because it would create too much uniformity and repress the variety and individuality of the separate German lands. Nevertheless, he was convinced that a single civil code for all the German states would help to create and sustain the sense of a common German identity, which was a virtual necessity given the new national self-awareness inspired by the recent wars against Napoleon (39, 48). Much of Thibaut's argument for a new code rested upon his assessment of Roman law, a field in which he was an acknowledged master. In his opinion, the problems with Roman law were insuperable, unrectifiable by the old practice of patchwork repairs. There was no certified and definite set of texts that could count as Roman law, but only a vast collection of fragments. No one, not even after a lifetime of study, could master the body of Roman law; there was no guiding thread to find the way through this vast labyrinth. There was also no way one could bring system and order into the mass of fragments, partly because there was no obvious principle of selection about which were the most important, and partly because scholars constantly disagreed about the meaning of each of the fragments (44). The ultimate conclusion after the study of any legal issue in Roman law could only be, Thibaut said, “*non liquet*,” i.e., “it is not clear.”⁶⁸

Most of Thibaut's argument against Roman law was rationalist in spirit. His chief criticism is that it lacks the clarity, completeness and organization required of any satisfactory system of laws (41). It is noteworthy, however, that Thibaut added some historicist arguments all his own. For he contends that the ideas of Roman law were appropriate and adequate to Roman life and culture during the decline of the Empire, and they are therefore scarcely suitable for German life today (42–43). We do not have a sufficient idea of Roman life to understand the full meaning of Roman law; and even if we did, why should what the Romans did be binding on us now? With this argument Thibaut turned the historicist conception of law against itself, an objection, as we shall soon see, that would prove exceptionally challenging for Savigny.

All the disadvantages of retaining Roman law are vastly outweighed, Thibaut believed, by the great advantages of a new civil code. A new civil code would be the product of German autonomy, of the Germans' "own energy and activity" and one suiting the needs of the time and the people (45). It could be fully rational in its structure, having order, clarity and systematic organization, so that cases could be more effectively and easily decided. Everyone could know the basis of the laws without needing to engage in esoteric historical research (46). Thibaut assumes a complete law book will contain a few simple principles, comprehensible even to the layman, and that it can be established on the basis of reason alone without having to resort to historical learning (45–6). It is significant that one of Thibaut's teachers was Kant, a thinker whom he greatly admired and to whom he felt greatly indebted.⁶⁹ Although Thibaut makes no explicit use of Kantian doctrine in his pamphlet, Kantian themes still surface, implicitly but unmistakably. Hence Thibaut makes use of the criterion of publicity (51–3), refers to the ideal of autonomy (45), and cites the adage *Sapere aude!* (56).

One of the most interesting and important passages of Thibaut's essay comes when he discusses historicist objections against his own proposal. The most plausible objection he finds in the claim that right depends on the spirit of a people, on its specific time, place and circumstances (53). This was virtually the position that Savigny would later pit against him. Thibaut counters that the objection is overstated. True to his Kantian roots, he insists that one cannot make suitability for time, place and nation the sole basis of right (53). This is to confuse the convenience of custom with what is according to right and reason (54). Thibaut acknowledges that local circumstances sometimes make it difficult to implement the law; but the mere difficulty of implementation does not abrogate from the responsibility to create just law. Civil laws, based on reason, should seldom bend with circumstances (54). Hence Thibaut finds the emphasis upon local difference and legal individualities in the states of the empire is grossly exaggerated. The only reason that laws are different is not because the sun shines differently on the other side of the creek but because so few legislators bother to co-operate with their neighbors (55).

When Thibaut's tract appeared in the summer of 1814 it had an electrifying effect upon Savigny. He reacted strongly against Thibaut's views, which he condemned in the harshest terms. Thibaut's tract was for him nothing less than a disgrace, "*eine Schandschrift*."⁷⁰ Perhaps part of the reason for Savigny's strong reaction was his professional rivalry with Thibaut, who was the other leading expert on Roman law, and who held a professorship in Heidelberg, a post he much coveted. More important than personal rivalry, however, was Thibaut's cavalier attitude toward Roman law. Thibaut had the *Frechheit* to call it into question, indeed to recommend its abolition. For Savigny, this was indeed a disgrace. Roman law was nothing short of sacred. It was the product of more than a thousand years of German history, and it was at the very heart of the culture of the Holy Roman Empire. To abolish it would be to deracinate Germany, to cut it loose from its historical moorings. Thus, to Savigny, Thibaut's tract was all too typical of the radical mentality of the Enlightenment, which was happy to abolish the reality of the past for the sake of a purely hypothetical and allegedly rational future. Since Thibaut's tract was getting much attention, it represented a very real danger: the destruction of Roman law and the independent judiciary needed to interpret it. Alarmed, Savigny resolved to write a countertract of his own. In a few feverish weeks in the summer of 1814, he dashed off a reply to Thibaut, his *Vom Beruf unsrer Zeit für Gesetzgebung und Rechtswissenschaft*. This little tract, which soon became the manifesto of the historical school, deserves careful examination.

Savigny begins his tract by defining the issues at stake. There can be two kinds of dispute, he says, friendly and hostile. There is a friendly dispute where one shares the same goals, differing about the means to attain them; and there is a hostile dispute where one differs about the goals themselves. Savigny thinks that he can have a friendly dispute with Thibaut, because he shares with him the same fundamental ideal: German unity (124). He differs with him only with regard to the means to achieve that end: whether it lies in a new written code or in retaining the old constitution. Savigny's claim that his dispute with Thibaut could be a friendly one seems belied by his hostile reaction to Thibaut's tract. Yet it was more than mere diplomacy and discretion. There was a strong core of truth to Savigny's claim, because, politically speaking, the two men were much closer than they seem. The conflict between Thibaut and Savigny was not that between a revolutionary and a conservative, as so often believed, but between two competing conceptions of moderate reform: whether it should be imposed wholesale from above by a legislative power, or evolved piecemeal from below by jurists interpreting the will of the people. Both Savigny and Thibaut were advocates of the *Rechtsstaat*, government according to law, which they regarded as a safe *via media* between *Fürst* and *Volk*, the extremes of absolutism and popular democracy. Although both men wanted national unity, they agreed that unity should be made not by the

people themselves but by an elite that represented them, whether legislators (Thibaut) or jurists (Savigny). Both men continued to uphold the value of monarchy.⁷¹

Given that they will have only a friendly dispute, Savigny says that there are two conflicting views about the means toward German unity. One is for the re-establishment of the old order, where each state has its own law book; the other is for the creation of a single law book for all German states (64). The first opinion is that of Rehberg, the second that of Thibaut. Savigny makes two general comments about the second opinion, which set the background for his critique of Thibaut and the exposition of his own view (64–5). First, the proposal for a written legal code derives from the idealism of the Enlightenment, which attempted to reform society according to the principles of reason. These principles were held to have a universal authority, valid for all people at all times and places, and so they were imposed with little feeling for the differences and characteristic qualities of a people, and with little regard for the history of a nation. While Savigny thinks that this tradition has lost much of its attraction, especially after all the catastrophes of the Revolutionary era, he states that it still has its followers, implying that one of them is Thibaut. Second, the proposal for a written legal code also assumes that all positive law derives from the prescriptions of legislative power. It was just this conception of positive law, which Savigny himself once endorsed in his early lectures, that will now be the chief target of his criticisms.

After defining the issues, Savigny sketches his own theory about the origin of the law (65–8), which is the very antithesis of Thibaut's. The law is not the product of a universal reason, still less of a legislative power, but of the beliefs and ways of life of a people (*Sitte und Volksglaube*) (68). Civil law is as characteristic of a nation as its language, customs and constitution; and to separate it from the culture of a nation is an artificial abstraction. The law therefore grows with a people, and it dies with them when a nation declines (67). “The proper seat of the law,” Savigny concludes, “lies in the common consciousness of the nation” (*das gemeinsamen Bewußtsein des Volkes*) (67), something he would later more colorfully call “*Volksgeist*.”

No sooner does Savigny state his general position than he is forced to make significant qualifications to it. Though he insists that the *basic principles* of law are based on the common consciousness of a nation, he admits that their detail or specific formulations arise from legal professionals, i.e., lawyers and judges (67). It is necessary to distinguish, he says, the *political* element of a law, which derives from the people, from the *technical* element, which derives from professionals. Savigny stresses that the work of the lawyers proceeds “entirely in an organic manner, without arbitrariness and design,” as if it were continuous with the development of the nation as a whole. Here it is clear that the relation of the law with “common consciousness” has become stretched or diluted; but it was vital to Savigny that there still be some close affinity, which alone could warrant the claim of jurists to represent the spirit of the people. As if this

concession were not enough, Savigny makes two more: first, that sometimes foreign laws influence a nation, so that all its laws are not indigenous; second, that sometimes positive laws are the work of legislative power after all (68). When all these qualifications are added together, they weaken Savigny's general thesis considerably. All that he can claim is that *some* principles of civil law derive, *in some extenuated but unspecified fashion*, from the characteristic way of life of a people. We will see in the next section how the older Savigny addressed some of these issues.

Savigny's theory about the origin of the law is the basis for his reaction against written legal codes. If law is an integral part of a culture, and if the very identity of a culture rests on each of its parts, one should not attempt radical changes, like imposing a written legal code, because this could have unpredictable widespread consequences for the culture as a whole. Rather than imposing the law abruptly from above, according to the plans of legislators, one should allow it to develop gradually from below, according to the evolution of the ways of life of a people. Savigny's chief complaint against the apostles of a legal code is that they lack "historical sense", i.e., they assume that what is true for us in our time is true for all people at all times (108). Since they are confident that their principles have universal authority, they do not hesitate to impose them upon a people, regardless of its specific circumstances, and regardless of its own unique development. This point had been made many times in the 1790s, when Möser, Rehberg and Gentz warned against the attempts of the French radicals to impose wholesale social and political change upon France. Savigny now applies their teachings against the latest German reformers.

Apart from this general objection, Savigny saw insuperable theoretical and practical difficulties in any attempt to recreate a new legal code. The theoretical difficulties came from the impossible demands placed upon the new law books. These books are supposed to be complete, so that all laws are in them; and they were supposed to be precise, so that each case could be decided by the application of a simple rule (69–71). But, as all legal practitioners know, no law book is ever complete, because there are always new cases; and there are no simple mechanical procedures for deciding them, because each case is unique. Savigny implies that the rationalist proposals, in attempting to find a rule for everything, fail to appreciate the role of judgment, which can never be guided completely by rules because it always involves decision and discretion. The indispensable place for decision and discretion demonstrates the need for an independent judiciary to interpret and apply the law. The chief *practical* difficulty in formulating a new legal code arises from the sheer lack of properly trained lawyers. Drafting a legal code for an entire country requires a rare combination of skills. Each jurist should have "a double sense": an historical sense, which makes him aware of the individuality of his age; and a systematic sense, which relates each concept and proposition to a whole (81). But this combination is seldom found nowadays, Savigny complains. Thibaut's answer to this difficulty is that the legal code should be the work of a committee or college, of many people pooling their expertise; but Savigny thinks that the collective effort of specialists is likely to result only in a patchwork lacking all organic unity (124). To have

the requisite unity, the legal code should be the work of a single individual. Savigny, true to his romantic roots, implies that this individual would have to be a genius.

The longest chapter of Savigny's tract is devoted to a detailed examination of the three recent legal codes, the *Code Napoleon*, the Prussian *Allgemeines Landrecht* and Austrian *Allgemeines Gesetzbuch*. His aim in discussing these codes is, of course, to undermine the precedents for Thibaut's proposal. Predictably, the *Code Napoleon* is given short shrift, because of its French origins. Savigny is under no illusion whatsoever about the political purpose behind it: to solidify French hegemony over Europe (84). This alone was for him sufficient reason to reject it, though he also argues that the code had none of the technical merits often attributed to it. Regarding the *Allgemeines Landrecht*, Savigny found its foundation infected with profound ambiguities. It was first meant to be a mechanical procedure to decide each case, leaving no room for the discretion of judges or lawyers; but it was eventually recognized that it could at best provide only a rough guideline for judicial and legal practice. Wisely, the Austrian *Gesetzbuch* never attempted to provide such a mechanical procedure; but its principles were too general and vague for them to be of much use in determining particular cases (101). Ultimately, both the *Landrecht* and the *Gesetzbuch* suffer from the same fatal error: a chasm between general principle and individual cases, which leaves far too much room for arbitrariness (98). All that can fill this gap, Savigny believes, is an historical jurisprudence that shows how universal rules are involved in particular cases and how particular cases illustrate general principles. The ability to work between these levels was the great merit of the great Roman jurists—the very people that Thibaut wants to eradicate.

Much of Savigny's tract is an apology for Roman law. What the young Savigny once saw in natural law—a safe redoubt against all the turmoil of his age—he eventually found in Roman law. But, *prima facie* this is puzzling. For we expect romantics to take modernist stands against neo-classicism, as Friedrich Schlegel did in advocating romantic poetry, and as Herder did in championing a new German poetry. But here the roles are reversed. While Thibaut is the modernist, ready to lay aside the entire system of Roman law to start on a new foundation, Savigny is the neo-classicist, who continues to see Roman law as the still unsurpassed foundation for modern law. Seen more closely, however, Savigny's defense of Roman law is, just as the name suggests, all too romantic.⁷² We have already seen how Savigny shared the early romantic nostalgia for the old constitution of the Holy Roman Empire. Savigny cherished Roman law because it was woven into the very fabric of that constitution. Roman law was the legal basis for two fundamental institutions of the Empire: the *Reichskammergericht*, the common court of the empire established in 1495, which would arbitrate disputes between citizens and their princes; and *Aktenversendung*, where cases could be submitted to law faculty committees for adjudication rather than local courts subject to a

prince. It was because of these institutions that Roman law acquired a reputation as a law of fairness and as a bulwark against tyranny. Last but not least, since Roman law required learned scholars to interpret it, it also provided a rationale for an independent judiciary, who could serve as the ultimate tribunal of justice. So, for Savigny, it was not simply that Roman law was tradition, the hallowed practice of centuries; it stood for ancient liberties, a bulwark against absolutism.

Apart from the political advantages, it is also striking that Savigny saw Roman law as a perfectly rational structure, a systematic unity, which one could see if one only got beyond its appearance—a mass of fragments—and investigated its structure with sufficient rigor and depth. What was great about Roman law was its power to unite general laws with particular cases. The Roman lawyers achieved a perfect synthesis of theory and practice, because they saw in each particular case the general principle, and in each general principle the particular case (74, 113). Hence Savigny's clash with Thibaut was ultimately not a battle between a traditionalist and rationalist, for both Savigny and Thibaut made the same rational demands upon the law, i.e., systematic unity and a close union of theory and practice. Where Savigny differed from Thibaut was in believing that these requirements were already fully met in Roman law. What Thibaut sought as a regulative ideal—systematic unity, the power to unite theory and practice—that Savigny found as a given reality.

What was Savigny's response to Thibaut's point that retaining Roman law amounts to a forfeiture of German autonomy? This was an apparently telling objection, revealing a deeper inconsistency in Savigny's position. According to Savigny's *Volksgeist* theory, systems of law are individual, the product of a specific people at a specific time and place. Roman law was a part and product of the ancient Roman *Volksgeist*, and therefore hardly appropriate, it seemed, for modern Germans. Not blind to this apparent inconsistency, Savigny went to great lengths and pains to resolve it. His first line of reply is that Roman law, despite the misleading connotations of the name, was not a foreign imposition upon Germany (77). It is a mistake to assume, he argues, that the Germans would have developed their own conception of law apart from the Romans. The Germans adopted Roman law from necessity as the only solution to their own problems. Because the German tribes were scattered far and wide, they did not have the opportunity to develop a code of law for a single people. Hence Savigny implies that Roman law, despite the misleading connotations of the name, was adapted to, and grew out of, German conditions.

Savigny's response to Thibaut's objection in the *Beruf*, though sketchy and brief, was only the beginning. For Savigny was preparing a much more extensive and potent reply to Thibaut, one he was finally rushing into print now that the *Kodifikationsstreit* had incited him. This reply was nothing less than Savigny's *magnum opus*, his seven-volume *Geschichte des römischen Rechts im Mittelalter*.²³ This work was responsible for

reviving the stature of Roman law in Germany when it seemed headed for irreversible decline. Though Savigny began to publish it in 1815, he had been preparing it for over ten years. The *Geschichte* is best seen as Savigny's ultimate response to the apparent deeper tension in his position.⁷⁴ Savigny's devotion to Roman law, which goes back to his Marburg years, seemed to violate his own patriotic sensibilities, which valued characteristic German values and virtues. So how could he square Roman law with the German *Volksgeist*? The main argument in the *Geschichte* answers just this question. Savigny contends that Roman law was an integral part of the German *Volksgeist* because the Roman legal system was never really abolished after the conquest of the Roman empire but was assimilated and internalized by the German conquerors. There was a change in the top administrators of the law; the German *Graf* replaced the Roman *Centarius*; but the legal institutions and structure under them remained essentially the same.⁷⁵ The Germans never annihilated the Romans, nor forced them to assimilate; instead, they conceded them their original rights, so that in many ways they were better off under German than Roman rule.⁷⁶ The most remarkable feature about Roman institutions and laws after the collapse of the empire, Savigny claims, is their persistence, their endurance throughout the Middle Ages. If German life was Romanized by assimilating Roman institutions, Roman life was also Germanized by serving German rulers and interests. Roman law simply became part of the warp and woof of German life and culture. Thus Savigny's argument in the *Geschichte* provided a completely new way of looking at Roman law. The standard view about Roman law—that it had been introduced wholesale in the twelfth century by the Emperor Lothar—seemed to vindicate the Roman yoke theory. But this view had been utterly discredited in 1643 by Hermann Conring, who had argued in his *De origine juris Germanici* that Roman law had been introduced only in a piecemeal fashion in the fifteenth century.⁷⁷ Savigny accepts Conring's thesis that the standard view is false; but he rejects his claim that Roman law was introduced only piecemeal later on. Rather, it was integral to German institutions and practice ever since the conquest of the Roman empire.

Behind Savigny's passionate defense of Roman law it is possible to see a concern for his own profession. Generations of German lawyers had been trained to acquire the skills to read and interpret the corpus of Roman law. Thanks to Roman law, knowledge of the law had become esoteric, the preserve of a trained elite. Sure enough, this concern surfaces toward the close of his *Beruf* when Savigny insists that there can be no science of law if the only object of study were the new law books (121). For Thibaut, the need for a learned elite to interpret Roman law was one of the main reasons for

abolishing it; but, for Savigny, this was not a problem but a solution. For it was precisely through an independent judiciary, having irreplaceable skills and learning, that one could uphold ancient liberties and protect a nation from the usurpations of princes. This role of jurists as the true leaders and representatives of the people comes to the fore at the close of Savigny's tract. Here Savigny claims that jurists should be in the vanguard in the quest for German unity, because they alone can uncover the common ideals behind their system of civil law, the general principles that are upheld in all German lands (123). What will ultimately unify Germany, Savigny believes, is "a progressive legal science, one which will be common to the entire nation" (126). Thus Savigny's ideal republic was one where not philosophers but jurists would be kings.

For all his loyalty to Roman law, it is striking that Savigny ends his tract by looking forward to the day when the Germans will develop their "own, national law" (*eigenes, nationales Recht*) (115). They will reach this stage, he predicts, only when they have a properly educated cadre of lawyers who have mastered the historical material; then they will be able to leave Roman law to history. They will then have developed their own "completely unique and new culture" (*ganz eigene und neue Bildung*), which will cease to be "a pale imitation of Roman culture" (115). In these remarkable lines toward the close of Savigny's tract we can see that he accepts Thibaut's ideal of a new constitution after all; his only difference with Thibaut concerns how that ideal is to be attained: whether through the historical study of Roman law or through the creation of a new legal code.

6. The codification controversy: philosophical issues

As explained so far, the *Kodifikationsstreit* between Savigny and Thibaut seems to concern more political and practical issues than philosophical. The dispute seems to resolve around how to achieve national unity, and whether it is practical to achieve it through a national law book. It would be a mistake, however, to ignore the deeper philosophical differences between Savigny and Thibaut. Though these differences are often implicit, they are still fundamental in determining the contours of the dispute. They are most explicit in the preface to Savigny's new journal, *Zeitschrift für geschichtliche Rechtswissenschaft*, where Savigny makes his distinctions between the historical and non-historical schools, already briefly stated in section 1. Although Savigny's formulation of these differences is simplistic, it still serves as a useful guideline for understanding the basic philosophical issues. Implicit in Savigny's account are several issues. One concerns human nature itself, whether the identity of a human being depends upon, or is independent of, its specific place in society and history. The difference between the historical and philosophical schools is that between (what we would now call) an "atomistic" or "communitarian" anthropology. Another issue concerns the power of reason: Does reason have the power to be practical, to be the source of universal laws? Or is the content of the laws laid down by experience, and indeed by the practice of

past generations? Still another issue, perhaps the most basic of all, concerns the source of legal authority: reason or history?

Never in their polemics do Savigny and Thibaut explicitly discuss the first issue. Still, Savigny's formulation shows that it was decisive for him. His stance toward this issue is apparent from his preface to the *Zeitschrift*. The problem with the philosophical school, he argues, is that it makes an artificial and arbitrary separation of the part from the whole. This part can be the individual citizen, who is separated from his family, country and state; or it can be the present generation, which is separated from history. The separation of the individual from his family, nation and state is no longer regarded as plausible, Savigny says, because philosophers now recognize that the identity of the individual depends on the group. But the separation of the present from the past is still a persistent error, he insists, because of the ingrained habit we all have of generalizing from our age, as if how we see the world now were somehow natural or universal, the way things have always been. To prevent this endemic error, we need to develop our "historical sense," i.e., our awareness of historical change and how the identity of a people depends on its specific place in history.

It is clear from Savigny's argument that the historical school represents a methodological holism. This school claims that each individual has to be understood from its place in a whole, whether the part/whole relationship is synchronic or diachronic, whether it is that of a citizen to the state or that of a generation to history. Hence the basic fallacy of the philosophical school is hypostasis: it separates the part from the whole and gives it a self-sufficient identity, when in reality the part is intelligible only within the whole.

Although Savigny and Thibaut also never explicitly discussed the second issue, it still deeply divided them. Following Kant, Thibaut had assumed that reason by itself has the power to determine just laws, i.e., that for reason to know which laws are just, it does not have to consult experience. This assumption comes to the fore in *Über die Nothwendigkeit* when Thibaut claims that the basis of the law lies in understanding and reason, and that we can know the law without having to engage in the study of history (46, 54). It is even more explicit in Thibaut's review of Savigny's *Zeitschrift* when he declares that the ultimate guide to determine the validity of a law or practice has to be the understanding (*Verstand*): "The understanding will be, and must always remain, the last and final touchstone..."⁷⁸ Of course, it is just this assumption that Savigny contests. We have already seen how, even in his Marburg years, Savigny questioned the Kantian faith in the practical powers of reason. The great merit of historical sense is precisely that it exposes the rationalist faith in universal principles, which, upon examination, turn out to be nothing more than invalid generalizations from our own time and age. Savigny did not question the crucial role of reason in jurisprudence, which was fundamental in arguing cases and bringing unity and system into the body of

law; indeed, one of his reasons for admiring Roman law was its rational organization and the central role it gave to “leading principles” which, like mathematics, derive a multitude of results from a few premises. Nevertheless, these powers were, for Savigny, entirely *formal*, i.e., they could organize and systematize principles that were already accepted as right; they were not *material*, i.e., they could not determine right or wrong themselves.

It is with regard to the third issue that the disagreements between Savigny and Thibaut are most explicit, even if it too is discussed in little detail. In *Beruf* Savigny pits his own theory about the historical origin of law against Thibaut's view that the source of law lies in reason. But, as it stands, there is a deep ambiguity in their discussion about the sources or origins of the law. These can be factual, the actual historical processes by which the law arose; or they can be normative, the higher principles from which the law derives. In other words, is the dispute about the *quid facti?*, i.e., the factual causes of the law, or is it about the *quid juris?*, i.e., the normative basis of the law or what it ought to be. *Prima facie* Savigny simply confuses these issues, as if answers to questions about the origin of the law determine what the law ought to be.²⁹ He seems to reason that if laws really derive from the *Volksgeist* as a matter of history, they are *ipso facto* valid. But this seems a terrible confusion, a gross *non sequitur*, because, as Thibaut often insisted, laws hallowed by tradition can still be unjust. The most notorious cases were Roman laws treating children as property. Since tradition or history by itself cannot be normative, the only answer to the *quid juris?*, it seems, is by falling back on some form of rationality. Once we make this simple distinction between the factual and normative, it seems the whole dispute between Savigny and Thibaut disappears; it appears they were dealing with different questions: Thibaut with the *quid juris?*, Savigny with the *quid facti?*

Unfortunately, this simple solution does not work. Although Thibaut wanted to resolve matters along just these lines, Savigny would have been less conciliatory. For Savigny, there is no confusion between the *quid juris?* and *quid facti?* His theory about the *Volksgeist* was meant to answer the normative as well as the factual question, given that, in his view, reason alone could not answer the *quid juris?* Appealing to reason would provide no answer to the *quid juris?* simply because reason never speaks with a unanimous and certain voice; by itself it is a merely formal power, which gives no substantive conclusions about what we ought to do. That substance has to come from some other source. And what other source could there be but history? For Savigny, the appeal to history finally became that bulwark against the turmoil of the revolutionary era that he had once sought in natural law. Against Thibaut's reliance on natural law, Savigny could always point to his own disillusionment with that doctrine and reply: “I too tried that; but it does not work.”

7. Mature legal theory

Savigny's last major work was his *System des heutigen Römischen Rechts*, a massive eight-volume study of Roman law, which was published from 1840 to 1848.⁸⁰ The *System* is a systematic reconstruction of the Roman *jus civile*, not in its origins or historical development but in its present form as it prevails in the common law of some European states. Thus the *System* was Savigny's last grand effort to show the abiding relevance and value of Roman law.

The *System* is more, however, than just a technical study of Roman law. The first two sections of Book I are a detailed discussion of the source of law in general. The *System* is Savigny's major systematic exposition of his general legal theory, his final thoughts on the foundation of law.⁸¹ It answers many of the questions left unanswered in his earlier writings.

One of the tasks Savigny set for himself in his *System* was to explain his views about the origin of law, his *Volkgeist* theory, which he made a defining doctrine of the historical school.

Rudiments of that theory are in his early lectures, and it took on clear shape over the years.⁸² However, even in his 1814 *Beruf*, Savigny's exposition was vague; indeed, the very foundations of the theory had not been laid. In the second section of Book I of the *System* Savigny attempts to fill these gaps in his exposition.

Savigny begins his exposition with an account of the concept of right (*Recht*) (7; §4). He defines right as “the power to which an individual person is entitled” (*die der einzelnen Person zustehende Macht*), which consists in “a sphere in which his will rules, and rules with our consent.” Savigny does not provide any absolute rules about what this power should be or what the extent of this sphere should be. He states only that each right is part of a larger network of rights (*Rechtsverhältnis*), and that its meaning and extent depends upon this network. The network of right forms an organic whole, which consists in (a) the interconnection of its mutually supporting and conditioning parts, and (b) their progressive development (7–8; §4). Savigny insists that “the spiritual

element of jurisprudential practice” consists in constantly keeping in mind these two organic factors; in other words, in treating any individual case, we have to consider the relationships of all the parts and how they changed or developed.

Savigny distinguishes this organic manner of thinking about legal cases from the “merely mechanical”, which does nothing more than apply a rule to a particular case in a rote fashion. He applies his organic analogy on several levels: the particular case, the rule, the institution, and higher principles. These levels are like so many concentric circles, where lower levels are contained in higher ones. Just as the decision about a particular case is based upon a rule and the specific network of relationships, so the rule and network are parts of a wider institution of right, i.e., the established custom or structure of right (*Rechtsinstituts*) (9; §5). Further, the institution of right should be understood organically, i.e., in its living interconnections and its progressive development, so that it is seen as part of a whole, the wider web of legal relationships and higher laws, which also have an organic nature (10; §5).

After this account of the concept of right, Savigny raises anew his central question: What is the source of right (*Recht*)? The central terms here, *Quelle* or *Entstehungsgrund*, are left ambiguous, in the manner indicated earlier, because they could refer to the higher normative principles that justify right or the factual causes of right. It is clear, however, that Savigny's immediate interest is to answer the *quid facti?* rather than the *quid juris?*, because he says that he wants to explain the *existence* of positive right, which he defines as the law insofar as it exists or is given (14; §7). Nowhere in section 2 of Book I does Savigny give explicit normative value to positive right, and only once, an exception we will note below, does he discuss its moral authority. Nevertheless, throughout the *System* there is an *implicit* answer to the *quid juris?* For Savigny believes that the way right originates is also the way it should be, or that any normative claim about what right should be must be based on how it originates.

Regarding the *quid facti?*, Savigny's answer is simple and clear: that right originates in the *Volksgeist*, the spirit of the people (14; §7). Positive right exists in a subject, which is the people or nation (*das Volk*). Insofar as it exists in “the common consciousness of the people” (*das gemeinsamen Bewußtsein des Volkes*), positive right is also national right (*Volksrecht*) (14; §7). To say that positive right exists in the “common consciousness of the people” does not mean that the people are really aware of it, nor that there are particular people who create it by choice (14; §7). It means only that right is implicit in the general values and norms of a culture, and that people would assent to them if they were to think about them. Savigny likens the way right is in the common consciousness of the people to the way in which a language is shared among people of a specific culture (15; §7). The meaning of the terms is objective in the sense that it is the same for everyone, and in the sense that they are independent of particular acts of thinking about them.

It is important to see that for Savigny national right or *Volksrecht* is not identical with the law (*das Gesetz*) (39; §13). The law is positive right *insofar as* it is embodied in language and enforced by legislative power. Law is indeed an embodiment of right,

one of its major organs. It is not, however, the only embodiment and organ of right; another such form or embodiment is the activity of courts and jurists (50; §15). More significantly, it is possible for right to exist without any law whatsoever, for it can be present in the consciousness and life of a people even if there is no legislative power to create or enforce it. Right might appear in the customs, rituals and actions of a people, even when there are no laws to enforce it, and even when there are no lawyers and judges to interpret it. Law and right are therefore independent. In making this argument, Savigny abandons his earlier thesis that the subject of right is circumscribed by the legislative function of the state. In the *System* Savigny sharply limits the role of the law with respect to right. He now gives it only two functions: first, to aid in the formulation of right where it is left vague; and, second, to make right certain where it is very uncertain during times of transition (40–2; §13).

Savigny's distinction between right and law made it easy for him to disassociate his *Volksgeist* theory from particular political views. *Prima facie* the very term "*Volksgeist*" has connotations of popular sovereignty. But Savigny was especially eager to dispel this confusion, which he believed arose from the ambiguity of the term "*Volk*," which could mean simply a nation as a whole or a popular assembly. He insisted that his theory was neutral regarding the source of political sovereignty and the proper form of a constitution (39; §13). Who makes the law could be a prince, a senate, a popular assembly; in each case the lawgiver could be understood to be a representative of the *Volksgeist*.

Since right is not to be equated with the law, one might be tempted to identify it with custom (*Gewohnheitsrecht*), which is the most visible form of right apart from law. Given Savigny's emphasis on social and legal continuity and evolution, this is a tempting reading; indeed, for just this reason, Savigny's legal theory is often taken to be a defense of precedent and custom. While there is some truth to this interpretation, it too requires major qualification, for Savigny is careful to distinguish *Volksrecht* from custom. Custom, he explains, is one of the means for knowing *Volksrecht*; but it should not be equated with *Volksrecht* itself (35; §12). To equate custom with *Volksrecht* would be to confuse cause with effect. Custom is not the source of right but one of its effects or appearances. The source of right is the *Volksgeist*, which embodies itself in custom (35; §12). There are two important functions of custom: it is an aid in knowing *Volksrecht*; and it is an effective means of bringing *Volksrecht* into existence and preserving it (37; §12). But Savigny stresses that custom is not the only means of knowing right, which we could also know through written laws enacted by legislative bodies; and he further insists that it is not the only means of bringing right into existence, which might also appear in beliefs and rituals as well as laws.

Although Savigny is at pains to distinguish right from law, he also recognizes that there is a close connection between them. He stresses that law is an important manifestation or embodiment of *Volksrecht*, and in developed modern cultures *the* most important. In these cultures, Savigny explains, there are two chief *legal* forms of *Volksrecht*. One form is the legislation of the state, which appears in constitutional

(*Staatsrecht*) and private or civil law (*Privatrecht*) (32; §8). Although Savigny insists that the state is not exhaustive of the realm of right, which also appears in morals, religion and customs, he still emphasizes that it is the highest appearance or manifestation of right, “the highest stage in the creation of right” (22; §9). This emphasis on the importance of the state was indeed one of the important shifts in Savigny's later legal thinking.⁸³ Besides legislation, the other legal form of *Volksrecht* is that of *Wissenschaftsrecht*, i.e., the law formulated by professional jurists (49; §14). He stresses the continuity between the law in the common consciousness of the people and in the work of the legal profession. Law in the special consciousness of lawyers and judges is “only a continuation and development of national right.” (45; §14). *Volksrecht* has a double life: in its fundamentals it lives in the common consciousness of the people; but in its more exact formulation and development it belongs to professional jurists (45; §14). Professional jurists have a twofold activity with respect to *Volksrecht*: material and formal. Their activity is material insofar as it receives its matter from *Volksrecht*; but it is formal insofar as it systematizes this matter and formulates it in distinct terms (46; §14). Savigny recognizes, however, that jurists are not entirely passive in receiving the matter of the law from *Volksrecht*; their formulations and systematization of the matter also give shape and form to it (46–7; §14). This means that jurisprudence itself becomes one form of the creation of the law. While Savigny stresses that this has its advantages, insofar as it makes the law more certain and clear, he also warns that it has its disadvantages if it claims to be the sole source of law.

Savigny admits that his theory about the origin of the law is beyond empirical verification (14–15; §7). The *Volksgeist* is not identifiable with any particular body, or with the conscious decisions and actions of specific people. What a particular body does, or what particular people are conscious of, could indeed be contrary to *Volksrecht*. There are also no historical documents that could demonstrate the existence of the *Volksgeist* and show that it was the source of the law. For no matter how far we go back in history to search for the origins of law, we find that positive laws already exist; hence the origin of the *first* laws cannot be empirically determined. Nevertheless, though there is no empirical proof that positive right originates in a *Volksgeist*, Savigny does not regard this as a fatal objection to his theory. He insists that the same problem afflicts other theories about the origin of the law, viz., the social contract theory. Furthermore, there are other kinds of evidence for his theory not available to other theories. One form of evidence that positive right originates in the *Volksgeist* is the universal and uniform recognition of positive law, the feeling of inner necessity that accompanies the representation of it (15; §7). This feeling often expresses itself in the thesis that the source of the laws are divine, lying beyond individual acts of choice. Another form of evidence is the analogy of law with other social phenomena, such as language and custom. These too show the same independence from the contingency and free choice

of individuals, and they announce themselves with the same feeling of necessity. This emphasis was indeed one of the important shifts in Savigny's later legal thinking.⁸⁴

The most obvious problem with Savigny's theory is the vagueness and mystical associations of the concept of the *Volksgeist*. The concept is so obscure that it seems an explanation *obscurum per obscuris*. It is imperative, therefore, to raise two questions. What, more precisely, does Savigny mean by "Volk"? And what, more exactly, does he mean by the "Geist" of that "Volk"? Fortunately, Savigny himself explains more precisely what he means by both terms. He goes to some pains to unpack the various meanings of "Volk" (30; §10). The concept can designate any of the following: (1) the natural whole in which the state exists and which does not arise from the free choice of individuals; (2) the collection of all individuals existing at the same time in the state; (3) these individuals apart from the government, i.e., the subjects rather than rulers; (4) in republican states like Rome, the organized assembly of individuals in which highest authority resided. Savigny uses the concept in the first sense, i.e., *das Volk* is for him the natural whole of a people, its unique identity, its individual character, the indivisible unity of its laws, mores, religion, language, and so on. The *Geist* of that *Volk* is simply that whole or character insofar as it is present in its "common consciousness." What Savigny means by *Geist*'s best explained by a writer he much admired: Montesquieu.⁸⁵ In his *Esprit des lois* Montesquieu refers to the "spirit of the laws" as the unique character of a nation or people. Savigny, like Hegel and the romantics, uses the term in this Montesquian sense. The *Volksgeist* is simply the unique identity of a people, its individual character, its indivisible unity, insofar as it manifests itself in the common consciousness of the people.

As explained so far, then, Savigny's *Volksgeist* theory is not as obscure or metaphysical as it first appears. It involves two central assumptions. First, that cultures or societies form organic wholes, where their customs, laws, religion, language, and so on, form an indivisible unity. Second, that the law is one part of this whole, and as such comprehensible only by its place within it. On historical grounds, it is accurate to regard both these assumptions as the result of a general vitalist metaphysics, which sees the concept of life as the key to explain history as well as nature.⁸⁶ Nevertheless, there is no need to accept such a metaphysics to hold these assumptions. The main point of the theory, which is already clear in the preface to Savigny's *Zeitschrift*, is its demand for a holistic explanation of positive law. This is not to say, however, that the theory is entirely non-metaphysical or merely regulative, involving nothing more than the demand or imperative that we seek holistic explanations of legal phenomena. For the first

assumption implies the constitutive claim that cultures or societies really are such wholes, and not merely that we treat them as such.

The antithesis of *Volksgeist* theory is social contract doctrine. According to that doctrine, at least as Savigny expounds it, the law originates from the free choice of individuals, their agreement or consent to follow certain basic laws ensuring the liberty and property of everyone. It attempts to create a society and state out of individuals, each of whom are self-sufficient, so that society and state are not organic wholes but composites or aggregates, which are nothing more than the sum of their parts. As we would expect, then, Savigny utterly rejects social contract theory as an arbitrary and artificial abstraction (18–19; §8). He makes two basic objections against it. First, it assumes that each individual could exist apart from his society and state, that he could just as well have chosen to live in some other society and state from that in which he happens to live (19, 28; §§8, 10). But this does not agree with the fact that wherever we find human beings they exist in a community and live according to laws. Second, the theory is circular, because it assumes the powers to deliberate and make laws that people could have only through society and the state (29§10). Though a collection of distinct individuals *need* the law, they still do not have the *power* to create it (18–19; §8).

One of the most striking passages of Savigny's *System* is his discussion of the content of *Volksrecht* (50–7; §15). These passages are surprising because they give the concept of natural law a clear and firm place in Savigny's system. Having been banished from the public entrance to the temple of right, natural law makes a furtive re-entry through the backdoor. The backdoor consists in a distinction between two kinds of content of right. That content can be *individual*, i.e., the characteristic of a particular people; or it can be *universal*, i.e., that common to human nature (52; §15). Savigny sees these as two necessary aspects of all right, and he complains that they have become separated in contemporary jurisprudence. There are those who stress the individual aspect of right, as if general principles play no role, and there are those who emphasize the universal aspect of right, as if general principles had their meaning independent of particular cases. Normally, Savigny criticizes the second party, the formalists who had developed the universal side of the law; but here, as if to admit they too have their point, he insists that we should not neglect “the sense for the whole, and therefore the higher meaning of the institutes of right” (53; §15). The universal content of *Volksrecht* appears as “the moral nature of right,” and it involves such concepts as “the moral worth and freedom of man” (55; §15). The task of the legislator, Savigny insists, is to keep in mind both these aspects of law and to fuse them into a unity, so that the universal principles take on a concrete meaning and particular cases have a general significance.

Here we can see clearly, then, how Savigny reintroduces the idea of natural law into his system, which reappears in the guise of the universal or moral content of the law. Though Savigny shuns the name *Naturrecht*, some of his later discussions of the

universal aspects of law read like nothing more than an old natural law doctrine.⁸⁷ Hence, in the second book of the *System*, Savigny discusses the universal concept of right, which he defines as the sphere in which a person can act freely without the influence of others (331–2; §52). The need and existence of right is the result of our human condition, Savigny says, and it does not depend on contingent historical circumstances alone (332). Savigny then proceeds to discuss universal aspects of family and property law (345–86; §§54–7). So what we have, in spirit if not name, is a system of natural law. With this, Savigny's intellectual development came full circle, going back to his early Marburg years when he once championed the theory of natural law. It was a late rediscovery of the value of a doctrine which he had spent so much of his career to defeat and bury.

Notes:

- (1) The standard treatment of the historical school, still valuable though somewhat out of date, is Erich Landsberg's *Geschichte der deutschen Rechtswissenschaft* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1910), Abteilung III, Halbband 2, 186–586.
- (2) “Über den Zweck dieser Zeitschrift,” *Zeitschrift für geschichtliche Rechtswissenschaft*, I (1815), 1–12.
- (3) Erich Rothacker, *Einleitung in die Geisteswissenschaften*, 2nd edition. (Tübingen: Mohr, 1930), p. 43.
- (4) *Das Recht des Besitzes* (Gießen: Heyer, 1803). The later editions appeared 1806, 1818, 1822, 1826, 1836, and 1864.
- (5) The term “historical sense” (*historischer Sinn*), as noted above (chapter 4, section 10), was already used by Humboldt. It is likely that Savigny learned it from him. The term became a catch phrase of the nineteenth century and the historical age.
- (6) The best basic account of natural law in the early German Enlightenment is T. J. Hochstrasser, *Natural Law Theories in the Early Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).
- (7) See, for example, George Turnbull's edition of J.G. Heineccius, *A Methodical System of Universal Law: or the Laws of Nature and Nations deduced from Certain Principles and applied to Proper Cases* (London: George Keith, 1763), II, 230–1.
- (8) See below, section 7.
- (9) On Moser's role in defining the law curriculum at Göttingen, see Michael Carhart, *The Science of Culture in Enlightenment Germany* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), pp. 52–63. On Moser's attitude toward *Naturrecht*, see Mack Walker, *Johann Jakob Moser and the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1981), pp. 290–301, 337–340, 345–6.
- (10) On Hugo's critique of natural law and his role in the reformation of legal studies, see Hans-Ulrich Stühler, *Die Diskussion um die Erneuerung der Rechtswissenschaft von 1780–1815* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1978), pp. 134–50.
- (11) One of these voices was no less than Hegel, who criticized the historical school in his *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts* (Berlin: Nicolai, 1821); the other was Friedrich Trendelenburg, who, some forty years later, would attempt to revive the tradition. See his *Naturrecht auf dem Grunde der Ethik* (Leipzig: Hirzel, 1860).
- (12) See below, chapter 10, section 3.
- (13) Landsberg, *Geschichte*, p. 187.
- (14) Hermann Kantorowicz, *Was ist uns Savigny?* (Berlin: Carl Heymanns Verlag, 1912), p. 5.
- (15) Rothacker, *Einleitung*, p. 44. Though the second edition of this work appeared in 1930, after the first two volumes of Stoll (see next note below), Rothacker did not revise it substantially from the first edition, which appeared in 1920.
- (16) Stoll's work consists in three separately titled volumes. *Der junge Savigny: Kinderjahre, Marburger und Landshuter Zeit* (Berlin: Carl Heymanns Verlag, 1927); *Friedrich Karl von Savigny: Professorenjahre in Berlin* (Berlin: Carl Heymanns Verlag, 1929); and *Friedrich Karl von Savigny: Ministerzeit und letzte Lebensjahre* (Berlin: Carl Heymanns Verlag, 1939). I will refer to them as separate volumes of a single work, designated respectively Stoll I, II and III.
- (17) Savigny to Christian von Neurath, End 1798 or Beginning 1799, Stoll Nr. 9, I, 69.

(18) On Spittler, see Eduard Fueter, *Geschichte der neueren Historiographie* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1911), pp. 377–9. Fueter regards Spittler as the founder of the “*gemütliche Auffassung des Mittelalters*,” and complains that his “*opernhafte Mittelalter*” did more harm than good.

(19) F.K. Savigny, *Geschichte des römischen Rechts im Mittelalter*. 2nd ed. (Heidelberg: Mohr, 1834–51), I, 286, 388, 406, 413.

(20) Stoll's claim, *Der junge Savigny*, p. 30, that Savigny never attended Hugo's lectures is false. See the sources cited in Landsberg, *Geschichte* III/2, Noten 95n5.

(21) See Savigny's review of Hugo's *Lehrbuch der Geschichte des Römischen Rechts, Vermischte Schriften* (Berlin: Veit, 1850), V, 1–36. The review first appeared in the *Allgemeine Literatur Zeitung*, October 20, 21, 1806, Nos. 251–2, pp. 129–44.

(22) See Stoll Nr. 30, *Der junge Savigny*, p. 117.

(23) Stoll, *Der junge Savigny*, p. 169.

(24) Stoll Nrs. 28–30, I, 113–25.

(25) See Savigny to Christian Schwarz, Friedrich and Leonhard Creuzer, April 26, 1800, Stoll Nr. 46, I, 153–4.

(26) *Ibid.*, p. 154.

(27) On the study of law in the period, see Theodore Ziolkowski, *German Romanticism and Its Institutions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), pp. 64–78.

(28) Stoll Nr. 9, I, 70.

(29) See Von Leonhardi to Leonhard Creuzer, March 19, 1799, Stoll I, 54.

(30) On Savigny's early Fichte studies, see Savigny to Friedrich Creuzer, April 27, 1799, Stoll Nr. 16, I, 80–81; and Savigny to Friedrich Creuzer, June 3, 1799, Stoll Nr. 21, I, 89.

(31) *Vorlesungen über juristische Methodologie, 1802–1804*, ed. Aldo Mazzacane, 2nd ed. (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 2004), pp. 114, 172–3.

(32) See Savigny to Christian Schwarz, Friedrich and Leonhard Creuzer, January 3, 1800, Stoll Nr. 41, I, 144.

(33) *Vorlesungen über juristische Methodologie*, pp. 114, 172–3.

(34) *Ibid.*

(35) Joachim Rückert has argued that the key to Savigny's legal theory is the metaphysics of objective idealism that Savigny shared with the early romantics. See his *Idealismus, Jurisprudenz und Politik bei Friedrich Carl von Savigny* (Ebelsbach: Verlag Rolf Gremer, 1984), pp. 232–99. While Rückert's interpretation is interesting and brilliantly executed, his argument that Savigny is an objective idealist is still based on circumstantial evidence. A detailed assessment of it here would take me too far afield.

(36) On the *Grundsatzkritik* of the early romantics, see Manfred Frank, *Unendliche Annäherung: Die Anfänge der philosophischen Frühromantik* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1997), pp. 532–68, 802–924.

(37) Stoll Nr. 16, I, 79.

(38) Stoll Nr. 157, I, 316.

(39) See Savigny to Friedrich Creuzer, June 21, 1799, Stoll Nr. 23, I, 95.

(40) See Savigny to the Creuzer cousins and Schwarz, January 3, 1800, Stoll Nr. 41, I, 145–6.

(41) Stoll Nr. 20, I, 87.

(42) See Savigny to Friedrich Creuzer, June 21, 1799, Stoll Nr. 23, I, 92.

(43) For a more detailed account of romantic politics, see my introduction to *The Early Political Writings of the German Romantics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. xi–xxix.

(44) Friedrich Schlegel, *Philosophische Lehrjahre* No. 1255, in *Friedrich Schlegel, Kritische Ausgabe*, ed. Ernst Behler (Munich: Schöningh, 1966), XVIII, 299.

(45) For a conspectus of some of the many Kantian interpretations, see Aldo Mazzacane, “Jurisprudenz als Wissenschaft,” in *Vorlesungen über juristische Methodologie 1802–1842*, pp. 4n18. Cf. p. 40.

(46) The remark was made by Savigny's friend Leonhardi in a letter to Leonhard Creuzer, March 19, 1799. Stoll I, 54. It is unclear whether Leonhardi reported something Savigny himself said.

(47) The traditional view of Savigny's relationship to Kant was provided by Landsberg, who gave one of the most influential accounts of Savigny's intellectual development. Landsberg claims that Kant provided the basis for Savigny's own jurisprudence because his critique destroyed the old system of natural law and therefore made empirical investigation of the law the only option. See his *Geschichte* I, 249. Landsberg fails to see, however, that Kant's rationalism also made possible a regeneration of natural law, and that Savigny came to his rejection of natural law through a criticism of that rationalism.

(48) Besides the Stoll collection of Savigny's correspondence, further insight into these conversations is given by *Briefe Friedrich Creuzers an Savigny (1799–1850)*, ed. Hellfried Dahlmann (Berlin: Erich Schmidt Verlag, 1972). See especially Nr. 5, May 17, 1799, pp. 29–33; and Nr. 18, November 16, 1799, pp. 66–70.

(49) Stoll Nr. 3, I, 82. Weinrich was the author of *Der rationale Eudamonismus: ein Beytrag zur Auseinandersetzung zwischen Puristen und Eudamonisten* (Leipzig, 1804). I have not been able to locate this work.

(50) Stoll Nr. 23, Beilage, I, 93–6.

(51) *Ibid.*, pp. 93–4. The same criticism of Kant was made by Gottlieb Hufeland (1760–1817) in his *Versuch über den Grundsatz des Naturrechts* (Leipzig: Göschen, 1785). Savigny was an admirer of Hufeland, whom he met in Jena in the summer of 1799. See Stoll I, 116–17. He vowed to read Hufeland's writings carefully and obtained his lectures on *Naturrecht*.

(52) On Leonhard Creuzer, see *Skeptische Betrachtungen über die Freiheit des Willens* (Giessen: Heyer, 1793). Fichte reviewed Creuzer's work in the *Allgemeine Literatur Zeitung* in 1793. See Fichte, *Werke*, ed. I.H. Fichte (Berlin: Veit, 1845–46), VIII, 411–17. On Schiller's *Anmut und Würde*, see *Werke, Nationalausgabe*, ed. Benno von Wiese (Weimar: Hermann Böhlaus Nachfolger, 1962), XX, 251–308.

(53) Stoll Nr. 41, I, 144–5.

(54) Stoll Nr. 44, I, 148–152.

(55) Creuzer's interpretation is not accurate. Kant argues that coercion is legitimate if it limits an action that would limit the freedom of others. See his *Metaphysik der Sitten*, “Einleitung in die Rechtslehre,” §D in *Schriften, Akademie*

Ausgabe (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1902f), VI, 231. Hence there is no *non sequitur* because Kant does have a rationale for coercion: the maximization of freedom.

(⁵⁶) *Athenäum* III/1, 4 and III/1, 10.

(⁵⁷) See Savigny to Friedrich Creuzer, June 21, 1799, Stoll Nr. 23, I, 95; and Savigny to Friedrich and Leonhard Creuzer, January 3, 1800, Stoll Nr. 41, I, 145.

(⁵⁸) Stoll Nr. 51, I, 161–2.

(⁵⁹) In 1926 the *Mitteilungen aus der Preußischen Staatsbibliothek* VIII (1926), p. 162, reported the existence of a *Nachschrift* of Savigny's 1802–3 lectures by Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm. The full significance of the lectures was first understood by Hermann Kantorowicz, who drew attention to them in 1933. See his "Savignys Marburger Methodenlehre," in *Zeitschrift der Savigny Stiftung für Rechtsgeschichte* LIII (1933), 465–71. The publication of the lectures was thwarted, however, by the rise of National Socialism. The first edition of the lectures, which only reproduced Jacob Grimm's *Nachschrift*, was published in 1952 by Gerhard Wesenberg as F.K. von Savigny, *Juristische Methodenlehre* (Stuttgart: K.F. Koehler, 1951). It was only in 1993 that Aldo Mazzacane published, along with Grimm's *Nachschrift*, Savigny's own lecture notes. See his *Vorlesungen über juristische Methodologie 1802–1842* (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1993), in *Savignyana, Texte und Studien*, ed. Joachim Rückert, Band II. All references in parentheses above are to Mazzacane's second expanded edition (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 2004). On the history and context of Savigny's lectures on methodology, see Mazzacane's indispensable introductory essay to this edition, "Jurisprudenz als Wissenschaft," pp. 1–56.

(⁶⁰) See Hans Kiefer, "Der junge Savigny (Marburg 1795–1808)," in *Akademische Feier aus Anlaß der 200. Wiederkehr des Geburtstages von F.C. von Savigny*, ed. H.G. Leser (Marburg: Phillips Universität Marburg, 1979), 15–49. On the importance of this distinction in early modern thought, see A. Seifert, *Cognitio historica. Die Geschichte als Namengeberin der frühzeitlichen Empirie* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1976), pp. 179ff.

(⁶¹) See *Discursus praeliminaris de philosophia in genere* §§1–6, in Christian Wolff, *Gesammelte Werke*, ed. Jean École, J.E. Hofmann, M. Thomann and H.W. Arndt (Hildesheim: Olms, 1968), II/1, 1–3.

(⁶²) Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, B 864.

(⁶³) On Savigny's hermeneutics, see Stephan Meder, *Mißverstehen und Verstehen: Savignys Grundlegung der juristischen Hermeneutik* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004).

(⁶⁴) See chapter 1, section 2.

(⁶⁵) See Mazzacane, "Jurisprudenz als Wissenschaft," pp. 31–2.

(⁶⁶) Jakob Friedrich Fries, *Reinhold, Fichte und Schelling* (Leipzig: Reinicke, 1803), pp. 318–22.

(⁶⁷) See *Thibaut und Savigny: Ihre programmatischen Schriften*, ed. Hans Hattenhauer (Munich: Franz Vahlen, 2002). All citations in parentheses are to this edition.

(⁶⁸) Thibaut. "Über die sogenannten historische und nicht-historische Rechtsschule," in *Thibaut und Savigny*, p. 223.

(⁶⁹) See his 1838 essay "Über die sogenannte historische und nicht-historische Rechtsschule," in *Thibaut und Savigny*, pp. 226–7.

(⁷⁰) See Savigny to Arnim, September 20, 1814, Stoll Nr. 273, II, 117.

(⁷¹) On the details of Thibaut's and Savigny's politics, see Rückert, *Idealismus, Jurisprudenz und Politik*, pp. 150–93.

(72) On the importance of Roman law for the romantics, see James Q. Whitman, *The Legacy of Roman Law in the German Romantic Era* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).

(73) *Geschichte des römischen Rechts im Mittelalter*, 2nd edn (Heidelberg: Mohr, 1834–51).

(74) This reading of Savigny's *Geschichte* was suggested by Hermann Kantorowicz, "Savigny and the Historical School of Law," *Law Quarterly Review* 53 (1937), 326–43.

(75) *Geschichte des römischen Rechts*, I, 293.

(76) *Ibid*, I, 115–16, 290.

(77) On Conring, see Hanns Gross, *Empire and Sovereignty: A History of the Public Law Literature in the Holy Roman Empire, 1599–1804* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), pp. 255–92.

(78) "Besprechung des Einleitungsaufsatzes aus der Zeitschrift für geschichtliche Rechtswissenschaft," in *Thibaut und Savigny*, p. 9.

(79) This criticism was made by Kantorowicz, *Was ist uns Savigny?*, pp. 11–13.

(80) *System des heutigen Römischen Rechts* (Berlin: Veit, 1840–48). All references are to this edition. Numbers before the semicolon refer to page numbers of this edition; numbers after the semicolon designated with the "§" sign refer to Savigny's paragraph numbers.

(81) This is not to say that Savigny's thinking did not undergo important shifts since 1814. Our concern here, however, is only to show how Savigny addressed questions about the foundations of the theory he sketched in the *Beruf*. For an insightful discussion of the change in his views between 1814 and 1840, see John Toews, *Becoming Historical: Cultural Reformation and Public Memory in Early Nineteenth-Century Berlin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 283–305.

(82) It is unclear when Savigny first formulated his *Volksgeist* theory in general terms. In his 1803/04 lectures on "Methodik", Savigny raises the question how at each time a people relates to its laws (204). Here it seems he is on the verge of formulating a general theory. The theory becomes more explicit in later lectures. In the introduction to his 1808 lectures he talks about the "consciousness of the nation" as the source of right. See his *Vorlesungen über juristische Methodenlehre*, p. 210. In his 1811 Pandects lectures he states clearly that the law is one aspect of the life of a people (250). And in the introduction to the 1813/14 Pandects lectures he is clearer still that law is the creation of the character and history of a people (263).

(83) Toews, *Becoming Historical*, pp. 290–1.

(84) Toews, *Becoming Historical*, pp. 290–1.

(85) See Montesquieu, *Esprit des lois*, Book 19, chapter 4. In his 1802/03 lectures Savigny singled out Montesquieu's work as the only one which provides a thorough historical study of legislation. See *Vorlesungen über juristische Methodologie*, p. 159.

(86) Thus Meinecke's claim that historicism is essentially the application of the concept of life to history. See *Entstehung des Historismus*, p. 2.

(87) For a detailed account of Savigny's changing views about *Naturrecht*, see Dieter Strauch, *Recht, Gesetz und Staat bei Friedrich Carl von Savigny* (Bonn: Bouvier, 1960), pp. 22–4, 42–3, 78–83, 131.

Ranke's Romantic Philosophy

1. Reputation and influence

All discussions of historicism in the nineteenth century give a central or prominent place to Leopold von Ranke (1795–1886). For some scholars, Ranke was “the father of modern scientific history,”¹ while others regard him as the founder of historicism itself.² Of course, all claims to historical paternity are artificial and suspect, especially in the case of historicism, whose roots lie so deep in the eighteenth century. Nevertheless, Ranke's achievement and influence were so great that we have more than ample reason to regard him as a major figure in the historicist tradition. His output alone was staggering: he wrote some sixty-three volumes on virtually every phase of early modern history. Based on archival research and written in a fluent literary style, Ranke's histories were popular and necessary reading for every historian in the nineteenth century. No less imposing was Ranke's influence, which came from not only his many books but also his many years of teaching at the University of Berlin (1825–70). Though not a popular or effective lecturer, Ranke was a highly successful instructor in his weekly seminars, whose purpose was to introduce future historians to the new critical methods.³ Virtually every major German historian of the nineteenth century was a student in Ranke's seminars; among his students were Heinrich von

Sybel, Georg Waitz, Wilhelm von Giesebrecht, Jacob Burckhardt, Friedrich Meinecke and Wilhelm Dilthey. These students went on to occupy important chairs in history throughout Germany, spreading Ranke's influence far and wide.⁴

Ranke's prominence in the historicist tradition is not the result of his books and seminars alone. Like Humboldt and Savigny, Ranke was crucial in raising the scientific status of history in nineteenth-century Germany. This is so in three respects. First, he championed the application of critical methods to modern history. Ranke held that the sources of modern history were in no less need of critical scrutiny than those of classical history, and that modern history could advance only through the most scrupulous examination of its sources. Second, Ranke stressed the importance of archival research, the need to consult original documents rather than relying on secondary sources. Thanks to Ranke's example, no historian could earn his scholarly credentials without a stint in the archives; the old "scissors and paste" routine, which stitched together a narrative from various secondary sources, was now *passé*. Third, Ranke defended the autonomy of history, its right to pursue its own goals and methods independent of philosophy and theology. It was very bold of him to take his stand on behalf of history in the 1830s, given that the intellectual environment was then dominated by Hegelianism, which had subordinated history to its system of philosophy. To many, Ranke was the gallant knight of history who slayed the monster of Hegelianism.

Like any major historical figure, there are many misconceptions surrounding Ranke. What is remarkable in Ranke's case, however, is just how persistent and prevalent these misconceptions have been. For generations, Ranke has been perceived as a stern positivist, a hardheaded pedant who insisted that the chief purpose of history is to ascertain facts and nothing but the facts.⁵ Ranke became the Mr Gradgrind of history: "Now, what I want is Facts...Facts alone are wanted in life."⁶ Like any caricature, this one has a grain of truth: Ranke did stress the importance of determining the facts and assessing the accuracy of sources. It is necessary to emphasize, however, that he explicitly, emphatically and repeatedly rejected the view that the end of history consists in nothing more than ascertaining and collecting facts. He called this the chronological or antiquarian way of doing history, which he regarded as a much too narrow conception of the historical enterprise.⁷ He also emphasized the importance of the historian *understanding* the facts, of *explaining* them by seeing them as part of a wider whole. There was no such thing as an atomic fact in Ranke's historical universe,

because he made the meaning of each fact depend on its general context, the broader culture and epoch of which it was only a part. Rather than being an historical miniaturist intent on tiny details, as the positivist image would have us believe, Ranke was an apostle of world history, and indeed so much so that he devoted the last years of his life to writing his *Weltgeschichte*.⁸

The main reason that positivists were so eager to embrace Ranke is that he championed the scientific status of history and opposed the philosophy of history. It is indeed the case that Ranke was hostile to the philosophy of history, and that he advocated the autonomy of history, its independence from philosophy and theology. It is important to see, however, that Ranke's conception of the scientific status of history was very different from that of positivism. There are three fundamental discrepancies. First, like any child of the romantic age, Ranke did not want to separate history from art; rather, he wanted to combine them. He believed that the artistic and scientific character of history are indeed inseparable. Second, Ranke did not decry metaphysics but made it the foundation of the study of history. The reason it was so important for him to investigate facts was that he saw each individual as the appearance of the infinite.⁹ While he rejected the traditional theological constraints upon history, he insisted that his own enquiry was based on a basic religious belief: "that nothing exists without God and nothing lives except through God."¹⁰ Third, contrary to positivism, Ranke did not think that the chief end of historical enquiry consists in the formulation of general laws similar to those in the natural sciences. Rather, its ultimate goal lay entirely outside the discursive domain in a special kind of experience: the intuition of the individual, the perception of existence, the grasp of the infinite within the finite.¹¹

Another stubborn misconception about Ranke is that he was a philosophical *naif*, having little or no interest, still less competence, in thinking through the philosophical presuppositions of his own work.¹² This error antedates positivism, going back to Ranke's early days in Berlin when his Hegelian opponents found it a handy insult to undermine his reputation.¹³ But no one was more concerned to correct this misconception than Ranke himself. Against the Hegelian charge, he indignantly replied that his main reason for doing history in the first place was his philosophical and religious

convictions.¹⁴ Ranke's indignation was indeed justified. His writings and correspondence during his early Leipzig (1814–17) and Frankfurt years (1818–25) show that he was deeply immersed in philosophical and religious questions. A shy and lonely student, Ranke spent much of his time during his university years reading and commenting upon the major philosophers of his day, especially Kant, Fichte, Hamann, Schelling, Novalis and Jacobi. His study of philosophy goes back to his days at the *Schulpforta* (1809–14), when he read on his own Lessing, Schiller, Goethe and the Schlegels, and when he studied as part of the curriculum Plato, Aristotle and Cicero. While the development of his historical interests eventually took him away from philosophy, Ranke's early philosophical views were crucial in forming his conception of history, as we shall see below.

Since the 1950s, many scholars have been active in reassessing Ranke's legacy, and they have largely succeeded in discrediting the old positivist picture of Ranke.¹⁵ Against the image of Ranke as a philosophical *naïf*, they have uncovered his deep roots in the fertile soil of German philosophy around the *Goethezeit*.¹⁶ By examining his early writings and correspondence, they have shown how Ranke was acutely aware of his philosophical principles, and how these played a crucial role in developing his view of history. In the estimation of Georg Iggers: “perhaps no German historian of the nineteenth century (with the possible exception of Droysen) paid as much attention to the theoretical foundation of his historical practice.”¹⁷ Our task here will be to continue in this revisionist direction, paying special attention to the philosophical issues behind Ranke's conception of history. We will examine in more detail than usual Ranke's philosophical origins and context, which have not been fully explored. Given Ranke's importance in the development of historicism, our investigation needs no further apology.

2. The autonomy of history

Ranke's reputation and influence in the second half of the nineteenth century rested not least on his advocacy and practice of “the critical method.” This method, which

can trace its earlier origins to the Renaissance and its later origins to Bayle, Voltaire and F.A. Wolf, had become *de rigueur* by the second half of the eighteenth century after it had been championed by the Göttingen historians.¹⁸ Ranke learned it from his teachers, most notably from Gottfried Hermann and Gustav Stenzel, during his student years at the University of Leipzig (1814–17). This method consisted primarily in a close critical scrutiny of sources to determine their authorship, authenticity and reliability.¹⁹ Before basing his history upon older documents, the historian had to answer a battery of critical questions: Is this text original or has it been altered over the years? How does it compare with other texts written around the same time? Has the author borrowed from others or is his work the result of first-hand testimony? What political or religious beliefs did the author have that would slant his views? Today, in law and journalism, these kinds of questions are taken for granted as the responsibility of every good detective or journalist; but in the eighteenth century they were less *de rigueur* and the old scissors and paste method was still common. For the young Ranke, the master practitioner of the critical-philological method was Barthold Georg Niebuhr (1776–1831), whose *Römische Geschichte* became his model of historical research.²⁰ Applying this method to Roman history, Niebuhr determined how unreliable some of the traditional sources had been. Ranke's claim to fame lay with his application of the method to modern history. In the critical appendix to his first work, *Geschichte der germanischen und romanischen Völker* (1824),²¹ he exposed some of the traditional sources of Italian history just as Niebuhr had once done for Roman history.

Although Ranke opposed the separation of history from art, he still firmly believed that history could be, and indeed should be, science. It was primarily the critical method that convinced him that history could achieve such status. This method was scientific—or “*wissenschaftlich*” in the broad German sense—because it provided strict rules for assessing the quality of evidence and for regulating assent according to that quality. For Ranke, the scientific status of history had nothing to do with its following the methods of the natural sciences. He never saw the natural sciences as a model of rigor and exactitude which history should emulate. The idea for a natural history of humanity, which was so important for Möser, Herder and Humboldt, held no magic for him, and he indeed rejected it early in his Leipzig years because it implied a form of determinism. With Ranke, there begins the turn against naturalism in the historicist tradition, a reaction that continues in Droysen and Dilthey and that is not reassessed

until the rise of neo-Kantianism. In his case, we must be careful not to describe this reaction as “anti-positivist.” Comte would begin to publish his *Cours de philosophie positive* only in the 1830s, too late to have any effect on the young Ranke. The reaction against positivism would begin only with Droysen in the 1850s.

For Ranke, the great threat to the new science of history came from not positivism but idealism, especially Fichte's and Hegel's speculative philosophy of history. Such a philosophy of history posed two dangers. First, it practiced, even if it did not always preach, an *a priori* deductive methodology, which was completely at odds with the piecemeal empirical enquiry demanded by the critical method. Second, it subordinated history under philosophy, as if history were a servant of a philosophical agenda, and as if its findings had to fit into the constraints of a philosophical system. In his early lectures in Berlin Ranke made it his mission to attack this deductive methodology, and to defend the autonomy of history from subordination to philosophy. His claim to fame as the champion of a new scientific history rests chiefly upon his early battle against these twin evils.

Ranke formed his conception of the autonomy of history only after his arrival in Berlin in 1825. There is no sign of it in the fragments of the Leipzig and Frankfurt years. Only in Berlin did he feel a need to develop such a conception. For there Hegel's fame was at its height, and he too was giving lectures on history. It is fair to say that Hegel was opposed, if only implicitly, to the ideal of historical autonomy. While he too believed that history should be a science, he did not think that its aims and methods are distinct from those of philosophy in general. History was indeed only one part of philosophy, tidily accommodated under paragraphs §§548–52 of his *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften* (1830 edition).²² The idea that history could be an autonomous science, independent of philosophy, was contrary to Hegel's belief in the sovereignty of philosophy over all disciplines, and indeed his systematic conception of the sciences. Somehow and sometime, then, the young Ranke was going to have to take issue with Hegel.

That Ranke ever clashed with Hegel has as much to do with his circumstances as it does with philosophical principle. He would perhaps never have done battle against Hegel if it were not for the factious and fractious intellectual atmosphere in Berlin. When Ranke arrived there in 1825 the intellectual scene was divided into two warring camps. There was “the philosophical school,” revolving around Hegel, and the “historical school,” centering around Schleiermacher, whose members included Savigny, Eichhorn and Niebuhr.²³ There were many issues dividing these schools, but the most fundamental philosophical difference concerns their opposing views regarding the powers of reason in history. The philosophical school held that reason

has the power to determine the ends and laws of history, whereas the historical school maintained that reason has no such power and that it is limited to the scanty evidence it can glean from the available sources. The historians especially objected to Hegel's dialectical method, which they saw as a relapse into "scholasticism," i.e., the imposition of a preconceived conceptual scheme upon the multiplicity of facts. The historical school had its roots in romanticism—Schleiermacher had been a central figure in the early romantic circle in Berlin—and so its battle with the philosophical school can be seen as another chapter in the longstanding war between Hegel and romanticism.

Ranke's sympathies in this struggle were never in much doubt. Although in his first days in Berlin he frequented the literary salons of Rahel Levin and Henriette Herz, which were sympathetic to the philosophers, his deeper loyalties lay with the historians. Not only had Niebuhr been a model for him, but his own romantic affinities drew him toward the historians. The historians knew their man from the very beginning. They had quickly befriended Ranke, and they were partly responsible for getting him his position as *professor extraordinarius* in the first place. They had recruited Ranke knowing that he would be a natural ally against Hegel. Given Hegel's reputation and Ranke's junior status, their forthcoming battle would be a struggle of David against Goliath.

Goliath did take notice of his puny foe, and treated him with due condescension. The occasion of Hegel's most celebrated comment about Ranke came in the aftermath of the historical school's great victory over Hegel in December 1827. Under Schleiermacher's leadership, the historical school succeeded in blocking Hegel's entrance into the *Akademie der Wissenschaften*. Smarting from that insult, Hegel retaliated by founding an academic society all his own, *Die Societät für wissenschaftliche Kritik*, whose main social purpose was to take revenge by snubbing the membership of historians. Predictably, the society consisted mostly of Hegelians, though a few non-Hegelians were added for appearances. When someone naively suggested adding Schleiermacher to their ranks, Hegel protested with the utmost vehemence. And when Ranke's name was put forward, Hegel quickly quashed that proposal with the single damning sentence: "*Das ist aber nur ein gewöhnlicher Historiker.*"²⁴

Ranke's battle with Hegel began with his 1831 lectures on universal history. Though Ranke never explicitly refers to him in these lectures, Hegel is constantly in the background, whether as a living or spiritual presence.²⁵ It is in the introduction to these lectures, "Idee der Universalhistorie,"²⁶ that Ranke first defends the autonomy of history and declares its independence from philosophy. He begins by raising the question: What is characteristic of history as opposed to other disciplines, especially philosophy? How do the aims and methods of history differ from those of philosophy?

Ranke says that his task is to find that single fundamental principle that defines the characteristic nature of history and distinguishes it from philosophy. What is this principle? It is, to use an anachronistic term, "the principle of individuality."²⁷ Ranke explains this principle by making a sharp contrast between the philosopher and historian. While the philosopher sees the individual only as an instance of the universal, the historian examines the individual for its own sake. The historian's task is not to know the general laws that govern a particular thing, or what it has in common with other instances of a kind, but to know what is unique about a thing, what makes it just this thing and no other.²⁸ Using the language of Schelling and the romantics, Ranke says that the philosopher sees the finite in the infinite, the particular in the universal, whereas the historian grasps the infinite in the finite, the universal in the particular. He then announces the fundamental "living principle" of history in these lines:

While the philosopher, contemplating history from his field, sees the infinite only in progress, development, the totality, history recognizes in each existence something infinite, in each condition or being something eternal coming from God-- and that is its living principle. How could something be without the divine ground for its existence? (77)

So far, it seems from Ranke's account of "the living principle of history" that the task of the historian is only to focus on the individual. It appears as if the historian would fully discharge his task if he just discovers facts and accumulates them. But Ranke is very clear that it is also the task of the historian to grasp the universality inherent in the particular. We cannot know the particular, he argues, unless we also see it as part of a wider whole. Hence he makes it another fundamental task of the historian to determine the "causal nexus" of an event (79). But then, one might ask, how does the historian's method differ from that of the philosopher? As if to answer this very question, Ranke makes another distinction between historical and philosophical method. He explains that the philosopher proceeds *a priori* or deductively, beginning with some universal and deriving the particular from it, whereas the historian operates *a posteriori* or inductively, deriving his generalizations only from particular cases (74). Ranke does not think that these methods are equally legitimate, as if the philosopher's method were fine in its own domain; rather, he has doubts about the philosophical method in general. This method rests upon a sleight of hand, he argues, because we cannot derive the multiplicity of appearances, the individuality of things, from any abstract principle (75). This multiplicity, this individuality, Ranke insists, has to be given to us; they are data of experience which no amount of reason can derive, deduct or construct *a priori*. The only proper method for history is therefore the same as that

for science in general: it is the empirical method, the path of slow, laborious induction. For this reason Ranke has his doubts about the philosopher's world history, because it presupposes the power of reason to grasp the ends of history independent of experience. We are still very far from understanding the general laws of history, he argues, because historical research has not proceeded far enough; a world history remains a mere desideratum, the goal for an infinite process of enquiry.

Ranke's polemic, whatever its ultimate merits, made two important points. First, that the historian's interest is in the individual rather than the universal. Second, that the method of the historian should not be deductive but inductive. Neither point was new, of course, but it is significant that Ranke would insist upon them. Both were adopted from Ranke by later thinkers in the historicist tradition. That the essential concern of history is individual would be a fundamental principle of the neo-Kantians—Windelband, Rickert and Simmel—in their attempt to explain the logic of history and its differences from the natural sciences. That generalizations in history should be formed inductively rather than deductively would also be taken as axiomatic by later generations of historians. The reaction against philosophy of history, which began with Humboldt in the late eighteenth century, gathers momentum and influence with Ranke's lectures.²⁹ Burckhardt's and Dilthey's distaste for the philosophy of history goes directly back to their days in Ranke's seminar. It was Ranke, not Kierkegaard or Marx, who discredited Hegel's philosophy of history for later generations.

3. David versus Goliath

Although Ranke's argument against Hegel was enormously influential, it was also misconceived.³⁰ He had triumphed, but only over a monster of his own making. The irony is that Hegel, who died in 1831 before he could have responded to Ranke, would have accepted much of his argument. No less than Ranke, Hegel was opposed to the philosopher creating *a priori* constructions and imposing them upon his subject matter. He too insisted that the philosopher should derive the universal from the particular rather than attempting an impossible deduction of the particular from the universal. It was a fundamental principle of Hegel's phenomenological method in the *Phänomenologie des Geistes* that the philosopher should bracket his own principles

and that he should examine his subject matter for its own sake; rather than judging actions or beliefs from some external standard, the philosopher had to understand them from within, according to their own internal standards.³¹ Hegel also applied this method in his philosophy of history.³² Hence in the introduction to his lectures on the *Philosophie der Weltgeschichte* he stressed that the philosopher should not apply the principles of speculative logic to history, as if it were already a given that the multitude of historical facts have to conform to them. Rather, he should proceed empirically, developing his generalization only after an examination of particulars for their own sake.³³ We think that we are reading Ranke when Hegel declares expressly: "We have to take history as it is; we must proceed historically, empirically."³⁴ Arguably, Hegel's practice does not match his principle; all too often he seems to violate his own methodology by setting up conceptual divisions before discussing his subject matter; but the chief point still remains: his principles were very similar to Ranke's.

How did Ranke get Hegel so wrong? Part of the answer is that Ranke had still not read him. Hegel's lectures on the philosophy of history began in 1822/23, and continued when Ranke was in Berlin; but the text of his lectures, which were largely based on student notes, were not published until 1837 with the first edition of the *Werke*. Hegel's conception of history appears, if only in very condensed form, in his 1817 edition of the *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften*. Ranke knew about this work; but he scarcely read it. In his March 10, 1828, letter to August Varnhagen von Ense, he admitted that he barely read it,³⁵ though he was familiar with the early and later editions. To Von Ense he further confessed a complete aversion to Hegel's writings. What content there was to Hegel's writings, he wrote, was only "the melody of depth," while the rest was "a batch of false, contemptible stuff" (*eine Menge falsches, häßliches Zeug*). Another part of the answer is that Ranke was not fighting Hegel but Fichte, who does indeed follow a method of *a priori* construction.³⁶ Ranke formed his conception of philosophical method from Fichte, especially his *Grundzüge des gegenwärtigen Zeitalters*, which he explicitly cites in his 1831/32 lectures.³⁷ For many years Fichte would be Ranke's model of the philosophical historian. Ranke knew his Fichte well, having studied him in detail since his Leipzig student years.³⁸ So rather than reading Hegel for his own sake, Ranke simply lumped him together with Fichte as a

philosopher of history. Probably because of the influence of the Hegelian school, Hegel eventually replaced Fichte as Ranke's prime example of the philosophical historian.

Given the animosities between the historical and philosophical school, it was only natural for Hegel to want to defend his own approach to history. History was the chief card his enemies were playing against him, and he wanted to show that here too he was master of the turf. Sure enough, in the drafts for the introduction to his lectures, Hegel engaged in an implicit critique of Ranke and Niebuhr. There, amid his involved discussion of the various ways of writing history, there is a curious reference to Ranke.³⁹ The reference simply states the name "Ranke" in parentheses. Georg Lasson, one of the first editors of the lectures, mistook the word for *Ränke*, and so missed its significance entirely; but Johannes Hoffmeister, a later editor, was able to determine from the handwriting and context that the word was indeed *Ranke*, the name of the historian.⁴⁰ The context of the remark makes it evident that Hegel had in mind Ranke's *Geschichte der romanischen und germanischen Völker 1494–1814*, which appeared in 1825.⁴¹ This work and its sequel, *Zur Kritik der neueren Geschichtschreiber*, had made Ranke's name, and they also left no doubt about Ranke's intellectual affiliation. Here was a practitioner of Niebuhr's critical history, who had applied his master's techniques to modern history. It was almost inevitable, then, that Hegel would want to take issue with him.

In his introduction Hegel cites Ranke's name as an example of a primitive form of what he calls *reflective* history, i.e., that form of history where the narrator stands apart from the past and attempts to reconstruct it from documents; he contrasts such reflective history with *original* history, where the narrator is an eye-witness, and so part of the historical process itself. The chief problem with all reflective history, Hegel thinks, is that "the writer approaches history in his own spirit, which is different from the spirit of the object itself." What matters is not so much how people in the past saw themselves but how the historian understands them. All reflective history therefore fails to get inside its subject matter; it forever sees the past from the standpoint of the observer rather than the actor. "When the [reflective] historian tries to depict the spirit of bygone times, it is usually his own spirit which makes itself heard."⁴² Hegel thinks that Ranke's form of reflective history suffers from the problems of that kind of history; but he also adds that it has some special problems all its own. The purpose of Ranke's version of reflective history, as Hegel explains it, is to avoid the dry abstractions of

historical surveys by giving a faithful and lively picture of the times. Ranke rightly sees, Hegel implies, that the usual surveys of reflective history are too abstract and dry, missing all the vibrancy and immediacy of original history. However, Hegel suggests, Ranke's solution to this problem is inadequate. To compensate for the abstraction, Ranke piles detail upon detail, so that in the end one gets lost in them and fails to grasp the whole. His history provides "a colorful quantity of detail," though it does not see beyond it to "a whole concept, a universal end." The wealth of detail in Ranke's writing reminds Hegel of nothing more than Walter Scott's novels, and such narrative is better left to novelists than historians. Had Ranke known of Hegel's Walter Scott analogy, he would have felt it to be a cruel *ad hominem* point; for Ranke recollected that the reason he turned to history in the first place is that he found the *Mémoires* of Phillippe de Commynes more fascinating than Walter Scott's *Quentin Durward*.⁴³

On the whole, Hegel's polemic against Ranke is limited to his misgivings about the narrative technique of the *Geschichte*. The broader point Hegel is making—that history cannot simply be a matter of determining the facts and of becoming accurate about details—would have been strongly endorsed by Ranke himself. Indeed, in the introduction to the *Geschichte* Ranke had insisted that understanding the unity and development of events is no less important than ascertaining facts themselves.⁴⁴ But Hegel's remark can be read as an internal critique: that Ranke failed to achieve his own ideal of unity. It is noteworthy that Ranke himself, and most of his later critics, admitted this shortcoming.⁴⁵

Despite Ranke's misreading of Hegel, and despite Hegel's misreading of Ranke, there are still two fundamental differences between them. The first difference, which follows the general rift between the philosophical and historical school, concerns the limits of reason. Hegel believes, and Ranke doubts, that through the examination of historical particulars we can arrive at a systematic knowledge of the general plan of history. All the evidence received so far from the detailed study of particular epochs, Ranke thinks, is still not sufficient to warrant grand generalizations about the purpose of history in general. Ranke's greater skepticism, and indeed greater modesty, about achieving a universal or world history came clearly to the surface in the following passage from his 1831/32 lectures:

One sees how infinitely difficult it is with universal history. What an infinite mass! Such differing strivings! What difficulties we have even to grasp the individual! Since we do not know so many things, how do we want to grasp the causal nexus everywhere, let alone the essence of the whole? To resolve this task I regard as impossible. God alone knows world history. We know the contradictions...but we can only divine, only approach from afar the whole itself.⁴⁶

It is surely significant that Ranke himself saw the differences between the historical and philosophical schools in terms of their opposing views about the limits of knowledge. In the 1830s, when he was first forming his views about historical method and beginning his attack on the philosophy of history, he wrote this telling passage from his *Tagebuch*:

The difference between the philosophical and historical school is solely that the former derives with a bold stroke forced conclusions from a flimsy and superficial knowledge of a few facts, whereas the latter attempts to grasp things in their particularity, investigates their specific characteristics and, mindful of the imperfections of tradition, only allows itself to have a feeling for the highest results.⁴⁷

Ranke's skepticism about world history would abate somewhat in his later years. He seemed to think that history was making progress, and that it could approach closer to the ultimate goal of a universal history. However, he continued to stress, in true Kantian fashion, that universal history had to remain a regulative principle, a goal that could be approached but never attained.⁴⁸ The similarity with Kant here is not accidental. For Kant was indeed the ultimate source of Ranke's greater skepticism and epistemic modesty. Ranke's debts to Kant emerge clearly from his early *Tagebuch* entries, where he explicitly endorses Kant's critique of knowledge. Ranke accepted Kant's argument that reason cannot give us knowledge of reality beyond experience, and he even declared that Kant had decisively settled the question about the limits of knowledge.⁴⁹ Ranke's constant insistence that universal history was an infinite task came from his absorption of the Kantian doctrine of regulative ideas. He could not accept Hegel's system of universal history because it made a constitutive principle out of a merely regulative idea whose sole purpose was to guide enquiry.

The second difference concerns the ultimate ends of history, and indeed all intellectual life. The goal of the Hegelian philosopher is essentially *discursive*, lying inside the realm of intellectual discourse. Hegel wants the philosopher of world history to achieve a *conceptual* grasp of the whole, a *systematic* knowledge of how spirit realizes itself in the different epochs of world history. The aim of the Rankian historian, however, is basically *intuitive*, lying outside the realm of intellectual discourse entirely. For Ranke, the ultimate end of history is not to know the whole of world history, which is unattainable in any case, but to have an intuition of the particular, to feel the individual in all its infinite depth. Some scholars write of this as Ranke's mysticism,⁵⁰ though, as we shall see, this needs qualification. But, however mystical, it is important to see the powerful pedigree and precedent behind it: Jacobi's critique of reason. Ranke's conception of the end of enquiry ultimately goes back to Jacobi, who

was a decisive influence on his thinking in his early years. In his *Tagebuch* he fully endorsed Jacobi's famous slogan that the purpose of enquiry is "to disclose existence" (*Daseyn zu enthüllen*).⁵¹ Ranke simply applied Jacobi's dictum to the realm of history itself. The purpose of history is to have an insight into existence itself, to perceive the unique particularity of things. Ranke's great debt to Jacobi brings out, however, his distance from Hegel, who famously rejected Jacobi's belief in the possibility of any kind of immediate knowledge.

4. History as art

In the introductions to his lectures Ranke would often defend the status of history as a science, and it is not least for this reason that he is often regarded as the founder of modern "scientific" history. However, it is important to see that this interpretation is half-truth, and taken as the whole truth it would be deeply anachronistic, just another legacy of the positivist misreading of Ranke. It is a half-truth because, while Ranke did want history to be a science, he did not want it to be a science alone. He insisted, tirelessly and passionately, that history should also be an art.⁵² This is very clear from his 1831 lectures on "Universalhistorie", the very text in which he first defends the autonomy of history against speculative philosophy. Here Ranke explains that history is a science insofar as it discovers and collects facts, but an art insofar as it shapes and presents them into a coherent whole.⁵³ History is an art because it uses the imagination to form and shape its material, and because it constructs a narrative or story; it differs from other arts only insofar as it is limited by facts. Ranke puts the point this way: if a poet were given facts for his material, what he would produce is history. Rather than stressing the scientific status of history in these lectures, Ranke does the very opposite, he deplores how, in modern times, its scientific status has been so exaggerated. He finds this problematic, because it brings history too close to philosophy and underrates its distinctive status. His bottom line is that history must be both science and art, that these interpenetrate so much that one cannot be without the other.

Ranke's insistence that the art and science of history fuse has to be taken entirely at its face value. It is not as if history is for him one part science and one part art, as if the two halves have nothing to do with one another. For Ranke's conception of the scientific side of history is itself profoundly aesthetic. This becomes apparent as soon as we consider the meaning of Ranke's demand that history be objective. History is a

science for Ranke insofar as it strives to be objective; and to be objective means for him to view an object impartially and disinterestedly, as an end in itself and not as a means to some end of the spectator. This is, of course, precisely the attitude of the aesthetic spectator, who is essentially disinterested, and who also considers his object as an end in itself. Furthermore, both historian and aesthetic spectator view their object as a whole and as an individual; they do not see it as an instance of some universal, which subsumes it under some system of classification, but they value it in all its individuality as just this thing and nothing else. Ranke himself alludes to this affinity between historical intuition and aesthetic contemplation when he writes, again in the 1831 lectures, that the historian looks upon the individual as “one would take pleasure in a flower without thinking about what class of Linnaeus it belongs to.”⁵⁴ So when Ranke describes historical understanding as intuition what he has in mind is aesthetic contemplation. Hence his very ideal of historical understanding is aesthetic.

Ranke was not alone, of course, in wanting to join history and art. The traditional classification of the arts made *historia* and *poetica* subspecies of rhetoric.⁵⁵ This tradition was carried on in German universities where universal history was read by professors of rhetoric.⁵⁶ The most illustrious representative of this tradition in the *Goethezeit* was Schiller, who was famous not only as a poet but also as an historian. When his critics complained that his *Geschichte des dreißigjährigen Kriegs* was too poetic, Schiller was puzzled, because it seemed obvious to him that the historian's task was so much like the artist's. After all, both of them had to write a story, and both had to use their imagination to create a whole out of the fragmentary material given to them. Struck by Schiller's remark, Wilhelm von Humboldt made it the starting point for his own reflection on the task of the historian in his celebrated essay “Über die Aufgabe des Geschichtschreibers.”⁵⁷ It is perhaps not accidental that Ranke's own distinction in his 1831 lectures should so closely follow Humboldt's.⁵⁸

While we should place Ranke's aesthetic conception of history in the Schiller–Humboldt tradition, we should also note that it has its roots in the romantic movement. Although Ranke's debts to romanticism have often been recognized,⁵⁹ it is important not to pay lip service to them and to see precisely what they mean. That he

was inspired by the romantics is not a matter of inference or conjecture, because there is so much direct evidence from his early fragments and letters. These show that Ranke was deeply immersed in romantic culture, and that he was indeed a champion of some of its leading principles.

There was no more defining characteristic of early German romanticism than its faith in the redeeming powers of art. It stressed that science and art, philosophy and poetry, should not be separated but wedded together in holy matrimony; art should be science as much as science should be art. What Ranke wrote in his 1831 lectures Hölderlin, Schelling, Novalis, the Schlegel brothers and Schleiermacher had declared a generation earlier. The most revealing testimony of Ranke's allegiance to the romantic faith in art is his March 4, 1817, letter to his brother Heinrich:

My favorite troll has shown me many passageways in his grotto; I have resolved to go after that one where there is a vein of gold. Right and left there might be something else. But gold is, as one says, blood, and blood is life itself, as you know. Do we not all seek the deepest, innermost life, and do we not all hate dark death? I believe, and you with me: the greatest poet must be the greatest philosopher. For if the blood is to congeal into gold, he must first have blood....Or, less metaphorically, a philosopher gives us insight (*Einsicht*), a poet gives us description (*Darstellung*). Hence every true description of insight, of philosophy, must be poetry. And can poetry be anything else? It is the only possible description. Description must show the spiritual, just as nature, humanity, history. It must be entirely and always ideal, presenting insight, philosophy, the idea. And that is art.⁶⁰

Like all the romantics, then, Ranke gave primacy to art as a means of exposition in the sciences. In an interesting fragment from the Leipzig years, written in 1816/17,⁶¹ he applied this belief explicitly to history. He begins by explaining, in standard romantic terminology, the difference between poetry and philosophy. Poetry presents the infinite in the finite, the universal in the particular, whereas philosophy presents the finite in the infinite, the particular in the universal. This raises questions how, if their expositions are so different, there can be a poetic presentation of philosophy. Nevertheless, Ranke thinks that there can be some synthesis of both kinds of exposition. This synthesis is what he calls "ideal history." An ideal history will show the infinite in the finite insofar as it is like poetry, and it will show the finite in the infinite insofar as it is like philosophy. The synthesis of the two will join facts and narrative, chronicle and story (*Roman*). Ranke complains that these two sides of history are often separated; but he is confident that ideal history will join them.

Ranke's romantic faith went further than his belief in the union of art and science. He was also an upholder of another cardinal romantic doctrine: that insight into reality is possible only through aesthetic intuition. This too was a central belief of Schelling,

Schleiermacher, Novalis, Hölderlin and the Schlegel brothers. The romantics arrived at this doctrine from their reflection upon Jacobi's famous lines in his *Briefe über Spinoza* that the aim of enquiry is to disclose existence (*Daseyn zu enthüllen*).⁶² Following Jacobi, they held that we reveal reality only through an immediate intuition of something particular, because reality is always particular, and conceptual thought is too abstract to grasp the particular as particular. What the romantics added to this Jacobian doctrine is the idea that immediate intuition is aesthetic. It is the artist who grasps reality itself, they argue, because aesthetic intuition is holistic and disinterested, and as such the paradigm of all immediate intuition. It is remarkable how closely the young Ranke walks down the same path as his romantic forbears. In another important fragment from the Leipzig years, dated March 23, 1817,⁶³ he engages in a full-scale assessment of Jacobi's philosophy. While Ranke is highly critical of some of Jacobi's views, especially his belief that our awareness of reality is only a form of faith, he endorses his slogan that the aim of enquiry is to disclose existence. This, he writes, is what gives Jacobi's philosophy all its magic, power and life. But we then learn, in true romantic fashion, that it is the poet who reveals existence. The poet renews our feeling for life itself, making us aware of existence itself. He has an immediate intuition into the particular itself, an insight into the *what* of things, whereas the philosopher, using abstract thoughts, explains only their *how* or *why*.

We can now see from these early letters and fragments the source of Ranke's teaching in his 1831 lecture. When Ranke insists that history is not only a science but an art, and when he claims that we know particular things only through aesthetic intuition, he was espousing romantic principles that he had affirmed a decade and half earlier. We can also see, more precisely and firmly, just how deeply Ranke's aesthetic conception of history is rooted in the romantic movement. This, once again, shows us that the positivist interpretation of Ranke is far off the mark. But, even more strikingly, it also shows how misleading it is to claim that Ranke wanted only to make history a science. The truth of the matter is more interesting: Ranke had a romantic agenda in wanting to unite history and art. Ironically, the twentieth-century reaction against "scientific history" in the name of art, which saw Ranke as the source of all evil, had really only attacked its strongest ally.⁶⁴

5. A romantic epistemology

What were the epistemological principles that guided Ranke's historical methodology? It might seem that we have already answered this question in discussing Ranke's 1831 lecture where he contrasts his method to that of speculative philosophy. But we have really only scratched the surface. The lectures and writings of the 1830s presuppose deeper philosophical principles, which they do not explain. To discover these principles, we have to return to Ranke's early unpublished writings, chiefly those composed during his Leipzig years (1814–17), but also some of those from his days at the *Schulpforta* (1809–14). These writings take the form of letters, diary entries and essay drafts. They contain occasional reflections on philosophical issues which arose from Ranke's reading of other philosophers, most notably Kant, Jacobi, Fichte and Schelling. They show the extraordinary effort of the young Ranke to think through on his own fundamental philosophical issues. While Ranke never gives his reflections a final systematic exposition, they still form a remarkably coherent whole. It was these reflections that determined Ranke's historical method and practice for the rest of his life.

Ranke formed some of his basic principles while still a student at *Schulpforta*. In the early drafts for his valediction essay on Greek tragedy, “De tragoediae indole et natura,”⁶⁵ he laid down some basic principles for the interpretation of Greek tragedy. Here the principle of individuality makes its first appearance in Ranke.⁶⁶ He stresses how each nation has its own characteristic ways of thinking and acting, which are determined by its language and customs, and that we understand a text only when we place it within the context of its own culture. Applying this principle to Greek tragedy, Ranke argues that we should be wary of judging it according to contemporary standards. He complains that no less than August Wilhelm Schlegel, no mean classicist, is guilty of this fallacy. Schlegel had criticized Euripides' plays on the grounds that they lacked unity of action;⁶⁷ but Ranke defended Euripides on the grounds that Schlegel's criticism is anachronistic, resting on a contemporary understanding of unity of action. Schlegel understood unity of action to be the ordering of specific events toward a definite end; but the Greeks understood unity of action to be only the general idea behind a work.⁶⁸ When measured in these Greek terms, Ranke argued, Euripides' plays could be shown to have unity of action after all.

For an understanding of Ranke's epistemological principles, one of the most important and interesting of his early writings is a short essay he wrote sometime

between 1816 and 1818, which has been given the apt title "Mensch und Natur."⁶⁹ The first part of the essay develops a thoroughgoing empiricist and naturalist standpoint for understanding the place of man in nature. Ranke stresses our dependence on nature, and declares that nature is our mother, provider and guide in all things. We are told that the understanding does not give laws to nature, as Kant assumed, but that on the contrary nature gives laws to the understanding. Consciousness is only "the most highly developed natural power." The intellect is not a spiritual faculty that stands above nature but it is a power within it. The senses arouse, direct and shape the forms by which we grasp the natural world, and the concepts of the intellect are nothing more than metamorphoses of sense images. Ranke pushes this empiricism so far that he doubts the existence of the Kantian *a priori* forms of cognition. There are no *a priori* forms of sensibility because the forms of space and time derive from our experience of the world; there are also no *a priori* forms of understanding because we learn to connect and distinguish things according to what is given in our experience. Although Ranke admits that the intellect has its characteristic laws, its own innate laws of operation, he insists that the specific form they take, i.e., just *how* they operate, is determined by what is given in our experience. Without the stimulus and material of the senses, the intellect would not know how to connect or distinguish between things. Ranke sums up his argument from the first part of his essay when he declares: "Man is in his whole being entirely the world of nature, and is indeed a part of her." (230)

From this statement it would seem that Ranke endorses a completely naturalistic metaphysics and a full-blown empiricist epistemology. But the second half of the essay sharply corrects this impression. Ranke now declares that man is more than nature and that he stands above it by virtue of morality. Although man is a creature of nature, it also turns out that he has the power to resist it. What gives him this power is his freedom, the capacity to determine his own actions independent of nature. Through self-determination he makes his own laws, and he becomes the master of his own fate. Just like the magician who draws a magical circle around himself into which nothing can enter, so the will has a sphere of autonomy no power of nature can overwhelm. "The realm of morality," Ranke writes, "is not of this world; it cannot be found in nature, however strictly nature conforms to the laws of the understanding." (272). While Kant is wrong that man is the lawgiver of nature in the realm of theory, he is perfectly correct that he is so in the realm of practice. It is precisely in this respect, Ranke adds, that Fichte is so important. Although his speculative principles are incorrect, his practical ones are right on target. Fichte rightly stresses the moral autonomy of man and how it elevates him to a position above nature. After reading the second half of the essay, then, we see how Ranke limits his empiricism and naturalism before the moral realm. He accepts a basic metaphysical dualism between

the moral and natural order, and endorses Kant's and Fichte's conceptions of the primacy of practical reason. While empiricism and naturalism hold for the realm of theory, they have no validity with regard to the realm of practice. This basic dualism will appear in Ranke's later writings. As we shall soon see, Ranke's belief in freedom was one the chief sources of his resistance against Hegel's philosophy of history.

From "Mensch und Natur" it would seem that, though he denies the validity of a complete empiricism in the realm of practice, Ranke still accepts it in the realm of theory. We seem to find in this early essay the basis for his later empirical method in the 1831 lectures. But this impression too is corrected by further reading. In a diary entry from 1816/17,²⁰ Ranke clearly endorses one of the most important principles of Fichte's epistemology: that self-knowledge is the basis for all knowledge, or that we know things only insofar as they conform to the conditions of self-awareness. Hence knowing is not simply a matter of passive reception, of mirroring what is given to us; rather, it involves active assimilation, making the objects conform to the conditions of our consciousness. If we want to specify what it is that we know, Ranke writes, we also have to take into account the subject who knows it and the conditions under which it knows. Since we are completely different creatures from nature, he argues, we cannot know it except by making it conform to the laws of our own consciousness. This point hardly seems compatible with Ranke's earlier argument in "Mensch und Natur" that we learn how to connect and distinguish things according to the content of our sensation; but the two doctrines can be reconciled provided that we distinguish between the pure forms of experience, which are *a priori*, and their application to particular cases, which has to be determined *a posteriori*. Ranke himself seems to have been aware of the tension between his endorsement of Fichte's principle and the empiricist principles outlined in his earlier essay, and to have resolved it somewhat along these lines. For in another diary entry from 1816/17,²¹ we find him qualifying his previous approval of Fichte's principles. While he continues to hold the "identity of one's own being must precede every perception," he warns against taking this doctrine to a one-sided extreme, as if everything were only the result of our knowing activity. He rejects Fichte's attempt to derive the entire content of experience from the ego alone. No such deduction can succeed, Ranke maintains, because one condition of self-consciousness is that we have consciousness of an external world.

Even if Ranke's epistemological principles are consistent, they still do not seem to coalesce or to form a coherent whole. We seem left with at best an eclectic doctrine, one which is half empiricist and half rationalist, or half realist and half idealist, with no real unifying center. It is of the first importance to see, however, that in upholding both epistemological extremes Ranke was typical of the romantic tradition. The most common epistemological doctrine of the romantic generation, which is found in Friedrich Schlegel, Novalis, Hölderlin and Schleiermacher, was a syncretic theory

called “ideal-realism” or “real-idealism”, which attempted to combine the insights of both Fichte's idealism and Jacobi's realism.⁷² According to this doctrine, we know something through a double process of internalization and externalization. We know things only by internalizing them, by making them to conform to the conditions of our own being; but we also know them only by externalizing ourselves, by making ourselves conform to the character of things outside us. Knowledge therefore involves a process of both contraction and expansion: contraction, because we assimilate things according to the laws of our nature; and expansion, because we have to conform ourselves to the world outside us. There are clear strengths and weaknesses to this theory, which we cannot pursue here. All that is relevant to note now is that Ranke himself explicitly endorses it. It appears unmistakably in two fragments. First, in a diary entry from 1814,⁷³ where Ranke states that the vocation of a human being, and the whole puzzle of its existence, resides in unifying two opposing activities: internalizing everything so that the world becomes oneself, and externalizing one's self so that it becomes one with the entire world. Second, in a draft of his valedictory essay for *Schulpforta*,⁷⁴ where Ranke notes how the same process takes place in the creative work of a dramatic poet, who both internalizes the world as he externalizes himself. Given his belief in the affinity of history and art, the importance of this conception of artistic creativity for his historiographical views should be clear.

If we now pull together these various fragments, they show that Ranke had a definite and coherent epistemology already in his Leipzig years, well before embarking upon his historical work. What relevance are these principles to his historical methodology? They have three important implications. First, contrary to Ranke's critics, they show that he was not a naive realist who held that knowing an object is simply a matter of copying what is given to us; Ranke's endorsement of Fichte's principles show that he held no such doctrine. Second, by the same token, they also demonstrate that Ranke was not an idealist either, the other pigeonhole in which scholars have wished to place him. Both the realist and idealist interpretations are wrong because they are one-sided, failing to do justice to Ranke's romantic synthesis of idealism and realism. Third, these principles also show that Ranke held that historical understanding, like all understanding, involves the complex interchange of opposed activities; it consists in both internalizing the past, so that it conforms to our standpoint, and identifying with, or externalizing ourselves in, the past, so that we conform to it. In other words, historical understanding arises from both *assimilating* the past, so that the other becomes like us, and of *sympathizing* with the past, so that we become like the other. By holding that all historical understanding involves both activities, Ranke was able to account for two of its fundamental features: first, that we understand the past when we get outside our

own present viewpoint and see things according to the viewpoint of the past; second, that we understand the past only in our own terms, so that history must be constantly rewritten for each generation. *Prima facie* Ranke's theory of historical understanding is contradictory because it combines elements of both idealism and realism; but the contradiction disappears as soon as we place it in context: romantic epistemology, specifically its real-idealism or ideal-realism.

6. Historical objectivity

No statement of Ranke has been more cited, and aroused more controversy, than his famous dictum that the aim of the historian is only to tell the truth "as it actually happened" (*wie es eigentlich gewesen*). This statement appears in the preface to his first book, his 1824 *Geschichte der romanischen und germanischen Völker*. There he felt obliged to explain his purpose and methods in writing the book, and how it differed from previous treatments of the same subject. He warned his readers not to expect literary quality because his "highest law" had been "a strict presentation of the facts, contingent and unattractive though they may be." Distancing himself from the pragmatic history of the Enlightenment, he stated that his task had not been to instruct the public, still less to draw moral lessons from history, but only to say what happened. And so he wrote:

One has allotted to history the office of judging the past, of instructing contemporaries for the sake of future generations. To such offices the present effort does not presume: it merely wants to show how things actually happened (*wie es eigentlich gewesen*).⁷⁵

Taken at its face value, Ranke's statement is a curious mixture of the banal and astonishing. It is banal, because it is obvious that the historian must tell the truth; after all, we do not expect him to tell stories like a novelist. But it is also astonishing, because it seems that Ranke really thinks that the historian can know *the objective truth* and tell us *exactly* what happened. He therefore seems either utterly naive or grossly presumptuous. It is not least because of this strange *mélange* of the commonplace and fantastic that Ranke's statement has proven so controversial.

Since the late nineteenth century, it is fair to say, all disputes about historical objectivity have begun with, or revolved around, Ranke's dictum. Those who defend historical objectivity adopt it as their rallying-cry; those who attack historical objectivity make it their chief target. We cannot discuss here, of course, the general issue of historical objectivity. Our task is much more limited: to determine what Ranke meant by his dictum. We must raise the question: What did Ranke mean by historical objectivity? Even this limited task will prove to be rather complex, however, because "objectivity" has several senses. We need to distinguish these senses and see whether and how they apply to Ranke.

One common sense of “objectivity” is that of naive realism, i.e., the belief that we know reality as it exists in itself, apart from and prior to our knowledge of it. It assumes that reality has all the properties we know it to have, but that these properties exist in the object independent of knowledge of it. Applied to history, naive realism supposes that we know the past as it *was* in itself, apart from and prior to our attempts to know it. In other words, the perspective of the historian adds nothing to the reality of the facts themselves, which have all their properties even if he were never to know them.

It is the apparent naive realism of Ranke's dictum that has made it so objectionable to some critics.⁷⁶ But, as we have seen in the previous section, Ranke was never committed to such a doctrine. The chief problem with this interpretation is that it fails to take into account Ranke's debts to the idealist tradition, more specifically, his recognition of the Fichtean principle that cognitive activity forms its object. Although, as we have seen, Ranke did not endorse this principle in a completely unqualified sense, he still accepted enough to rule out naive realism. While he held that the *matter* of experience is given, so that the subject knows *more* than what it creates, he also maintained that the *form* of experience is determined by our knowing activity. Applied to history, this means that the perspective of the historian does add to what he knows, and that the historian is never limited to passively recording what is given. Ranke expressly accepts this implication, because he maintains that each generation must write its own history, and because he doubts that there is a perfect history that holds for all times.⁷⁷

Another sense of historical objectivity means knowledge of basic facts, i.e., what, when, where and how someone did something. Such knowledge is distinguished from interpretation, assumption, fantasy, hearsay, legend, embellishment and distortion. To be “objective” in this sense is “to stick to the facts” and to describe only what the evidence allows. This is the meaning of objectivity required in courts of law when judges demand that a witness describe simply what he or she saw, refraining from all assumption, interpretation and embellishment.

Ranke did intend this sense of objectivity. When he said that the historian should tell us what really happened, he meant not least that he should determine basic facts and distinguish them from assumption, interpretation, or invention. The historian can approach, if not achieve, objectivity in this sense, Ranke believed, if he relies on the testimony of witnesses or first-hand reports, and if he does not rest his case with tradition, authority or secondary literature. That Ranke understood objectivity in this sense is clear from his *Zur Kritik neuerer Geschichtsschreiber*.⁷⁸ Here Ranke engages in a critical discussion of Guicciardini's *Storia d'Italia*, which for generations had been one of the most trusted sources about Renaissance Italy. When Ranke examined

Guicciardini's history by comparing it to other sources, he found it full of inaccuracies, fabrications and distortions. It was not an eye-witness account, as it presumed to be, but a compilation of other sources. It was not a faithful chronology of events but a fictional narrative. Still less was it an accurate portrait of the words and deeds of great Italian statesmen, for Guicciardini simply invented their deeds and words to fill in his story. History did not have to be a fabrication like Guicciardini's, Ranke argued, because the historian could and should proceed critically, checking his sources and relying on original documents.

In this modest sense Ranke's belief in objectivity is at least plausible. Should this kind of objectivity be impossible, we must accept complete historical skepticism. If we cannot determine how, when and where something happened, even the most prosaic journalism is impossible. *Prima facie* it might seem banal or trivial to claim this kind of objectivity; but, when placed in its original context, Ranke's statement has a point and potency all its own. It was a declaration against older habits of historiography, still prevalent in Ranke's day, which were happy to accept authorities without critically examining them, or which cobbled together a story by compiling various secondary sources. Ranke's dictum was his counterpart to Niebuhr's outburst: "*Ewige Krieg der Kritik gegen die Überlieferung!*" Rightly, Ranke saw that the modern age, which had been so inspired and permeated by the ideals of the new sciences, demanded more than legend and tradition. Hence he declared: "We, in our place, have a different notion of history [than Guicciardini]...naked truth without embellishments, thorough investigation of every single fact...By no means fiction, not even in the smallest details; by no means fabrications."⁷⁹

Although Ranke is correct that historians can sometimes achieve objectivity in the sense of distinguishing fact from legend, fantasy and fabrication, there is another respect in which he was naive in assuming how such objectivity can be attained. Ranke thought that the historian could achieve objectivity provided that he resorted to original documents, eye-witness accounts, rather than relying on secondary literature. In his search for original documents one of his great discoveries was the *Relazioni*, the reports of Venetian ambassadors about affairs in foreign countries. These appeared to be direct accounts of events as they were happening, and therefore just the kind of primary source Ranke needed for his objective history. But here, arguably, Ranke himself was not very critical. It has been claimed that he was blinded by the freshness and immediacy of the *Relazione*, and failed to appreciate fully how slanted they often were.⁸⁰ After all, they were only the ambassador's own take on events, and he often had to slant or embellish them in a light expected by his audience. Ranke could defend himself by saying that the *Relazione* were the best available sources, and the closest one could get to objective history. But such a reply, of course, only proves the point of the

historical skeptic: there are no purely objective source materials, not even eye-witness accounts.

Another sense of objectivity is that of impartiality or neutrality, i.e., refraining from moral, political or religious partisanship. The historian is objective in this sense if he attempts only to describe facts and does not presume to judge them.

It is clear that Ranke also had in mind this sense of objectivity. In the preface to his 1824 *Geschichte* he takes issue with the old pragmatic history of the Enlightenment, which cast judgment upon the ignorance, superstition and barbarism of the past from the standpoint of some presumed eternal reason. Ranke rejects pragmatic history not because he thinks that people cannot learn from history, but because he thinks that the judgments of these historians are covertly partisan. They presume to speak from some universal and eternal standpoint, but their perspective is really only that of their own culture and epoch. To ward off the danger of such ethnocentrism, Ranke advises the historian to refrain from judgment and to aspire toward neutrality. The introduction to his 1831 lectures on "Universalhistorie" make this very clear.⁸¹ Here he explains that "the living principle of history," i.e., the principle that we should treat each individual on its own terms and for its own sake, involves the demand for "impartiality" (*Unparteilichkeit*). Amid all the conflicts of history, we must renounce all judgment and refuse to take sides.

Yet another sense of objectivity, and one closely connected with that of impartiality, is that of *internal* understanding, i.e., knowledge of the past from the perspective of the agent. Objectivity in this sense is opposed to *external* understanding, i.e., a perspective which understands the past only in contemporary terms.

There is evidence that Ranke also meant objectivity in this sense. In his *Englische Geschichte* he wrote about how much he wanted to get outside himself and to let the facts speak for themselves: "I wanted, as it were, to extinguish myself, and to let the things speak for themselves, to let the powerful forces appear on their own..."⁸² Then in his lectures on contemporary history from 1862, he seems to endorse something like a re-enactment theory of historical understanding, according to which the historian understands the past when he re-creates it. In musing about Goethe's concept of "objective thinking," Ranke wrote:

It occurs to me that exactly such objective thinking suits the historian. He may not apply a theory to the historical event; he must instead quietly allow the object to work upon him. But he should go even further. He must intellectually reproduce the object and rebuild it before his eyes. That belongs to the method of research and exposition I have discussed...⁸³

Recreating the past in his imagination seems to have been Ranke's *modus operandi* in reading or lecturing about history. Whenever he would read or lecture about the past

he would imagine its events and let them pass through his inner stage. The reason he wanted to study history, he told his brother, was because he took such pleasure in “reliving the past.”⁸⁴ In a revealing reminiscence about Ranke's seminar, Dilthey tells us how much Ranke seemed to be reliving the past in retelling it:

I can still see him, with his eyes directed not to the listener but inwards toward the historical world. There was no trace of the rhetorician in him, and no relation to his listeners; without any relation to them he would live in his intuition of the historical world; he watched as the images went past him; his great eye seemed to perceive them from within.⁸⁵

It is in these last two senses that Ranke's claim for objectivity seems so naive. When Ranke states that he wants to “extinguish himself” he seems to betray the implausibility of his whole ideal. For how, one might ask, do we get outside our own skin? We cannot escape our own self in understanding the past, nor we can become completely identical with it. Our efforts at empathy seem to be only projections of ourselves. By the same token, it seems impossible for someone to be completely impartial and neutral, as if they could renounce their moral, political and religious affiliations.

No one, it seems, could renounce these affiliations less than Ranke himself. It is not surprising that it is a favorite pastime of Ranke scholars to point out the biases that creep into his histories. Ranke's focus on political history rather than economic and social history, which has been one of the chief complaints against his historiography, was partly a function of his sources; but it was also a function of Ranke's conservative political sympathies, which led him to identify more closely with ruling elites than the people.⁸⁶ The most telling of all Ranke's biases appears in his *Politisches Gespräch*, where he enlists his historical method in service of his conservative political cause.⁸⁷ Critical of both revolution and reaction, Ranke believed that true politics was that of the moderate center, which was the middle path of gradual and enlightened reform. The foundation for this moderate politics, Ranke argued, is nothing less than history.⁸⁸ Rather than deriving his policies from abstract and general principles, and then imposing them upon state and society, the wise statesman had to formulate and implement his policies from the study of history itself. It was history that would tell him the tendencies and directions of his age, and show him the most workable policies for the state. Like the philosopher, the reckless radical proceeded from universal to

particular; but, like the historian, the moderate statesman proceeded from particular to universal.

In Ranke's defense it can be replied that he knew his ideal of impartiality was demanding the impossible. He did not believe that we can be completely impartial, or that we can get outside ourselves and identify entirely with people and events from the past. Here again he can fall back on Kantian doctrine, making impartiality and re-enactment regulative ideals, goals which the historian can approach but never attain.⁸⁹ Although the historian cannot realize these goals, they still have a normative force, imposing an obligation upon him. The ideal of historical objectivity becomes something like that of friendship: even if there cannot be a perfect friend, we should all strive to be one.

It is also noteworthy that Ranke did not conceive of his ideal of objectivity in the "eunuch" like terms sometimes attributed to it. Impartiality did not mean for him completely renouncing all morality and religion and having no morality and religion at all. Rather, it involved cultivating a special kind of morality and religion, one which gave equal rights to all parties, attempting to understand them from within and to interpret them according to their own principles and ideals. Ranke explained this point in his introduction to his 1859–61 lectures on modern history:

True history strives after the intuition of objectivity; it must lift itself above the partisan standpoint. By its very nature it has a moral and religious element. But the moral does not consist in judging and condemning each party according to one's preconceived view; nor does the religious consist in vindicating one's own confession and deprecating and degrading others. Rather, it consists in justifying the right to exist of each moral and religious existence, even if it should be limited.⁹⁰

This was the same conviction behind Ranke's famous statement that all epochs are equally near to God. This dictum meant not least that the historian should not favor one over the other.⁹¹ When we consider such statements it becomes clear that the ideal of objectivity means something like universal sympathy, placing oneself equally within the standpoint of everyone alike. Terence's classical adage—*Homo sum; humani nil a me alienum puto*—was the heart of Ranke's doctrine. Of course, this makes objectivity really no easier to achieve; but it does make it more comprehensible, indeed admirable.

7. Historical explanation

What was Ranke's paradigm of historical explanation? What did it mean for him to understand a human action? We have already seen that, contrary to his positivist reputation, Ranke stressed the importance of not only determining facts but also

understanding the reasons for them. Time and again he insisted that it is never sufficient for the historian simply to know *that* something happened; it is also necessary for him to know *why* it happened. But what should these reasons be? What, for Ranke, constituted an adequate explanation for an historical action?

It is noteworthy that Ranke rejected from an early age the old theory of the Enlightenment that would explain all historical actions from the motives and characters of individual agents. According to this theory, all historical events are the result of the decisions of particular agents, so that historical explanation involves nothing more than the collection of individual actions resulting from individual decisions. For Ranke, this conception of history was much too individualistic, deriving from the tendency, especially prevalent in the Enlightenment, to see the individual as a self-sufficient being. Like all the previous historicists, Ranke affirmed the doctrine that the individual is the product of his time and place, a part of a social and historical whole, and that to separate him from his context is an artificial abstraction. It is therefore essential for the historian, he believed, to see human actions as parts of a wider whole, as the product of their social and historical context. We could never account for them completely from the psychology of individual agents. An important note from 1816/17 makes this explicit:

It cannot be the purpose of the historian to explain all events from the minds of the acting persons. There must be something above them and that rules them—whether we call it fate, providence or God—just as an event stands above them which they do not produce but to which they consciously or unconsciously contribute. One can call the circumstances under which people become what they are contingent; but that higher development of human life is necessary. This development, however, extends to the whole epoch in which people live, to the great event in which they participate, to the overview of the general fate of humanity.⁹²

Granted that human actions have to be understood in their wider context, what is this context, and how, more precisely, does it explain human actions? When Ranke wrote this note he still had no definite conception of it, uncertain whether to call fate, providence or God. Throughout his Leipzig and Frankfurt years, he groped for a better formulation. In the same fragment from 1816/17 he refers to the general context of human action as “the spirit of the time” or “the power of ideas.” Another fragment from the same period states that the great events of history are produced by “the divine idea, which governs human beings everywhere and at all times.”⁹³ This passage reflects Ranke's profound belief in the role of providence in history. He had endorsed the classical Christian conception of history as the hieroglyph of God, which it was the task of the historian to decipher. Thus he wrote his brother at the end of March 1820:

In all history dwells and lives God. Every deed gives witness to him, every moment preaches his name, but most of all, I think, is his presence plain in the connection of all history. He stands

there like a holy hieroglyph, whose most visible form we apprehend and preserve, perhaps so that he does not get lost for future more knowing generations.⁹⁴

The importance of this religious belief for Ranke's practice of history has often been pointed out, and it has been argued, plausibly, that it was his motivation for the study of history.⁹⁵ History was for Ranke nothing short of a divine calling: it was the method for deciphering the divine hieroglyph.

It seems, then, that Ranke thought of the general context as divine providence, as if the ultimate explanation for an action were to see it within God's design. This would make Ranke's history very much like the traditional Christian conception, according to which history is the realization of divine purpose. Attempting to discredit Ranke, Lamprecht interpreted his historiography along just these lines; it was in his view a product of a Lutheran spiritualist tradition, which could not address the concerns of modern historians.⁹⁶ But this interpretation fails to appreciate Ranke's intellectual development and complexity. Though Ranke was a firm believer in providence, though he would often refer to the hand of God in history, and even though detecting the hand of providence was probably his reason for doing history in the first place, providence was still not crucial to his conception of historical explanation. When Ranke began to formulate his conception of the autonomy of history in the early 1830s, he was compelled to lay aside or "bracket" his theological beliefs. Placing history under religious stewardship was for him no better than subjugating it to philosophy. Hence in his 1830 lectures on "Universalhistorie" he argues for the independence of history from theology as much as philosophy, and he explicitly rejects any attempt to explain historical events from providence.⁹⁷ Although Ranke would continue to see faint insight into the workings of God as the ultimate result and reward of historical labor, he recognized that it could not be its starting point or premise. We must not confuse here, as Lamprecht does, historical and logical questions, as if the conditions for the genesis of Ranke's historiography (i.e. his religious beliefs) were also conditions of its validity. Even if Ranke's belief in providence were false, it would not invalidate his history, except in those brief passages where he expresses his belief in providence.

Ranke first expounded, if only in brief tentative steps, his mature theory of historical explanation in his 1830 lectures.⁹⁸ He then gave it a slightly more detailed formulation in his 1835 *Politisches Gespräch*, though this too is sketchy. This is his theory of ideas, his so-called *Ideenlehre*. After the short and vague accounts in the 1830s, Ranke would

return to the theory of ideas, providing various formulations for it in his later lectures. The theory became increasingly important for him, as this passage from the 1847 lectures on “Neuere Geschichte” shows:

It is ideas that appear throughout the centuries, which are accepted or fought. They appear as much in literature...as in the activity of states and churches, which apply them practically. The succession of these ideas and their tendencies form the great structure of universal history. To apprehend them is the first task of the historian...⁹⁹

What does Ranke mean by an “idea”? It has two distinct, though sometimes connected, meanings. In one sense an idea is the governing or dominant idea of an epoch, which is often the guiding principle of an ideology, viz., popular sovereignty during the French Revolution, religious liberty during the Reformation, or national unity during the Bismarck era. Ranke would often write of ideas in this sense in discussing the political movements of the modern age. In another sense an idea is the characteristic nature of a state or nation, what makes it just this state or nation rather than any other, i.e., its *principium individuationis*.¹⁰⁰ This characteristic nature is also the *unity* of a state, nation or epoch, what joins together its customs, morals, laws, religion, politics, and art into a single indivisible whole. The idea in this sense is not simply a static structural principle, what unites all parts of a state, nation or epoch into a single whole; it is also a dynamic principle, the source of its development. Ranke indicates its dynamic character when he writes: “The innermost urge of spiritual life is movement toward its idea, toward greater perfection.”¹⁰¹ It is clear that, in this latter sense, the idea is essentially the principle of individuality applied on the level of a nation or state.¹⁰² Although Ranke does not carefully distinguish them, these senses are distinct from one another: the same leading ideas (in the first sense) could apply to distinct states or nations; and the same state or nation could be characterized by different or conflicting leading ideas. They can be connected, however, if the governing idea of an epoch determines the distinctive character of the nation or state, e.g., England as the representative of a mixed constitution, France as the nation of popular sovereignty.

Ranke's theory of ideas was a hybrid creature, the product of diverse influences. Its ultimate pedigree was Leibniz's entelechy, which is the substantial form of a thing, both its individual nature and its principle of growth. Though there is no evidence that Ranke studied Leibniz, Leibnizian ideas were crucial to romantic *Naturphilosophie*.¹⁰³ We have already seen their importance for Herder and Humboldt; but the progeny of Ranke's *Ideenlehre* was even more complex. Another important source was Fichte, who

was one of the most formative figures in Ranke's intellectual development.¹⁰⁴ When Ranke refers to “the divine idea” he is borrowing a Fichtean concept, which he had acquired from Fichte's 1806 *Ueber das Wesen des Gelehrten*, a crucial text for him which he carefully studied and excerpted in the Leipzig years.¹⁰⁵ According to Fichte, the divine idea is the absolute, God or eternal life itself, which manifests itself in all of nature and history; it is the ground of all the appearances in the sensible world.¹⁰⁶ The task of the scholar is to know the idea, to trace its development in the natural and historical world, and to communicate it to others. The young Ranke was deeply inspired by Fichte's theory, not least because of the philosophical and religious justification it provided for historical scholarship.¹⁰⁷ Besides Leibniz and Fichte, there were two more important sources for Ranke's *Ideenlehre*, both of them from his early Berlin years. One of them was the historical school of law of Savigny and Eichhorn, whose model of historical explanation was the *Volksgeist*; the other was Wilhelm von Humboldt, who had stressed the importance of the historian grasping “the idea” behind an event, nation or culture.¹⁰⁸ All these influences came together in Ranke's *Ideenlehre*: its metaphysical foundation came from Leibniz; its divine or religious dimension came from Fichte; its social and political identity from Savigny and Eichhorn; and its special historical significance and aesthetic character from Humboldt.

Not that such noble pedigrees made the theory more plausible. As it stands, Ranke's *Ideenlehre* is open to obvious objections. Simply to refer to the idea behind a nation or epoch seems little better than an explanation *obscuram per obscuris*. It seems purely verbal, like saying that opium puts people to sleep because of its “dormitive power.” Even worse, the theory seems to put the cart before the horse. Since the idea is the whole structure and generating force behind a culture, it should be the result rather than starting point of explanation. We only know the idea *after* examining and explaining its many parts, so it cannot help us to explain the parts themselves. Worst of all, the theory seems metaphysical, a relapse into older teleological and organic patterns of thinking, which violates Ranke's own empirical standards of scientific knowledge.

But these objections fail to understand the specific logical status of the idea. Obviously, nothing is explained simply by invoking an idea, and on its own it does provide only a verbal explanation. But this is not problematic, because the idea is not meant to be a proper first-order explanation, but a second-order heuristic principle about how to proceed in forming an explanation. The theory of ideas invokes a second-order principle of holistic explanation, according to which we understand an historical action or event when we place it within its context as a whole. This means

understanding the event as the result of not simply one cause, and not even several separable causes, but as the result of many factors or causes that are inseparably interrelated to one another. It tells us that the ideal explanation would be one where the action could be seen as the necessary result of the culture as a whole, where all the factors within the culture serve as causes. Of course, it is impossible to achieve such a full understanding of any action; but at stake is the validity of the ideal, not its practicality. True to his Kantian sentiments, Ranke would stress that understanding an action according to its idea is only a regulative ideal, which we can approximate and never attain.¹⁰⁹ Although he also gives his ideas a metaphysical status, so that they designate a reality and are not mere fictions, their metaphysical status is irrelevant to their justification. What justifies the principle is not its metaphysical truth but its fruitfulness as a method of enquiry.

Ranke's theory of ideas has been criticized on two other grounds. First, by focusing on statesman as the representatives and implementers of ideas, it does not give sufficient attention to social and economic factors in history.¹¹⁰ Second, by seeing a nation or state as an individual, it assumes that it is harmonious or unified, ignoring sources of social and political tension and conflict.¹¹¹

Both objections fail to understand the specific logic of Ranke's theory. The first overlooks the essentially holistic purport of the theory of ideas, which demands that all factors in society and state play a role in the explanation of an action. Although Ranke himself did focus on the role of statesmen as the movers of history, this was less the result of his methodology than his source materials—state archives rather than economic statistics.¹¹² It was entirely in keeping with Ranke's general principles, therefore, that he would sometimes stress social and economic factors.¹¹³ The second objection ignores the essentially regulative status of Ranke's principle, which makes unity the ideal of explanation rather than an attribute of societies and states. Read as a regulative principle that tells us to determine *all* the causes behind an event, it also makes it possible to take into account social and political conflict as one of these causes.

8. Ranke's “irrationalism”

It is a paradox of Ranke's legacy that he both extends and limits the province of reason. He extends it, insofar as he insists on applying the critical method to all historical

documents, examining them carefully for their authenticity and reliability. The historian now proceeds according to the same rational guidelines as the philosopher: he does not take documents on trust but believes them only to the extent that there is evidence for them. But he also limits it, insofar as he claims that the subject matter of history is the individual. The individual, just this determinate thing and no other, is something so infinitely rich and complex that it cannot be fully explained or described in discursive terms. No amount of words ever exhausts it. All that we can do is see, touch or taste it, or, in Ranke's terms, "intuit" it. Hence Meinecke made the fundamental maxim of historicism "*Individuum est ineffabile.*"¹¹⁴ So, when we put together these two sides of Ranke, the result is somewhat paradoxical: we extend the powers of reason over history only to end with some intuition that eludes the powers of reason.

Because he makes the principle of individuality "the living principle of history," and because the individual is effable, constituting a limit on all our rational powers, Ranke has been described as one of the foremost protagonists of "irrationalism", by both friends and foes alike.¹¹⁵ But was Ranke really a champion of "irrationalism"? The term "irrationalism" is sometimes pejorative, of course, meaning a failure to recognize the obvious; but in this context it is meant to have a neutral philosophical sense. In the philosophical sense it can be ambiguous: it might mean advocating beliefs that are *contrary to* the evidence, which therefore are probably false (at least by rational standards), or approving beliefs that have *insufficient* evidence, and which therefore could still be true. It is odd to find Ranke charged with irrationalism, in either sense, given his advocacy of the critical method; but the charge of irrationalism concerns the other side of Ranke, not his critical method but his belief that the individual is indescribable and knowable only through an immediate intuition. Here the claim is that making such immediate awareness the end of historical enquiry is irrational, at least in the second sense, because immediate awareness cannot be verified or demonstrated by Ranke's own critical methods.¹¹⁶

But there is a problem in describing this aspect of Ranke's theory as irrationalist. According to his theory, immediate awareness is not formulable in a belief, because a belief is expressible as a proposition, and the predicate of a proposition involves a concept, a universal or abstract term, which is precisely what the intuition is meant to transcend. But where there are no beliefs, there is nothing to go against or beyond the evidence, and so the question of irrationalism does not even arise.

Still, it could be claimed that this defense of Ranke misses the point. Ranke's irrationalism does not consist in advocating beliefs that go beyond the evidence, still

less beliefs that are contrary to the evidence, but in claiming that there is a realm of life or experience that does not fall under the jurisdiction of reason at all. In claiming that this realm is accessible only to the senses, he is limiting the extent to which our experience is formulable in propositions, and therefore he is restricting the competence of reason itself; for, so the argument goes, reason has jurisdiction only over propositions, i.e., over beliefs formulated into words for which we can cite evidence pro et con. To grasp the irrationalist purport of Ranke's theory we only need to compare it with that of Hegel, who claimed that there is no such thing as immediate experience. According to Hegel, whatever falls within experience should be, at least in principle, describable, and therefore formulable in propositions. When we compare Ranke with Hegel, there can be no question that Ranke is limiting the powers of reason in respects in which Hegel is extending them. Hegel affirms, and Ranke denies, that the content of our immediate experience falls under the jurisdiction of rational criticism. All the more reason for thinking, then, that to just this extent Ranke is an irrationalist.

The epithet "irrationalism" also seems appropriate on historical grounds, given Ranke's great debt to Hamann and Jacobi, two of the major critics of the Enlightenment. We have already noted Ranke's sympathy with Jacobi, especially to his doctrine that the ultimate end of enquiry is to reveal existence. According to this doctrine, existence is revealed to us through an act of immediate perception or intuition, which cannot be demonstrated, explained or defined in rational terms. It is also noteworthy that, from an early age, Ranke was inspired by Hamann, the legendary *Magus des Norden*, a thinker often seen as the fount of German irrationalism.¹¹⁷ During his Leipzig years Ranke had carefully studied Hamann's "Metakritik der Kritik der reinen Vernunft," one of the key texts of the irrationalist tradition.¹¹⁸ The study of Hamann seems to have been more than occasional, because, as late as 1820, we find Ranke again reading him.¹¹⁹ Hamann was for the young Ranke something of a modern version of Thomas à Kempis, a true servant of Christ. From the young Ranke's admiration of Hamann, we can see how the fount of German irrationalism fed directly into historicism itself.

Or so it seems. Before concluding that Ranke was an irrationalist, it is worthwhile to take a closer look at the details of his theory of immediate intuition. *Prima facie* it is odd that Ranke applies Jacobi's theory of immediate intuition to history at all. Assuming that there can be immediate intuitions, they apply only to objects in the present, not those in the past. We cannot have a direct perception of something in the past, simply because it is gone and no longer an object of perception at all. The past is something

that we know, it seems, only from description rather than acquaintance, only from second-hand reports rather than first-hand experience. It should be therefore formulable in propositions, and so should fall under the jurisdiction of reason. The apparent difficulty disappears when we realize that Ranke places his intuitions at the end rather than beginning of critical enquiry. They are not intended to replace the descriptions of the past; rather, they are meant to synthesize these descriptions, to form them into a whole through a creative act of imagination. They amount to the historian's re-enactment of the past, his making whole again all the fragments that he has received from past testimony. This point is decisive, because it means that Ranke's intuitions do not stand above rational criticism but are supposed to be the result of it. This point is made perfectly clear by Ranke himself in a note to his 1847 lectures on modern history where he criticizes Hegel—of all people—for making too sharp a distinction between original and reflective history. Whatever we know through intuition in original history, he argues, is the result rather than predecessor of criticism. “Critique must therefore precede the whole intuition.”¹²⁰

There is another important respect in which Ranke's theory of history is balanced by rational constraints. It is not only that the historian's intuition of the past must follow from his criticism of the sources; it must also derive from placing the individual within its context and seeing it as part of a whole. As much as Ranke stresses the individuality of historical characters and events, he also emphasizes that they be seen within a context. This is indeed the purport of his theory of ideas, which explains all historical events by placing them within a culture as a whole. Once we introduce that theory, it seems that the irrational dimension of Ranke's theory of history has completely disappeared. The individual turns out to be not something unique and ineffable but the necessary part and product of a wider whole, the appearance of an idea. In this respect Ranke's theory of history seems to bring him very close to Hegel, whose “conceptual thinking” (*das begreifende Denken*) is a very similar form of holistic explanation.

But it is precisely in this context that Ranke stresses another irrational factor in history, one which separates him from Hegel after all. The “irrational” factor in this sense is something resistant to holistic explanation, something which cannot be understood as the necessary part and product of a whole. This factor is nothing less than freedom. We have already seen how, in his Leipzig years, Ranke placed man outside the sphere of nature in an intelligible realm of freedom. This doctrine he never abandoned. Even in his later years he insists on excepting man from the general process and context of world history for the sake of preserving his freedom. Hence in some of his later lectures on world history he struggles to find a balance between freedom and necessity, between seeing human actions and character as the product of their own

volition and their historical context.¹²¹ Although the individual is indeed part of the whole, a manifestation of the idea of his nation and epoch, he is also free and autonomous, responsible for his own fate. Ranke is critical of Hegel's theory of history because "the cunning of reason" means that the individual, despite thinking it is following its own will, is really only the plaything of broader historical forces. Like Humboldt, Ranke saw freedom as a limit to historical explanation insofar as human actions could *not* be explained as the necessary result of their specific historical context or other general laws of history. Although we could explain, entirely and exhaustively, human actions through the motives and characters of agents, we could not explain motives and characters in turn as the necessary result of their context or broader historical laws. Ultimately, what separates Ranke from Hegel is his firm faith in a sphere of freedom that stands above and beyond the phenomenal world of history and nature. To this extent, Ranke indeed places greater restraints upon explanation than his rationalist nemesis.

So was Ranke an irrationalist? The answer, as we have seen from our discussion, is somewhat complex and does not permit a simple "yes" or "no". We have come full circle, back to our starting point, according to which Ranke both limits and extends the powers of reason. Ranke did limit the powers of rational explanation in history in two fundamental respects: first, insofar as he believed that its chief object is the individual, which is never completely describable in rational terms; and, second, insofar as he believed that human decisions and actions are irreducibly free, and therefore cannot be completely understood as the product of more universal laws. In both these respects it is perfectly justifiable to describe Ranke as an irrationalist. Nevertheless, in extending the range of the critical method, and in insisting that it be scrupulously followed, Ranke expanded the powers of reason, so that in this sense it is perfectly accurate to regard him as a rationalist. In this respect, as in so many others, Ranke's legacy for the historicist tradition proves to be ambivalent.

Notes:

(1) This was the epithet of Herbert B. Adams in "New Methods of Study in History," in *Johns Hopkins University Studies in History and Political Science* II (1884), p. 65. This view was very widespread in the US and Britain during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. On Ranke's reputation in the US and Germany, see Georg Iggers, "The Image of Ranke in American and German Historical Thought," *History and Theory* 2 (1962), 17–40, and W. Stull Holt, "The Idea of Scientific History in America," *Journal of the History of Ideas* I (1940), 352–62. On Ranke's role in the development of history in Britain, see Doris Goldstein, "History at Oxford and Cambridge," in *Leopold Ranke and the Shaping of the Historical Discipline*, eds. Georg Iggers and James Powell (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1990), pp. 141–53. Ranke's reputation in Britain was secured chiefly by Lord Acton, "German Schools of History," in *Historical Essays & Studies* (London: Macmillan, 1919), pp. 344–92, and J.B. Bury, "The Science of History," in *The Varieties of History*, ed. Fritz Stern (Cleveland: Meridian, 1956), pp. 210–23.

(2) It was above all Friedrich Meinecke who promoted this conception of Ranke. See his "Gedächtnisrede" published as the Beigabe to *Die Entstehung des Historismus*, in *Friedrich Meinecke Werke* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1965), III, 585–602.

(3) On the origins of Ranke's use of this method, see Edward Bourke, "Ranke and the Beginning of the Seminary Method in Teaching History," in *Essays in Historical Criticism* (Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1967), pp. 265–74; and Gunter Berg, *Leopold von Ranke als Akademischer Lehrer* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1968), pp. 51–6.

(4) On the Rankean school, see G.P. Gooch, *History and Historians in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1952), pp. 98–121; James Westfall Thompson, *A History of Historical Writing* (New York: Macmillan, 1942), II, 187–204; Heinrich von Srbik, *Geist und Geschichte von deutschen Humanismus bis zur Gegenwart* (Salzburg: Bruckmann, 1950), I, 293–325; and Eduard Fueter, *Geschichte der neueren Historiographie* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1911), pp. 487–92.

(5) For this image of Ranke, see especially Charles Beard, "That Noble Dream," in Stern, *Varieties*, p. 318.

(6) Dickens, *Hard Times*, Book I, chapter 1.

(7) See, for example, the lectures "Geschichte der neueren Zeit" (1839/40), and "Neuere Geschichte seit dem Westfälischen Frieden," in *Leopold von Ranke, Aus Werk und Nachlass*, ed. Walther Peter Fuchs (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1965), IV, 134–5, 185.

(8) On the importance of the ideal of world history for Ranke, see Herbert Butterfield, "Ranke and the Conception of General History," in *Man on his Past* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1955), pp. 100–41.

(9) See his statement in "Idee der Universalhistorie," *Aus Werk und Nachlass* IV, 77.

(10) *Ibid*, IV, 77.

(11) *Ibid*, IV, 77, 78, 86, 87.

(12) For this image of Ranke, see, for example, Thompson, *History*, p. 185, Beard, *Varieties*, pp. 317–18; and Croce, *History: Its Theory and Practice* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1960), pp. 289–91.

(13) The first to make this charge against Ranke was Heinrich Leo, a disciple of Hegel, in a hostile review of Ranke's first work. On Ranke's early dispute with Leo, see Georg Iggers, *The German Conception of History* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1968), pp. 66–9. On Leo, see Georg von Below, *Die deutsche Geschichtschreibung von den Befreiungskriegen bis zu unsern Tagen* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1924), pp. 17–20.

(14) See Ranke to Heinrich Ritter, August 6, 1830, in *Das Briefwerk*, ed. Walther Peter Fuchs (Hamburg: Hoffmann und Campe, 1949), p. 216.

(15) See especially the works of Butterfield and Iggers cited above, but also the following: von Srbik, *Geist und Geschichte vom deutschen Humanismus bis zur Gegenwart*, I, 239–92; Theodor Von Laue, *Leopold Ranke: The Formative Years* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1950); Ferdinand Schevill, “Ranke: Rise, Decline and Persistence of a Reputation,” *Six Historians* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956), pp. 125–55; Herbert Schnädelbach, *Geschichtsphilosophie nach Hegel* (Munich: Alber, 1974), pp. 34–48; Leonard Krieger, *Ranke: The Meaning of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977); Rudolf Vierhaus, *Ranke und die soziale Welt* (Munster: Aschendorff Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1957); and Friedrich Engel-Janosi, *The Growth of German Historicism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1944), pp. 50–62.

(16) The best account of Ranke's philosophical and theological background is Carl Hinrichs, *Ranke und die Geschichtstheologie der Goethezeit* (Göttingen: Musterschmidt Wissenschaftlicher Verlag, 1954).

(17) Iggers, *German Conception of History*, pp. 64–5. Cf. Von Laue in *Ranke* (p. 137): “Rarely has history been written with so much awareness of philosophical problems.”

(18) See Andreas Kraus, *Vernunft und Geschichte: Die Bedeutung der deutschen Akademien für die Entwicklung der Geschichtswissenschaft im späten 18. Jahrhundert* (Freiburg: Herder, 1963), pp. 136–60, 339–49.

(19) On the origins and meaning of this method, see Fueter, *Geschichte der neueren Historiographie*, pp. 461–6.

(20) See Ranke to Niebuhr, December 1824, in *Briefwerk*, pp. 69–70.

(21) *Zur Kritik neuerer Geschichtsschreiber: Eine Beylage zu desselben romanischen und germanischen Geschichten* (Leipzig: Reimer, 1824). This work was revised for the second edition and published as volume XXXIV of *Sämmtliche Werke*, ed. Alfred Dove (Leipzig: Duncker & Humblot, 1867–1890). (Henceforth this work will be designated “SW”). On the context behind this early work, see Ernst Schulz, “Rankes Erstes Buch,” *Historische Zeitschrift* 203 (1966), 581–609.

(22) See Hegel, *Werke in zwanzig Bänden*, eds. K. Michel and E. Moldenhauer (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1970), X, 347–365.

(23) The best account of the dispute between the historical and philosophical schools is still that of Ernst Simon, *Ranke und Hegel*, *Beiheft der Historische Zeitschrift* 15 (1928), pp. 16–119.

(24) On this episode and the source of the remark, see Simon, *Ranke und Hegel*, pp. 81–3.

(25) Hegel died in November 1831. Ranke gave these lectures either in the summer semester of 1831 or the winter semester of 1831/32. See the editorial footnote in *Aus Werk und Nachlass*, IV, 72, n2.

(26) *Aus Werk und Nachlass*, IV, 72–89.

(27) Meinecke, who traces this principle back to Ranke, finds its source in the 1854 *Epochen der neueren Geschichte*. See his “Deutung eines Rankewortes,” in *Zur Theorie und Philosophie der Geschichte, Friedrich Meinecke Werke* (Stuttgart: Koehler Verlag, 1965), IV, 117–39. As we can see from the above, the source goes back much earlier.

(28) *Aus Werk und Nachlass* IV, 76.

(29) On the decline of the philosophy of history after Hegel, see Schnädelbach, *Philosophy in Germany*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), pp. 40–47.

(30) On the whole, Ranke scholars have accepted uncritically his conception of Hegel's methodology. They see Hegel's methodology as *a priori* construction, as fundamentally identical to the Fichtean method Hegel explicitly spurned. See, for example, Schnädelbach, *Geschichtsphilosophie nach Hegel*, pp. 34–47; Iggers, *German Conception of History*, pp. 66, 77; Friedrich Jäger and Jörn Rüsen, *Geschichte des Historismus* (Munich: Beck, 1992), pp. 34–40; and Meinecke, “Ein Wort über geschichtliche Entwicklung,” in *Zur Theorie und Philosophie der Geschichte*, p. 115. Although Simon did note some of the important methodological affinities between Hegel and Ranke (*Ranke und Hegel*, pp. 125–6), he too conceives Hegel's methodology in essentially deductive terms as a progression from the general to the particular (pp. 124, 157–8).

(31) See the “Einleitung” to the *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, ed. Johannes Hoffmeister (Hamburg: Meiner, 1954), pp. 65–7, 70–2.

(32) That Hegel applied this method to his philosophy of history I have argued in “Hegel's Historicism,” *Cambridge Companion to Hegel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 282–8.

(33) See Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Weltgeschichte*, Band I, *Die Vernunft in der Geschichte*, ed. Johannes Hoffmeister (Hamburg: Meiner, 1970), pp. 30–1.

(34) *Ibid*, p. 30.

(35) See Ranke to Varnhagen von Ense, March 10, 1828, *Briefwerk*, p. 148.

(36) See Fichte's statement of his method in *Grundzüge des gegenwärtigen Zeitalters*, in *Werke*, ed. I.H. Fichte (Berlin: Veit, 1845–46), VII, 4–6.

(37) *Aus Werk und Nachlass*, IV, 74.

(38) Ranke took extensive notes in 1816–17 on Fichte's *Das Wesen des Gelehrten* and *Die Anweisung zum seligen Leben*. See *Aus Werk und Nachlass*, I, 493–501.

(39) Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Weltgeschichte*, p. 15.

(40) This important clue is overlooked by Simon, who used the Lasson edition. He writes that there is no reference to Ranke anywhere in the lectures. See *Ranke und Hegel*, p. 28.

(41) This work was reviewed by Heinrich Leo, a student of Hegel's, in 1828 for the *Ergänzungsblätter zur Jenaischen Allgemeinen Literatur-Zeitung*. Ranke replied to the review in *Hallische Literaturzeitung*, in *Sämtliche Werke* LIII/LIV, 659–66. On this episode see Iggers, *German Conception*, pp. 65–9, and Simon, *Ranke und Hegel*, pp. 93–101.

(42) Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Weltgeschichte*, p. 12.

(43) Ranke, SW LIII/LIX, 61.

(44) Ranke, SW XXX, vii.

(45) In the introduction Ranke admitted that his treatment of the many particulars would seem “harsh, disconnected, colorless and tiring.” Later historians have agreed with Hegel's assessment of Ranke's narrative. See, for example, the opinions cited in Iggers, *German Conception*, p. 69, and Krieger, *Ranke*, pp. 107–8.

(46) *Aus Werk und Nachlass*, IV, 83

(47) *Tagebücher* #250; *Aus Werk und Nachlass* I, 237.

(48) *Ibid*, IV, 297, 307, 411, 435.

(49) *Tagebücher* ##137, 146,172; *Aus Werk und Nachlass* I, 142–3, 146–7, 159.

(50) Von Laue, *Ranke*, pp. 43–44, 45. The charge of mysticism goes back to Karl Lamprecht, *Alte und neuer Richtungen in der Geschichtswissenschaft* (Berlin: Gaertner, 1896), pp. 34, 38, 44, 48.

(51) *Tagebücher* #158, *Aus Werk und Nachlass* I, 152–4.

(52) In his later 1847 lectures on “Neuere Geschichte seit dem Westfälischen Frieden,” Ranke would stress more the scientific status of history and its difference from poetry. See *Aus Werk und Nachlass* IV, 188–9. However, his basic faith in the affinity between history and poetry did not falter. It is expressly and emphatically reaffirmed in the “Analecta” to his 1852 *Französische Geschichte*, SW XII, 5. The importance of Ranke's literary conception of history has been stressed by Rudolf Vierhaus, “Historiography between Science and Art,” in Iggers and Powell, *Ranke*, pp. 61–9.

(53) *Aus Werk und Nachlass* IV, 72.

(54) *Ibid*, IV, 88.

(55) On the traditional classification and discussion of the relation between poetry and history, see Klaus Heitmann, “Das Verhältnis von Dichtung und Geschichtsschreibung in älterer Theorie,” *Archiv für Kulturgeschichte* 52 (1970), 244–79.

(56) As Vierhaus has pointed out, “Historiography,” pp. 65–6.

(57) See Humboldt to Goethe, March 18, 1822, in *Briefe an Goethe*, ed. K.R. Mandelkow (Munich: Beck, 1982), II, 313.

(58) Humboldt's essay was an Akademie address delivered in February 1821, and it was published later that year in the proceedings of the Akademie. It is very likely that Ranke would have read it, though there is no direct evidence he did so. It perhaps stimulated and encouraged him to put forward his own views; however, as we shall soon see, Ranke's views about the fundamental role of poetry in all forms of prose was already set in his Leipzig years.

(59) Among the first scholars to fully appreciate Ranke's debts to the romantic movement was Georg von Below in his brilliant *Die deutsche Geschichtsschreibung von den Befreiungskriegen bis zu unsern Tagen*, pp. 20–9. As if to underscore the novelty of his interpretation, Below constantly complains that this debt has not been understood.

(60) *Das Briefwerk*, p. 2.

(61) *Tagebücher*, #243, *Aus Werk und Nachlass* I, 233–4.

(62) Jacobi, *Werke* (Leipzig: Fleischer, 1829), IV/1, 72.

(63) *Tagebücher* #158, *Aus Werk und Nachlass*, I, 152–3.

(64) See, most famously, George Macaulay Trevelyan's *Clio, A Muse*, in *Varieties of History*, pp. 227–45. Trevelyan does not mention Ranke; but his essay was a response to J.B. Bury's “History as a Science,” *ibid*, pp. 210–23, which distinguished literature from history and made Niebuhr and Ranke the chief exemplars of scientific history. When Trevelyan complains about making British historians into “so many Potsdam guards of history” it is fair to say that he saw Ranke as their drillmaster.

(65) *Aus Werk und Nachlass* II, 94–119.

(66) Hinrichs, *Goethezeit*, pp. 105–6, is incorrect in tracing the source of this principle to Niebuhr, whom Ranke would read only later.

(67) A.W. Schlegel, *Vorlesungen über dramatische Kunst und Literatur*, in *Kritische Schriften und Briefe*, ed. Edgar Lohner (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1967), V, 100.

(68) See Ranke's earlier essay "De actione in Graeca Tragoedia," *Frühe Schriften, Aus Werk und Nachlass*, III, 54.

(69) *Frühe Schriften, Aus Werk und Nachlass*, II, 223–32.

(70) *Tagebücher*, #135, *Aus Werk und Nachlass* I, 142.

(71) *Ibid*, I, 146.

(72) On the importance of this doctrine in early German romanticism, see my "The Paradox of Romantic Metaphysics," *The Romantic Imperative* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), pp. 131–52.

(73) *Tagebücher* #125, *Aus Werk und Nachlass* I, 138.

(74) *Frühe Schriften, Aus Werk und Nachlass*, III, 85–6.

(75) SW, XXXIII, vii.

(76) Collingwood interprets Ranke along these lines. See *The Idea of History*, Revised edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 130–1.

(77) See, for example, Ranke's statement in *Tagebücher* #260, *Aus Werk und Nachlass* I, 241.

(78) For the details of this text, see note 20 above.

(79) SW, XXXIV, 24.

(80) Fueter, *Historiographie*, pp. 480–1.

(81) *Aus Werke und Nachlass*, IV, 80–2.

(82) SW XV, 103.

(83) *Aus Werk und Nachlass*, IV, 307.

(84) To Heinrich Ranke, End of March, 1820, *Das Briefwerk*, p. 17: "Das ist so gar süß, schwelgen in dem Reichtum aller Jahrhunderte, all die Helden zu sehn von Aug zu Aug, mitzuleben noch einmal und gedrängter fast: es ist so gar süß, und es ist so gar verführerisch!"

(85) Dilthey, "Erinnerungen an deutsche Geschichtsschreiber," in *Gesammelte Schriften* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1965) XI, 217.

(86) This point is explored from a different angle by Rudolf Vierhaus, "Rankes Begriff der historischen Objektivität," in *Objektivität und Parteilichkeit in der Geschichtswissenschaft*, ed. Reinhart Koselleck, et. al. (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1977), pp. 63–76, especially 73–6.

(87) SW XLIX/L, 314–39.

(88) *Ibid*, 325.

(89) See *Aus Werk und Nachlass*, IV, 307; and *Analecten der englischen Geschichte*, SW XXI, 114.

(90) *Aus Werk und Nachlass*, IV, 295.

(91) Ranke made this statement in his 1854 Berechtsgaden lecture, *Aus Werk und Nachlass*, II, 63.

(92) *Aus Werk und Nachlass* #245, I, 234.

(93) *Ibid.*, #246, I, 235–6.

(94) *Briefwerk*, p. 18. Hinrichs, *Goethezeit*, p. 140, traces the origins of Ranke's hieroglyphic conception of history to Herder, especially his *Älteste Urkunde des Menschengeschlechts*, I, 1, VI, "Hieroglyphe." If this is so, we can again trace the ultimate source of Ranke's thinking back to Hamann. See Hamann's *Biblische Betrachtungen*, in *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. Josef Nadler (Vienna: Herder, 1949–57) I, 5, 9.

(95) See Hinrichs, *Goethezeit*, pp. 114–17; Krieger, *The Meaning of History*, pp. 66–127.

(96) See Lamprecht, *Richtungen*, pp. 34–5, 44, 48, 73.

(97) *Aus Werk und Nachlass*, IV, 75.

(98) *Ibid.*, IV, 83.

(99) *Aus Werk und Nachlass*, IV, 191, note q. The passage was struck out, though for reasons hard to determine. It is consistent with Ranke's general theory of historiography at this time.

(100) See the 1848 lectures on world history, *Aus Werk und Nachlass*, IV, 202; and *Über die Epochen der neueren Geschichte*, *ibid.*, II, 58–9.

(101) SW XLIX/L, 337.

(102) *Ibid.*, 329.

(103) On the connection between Ranke and *Naturphilosophie*, see Peter Hanns Reill, "History and the Life Sciences in the Early Nineteenth Century," in Iggers and Powell, *Ranke*, pp. 21–35.

(104) Ranke himself paid tribute to Fichte's role in the development of his thought in a speech he delivered in his later years. See "Beim fünfzigjährigen Doktorjubiläum, 20 February 1867," SW LI/LII, 589.

(105) See *Aus Werk und Nachlass*, I, 493–8.

(106) Fichte, *Werke* VI, 351, 361,

(107) See Ranke to his brother Heinrich, End of October, 1820, *Das Briefwerk*, p. 18. On the importance of Fichte for the young Ranke, see Hinrichs, *Goethezeit*, pp. 112–17; and Krieger, *Meaning of History*, pp. 50–3.

(108) Humboldt, "Über die Aufgabe des Geschichtschreibers," *Werke* I, 600–6.

(109) See, for example, Ranke's statements in *Geschichte der romanischen und germanischen Völker*, SW XXXIII, viii, and in his 1830 lecture, *Aus Werk und Nachlass*, IV, 83.

(110) This was Lamprecht's chief objection, and it has been restated often since. See his *Richtungen*, pp. 48, 77–8.

(111) This objection is made by Iggers, *German Conception of History*, pp. 75–6.

(112) Butterfield makes this point in "Ranke and the Conception of General History," *Man on his Past*, pp. 121–2.

(113) Lamprecht himself admits that Ranke urged him to continue with his own researches into the economic factors behind history. See *Richtungen*, pp. 45–6. This was entirely in keeping with his holistic principles, as Lamprecht acknowledges.

(¹¹⁴) This is the motto of Meinecke's *Entstehung des Historismus*.

(¹¹⁵) Among the foes, see Georg Lukács, *Die Zerstörung der Vernunft* (Nuewied: Luchterhand, 1962), p. 111; among the friends, see Meinecke, "Leopold von Ranke. Gedächtnisrede," *Entstehung des Historismus*, pp. 585–602.

(¹¹⁶) This charge is made by Iggers in the "Introduction" to *The Theory and Practice of History* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1973), p. liii.

(¹¹⁷) See Rudolf Unger, *Hamann und die Aufklärung* (Halle: Niemeyer, 1925); and Isaiah Berlin, *The Magus of the North* (London: John Murray, 1993).

(¹¹⁸) *Aus Werk und Nachlass I*, 492–3.

(¹¹⁹) After thanking his friend Hermann Baier for sending him Thomas à Kempis' *Imitatio christi*, Ranke had a recommendation in kind for his friend: volume IV of Jacobi's *Werke*, which consists in Hamann's correspondence with Jacobi. See *Das Briefwerk*, p. 12.

(¹²⁰) *Aus Werk und Nachlass*, IV, 187, note j. See also Ranke's 1840/41 lectures on "Geschichte des Mittelalters": "*Das geistige Begreifen und das Erforschen des Faktums müssen immer Hand in Hand gehen.*" (IV, 141).

(¹²¹) See "Neuere Geschichte" (1847), *Aus Werk und Nachlass IV*, 193–4; "Einleitung zu einer Vorlesung über Neuere Geschichte" (1859–61), IV, 296–7; and especially the 1854 *Epochen der neueren Geschichte*, *Aus Werk und Nachlass*, II, 63–9.

The Histories of Johann Gustav Droysen

1. The Kant of history

In May 1843, in the personal forward to the second volume of his *Geschichte des Hellenismus*,¹ Johann Gustav Droysen (1838–1908) expressed his embarrassment that, in the course of his exposition, he often had to make general remarks about history that he was in no position to justify. These remarks required a broader systematic foundation, which would be something he called “*eine Historik, eine Wissenschaftslehre der Geschichte*.” But, he lamented, there was nothing like that in the present state of his discipline. “There is no scientific domain that is so far from being theoretically justified, defined and organized than history....” “What we need is a Kant,” Droysen exclaimed, a thinker who would critically reflect on history and determine what makes it a science. Such a critical investigation would examine the present state of history according to rigorous standards, what Droysen called “a categorical imperative of history.”

Droysen's call for an historic was, of course, a statement of personal ambition. No one wanted to be the Kant of history more than Droysen himself. Starting in 1857, first in Jena and then in Berlin, he began a series of lectures on the methodology of history entitled “*Enzyklopädie und Methodologie der Geschichte*.” The project was dear to him, and he worked on it tirelessly, revising his lectures constantly. He would continue to lecture on the topic for twenty-five years, giving the course no less than eighteen times.² In 1858 he had printed an outline of his lectures, *Grundriß der Historik*, which stated its main themes in a series of concise paragraphs; it was then published in 1867, and twice again, with minor editions, in 1875 and 1882. Although Droysen had written out a full and final draft of his lectures, infirmity and age prevented its publication. As a result, for generations, the *Grundriß* remained the sole source for Droysen's thought.

Despite the energy he invested in it, Droysen's historics received little attention in his lifetime. He achieved respect and recognition for his two major historical works, his *Geschichte des Hellenismus* and *Geschichte der preußischen Politik*.³ And he became famous as the leader of the Prussian or *Kleindeutsch* school of history.⁴ His historics, however, was nearly forgotten.⁵ This was chiefly because, for seventy years, its sole source was the *Grundriß*, which is so dense and brief that it has proved impenetrable to most scholars.⁶ In 1937, however, Droysen's fortunes began to improve.⁷ In that year Rudolf Hübner, Droysen's grandson, published the final 1882/83 draft of the lecture manuscript of the *Historik*.⁸ The lectures revealed at once the depth and breadth of Droysen's thinking, and they give much greater meaning to the abstract outline of the *Grundriß*. Droysen's fortunes improved again in 1977 when Peter Leyh published a critical edition of the manuscript of Droysen's original 1857 lectures.⁹ While Hübner's edition lacks coherence, the 1857 lectures are a unity, and they are written in a more smooth and gracious style. They reveal the power and sweep of Droysen's original conception. The publication of these lecture manuscripts has greatly enhanced Droysen's reputation. The *Historik* has been hailed as "the first comprehensive methodological canon of modern historical science."¹⁰ Some scholars think that it

places Droysen on par with Marx and Dilthey,¹¹ while others regard Droysen simply as “the greatest theorist of history in the German language.”¹² Since the Second World War, scholarship on Droysen has grown exponentially, so that almost every aspect of his work has now been carefully examined.¹³

With Droysen, the historicist tradition enters a new phase in its development and self-understanding. Like all thinkers in this tradition, Droysen wants history to be a science in its own right, an autonomous discipline having its own goals and agenda, independent of those of other disciplines, such as law and theology. However, unlike Herder, Humboldt and Möser, Droysen does not think that the methods of history should be modeled on those of the natural sciences. Like Ranke, he turns his back on the Enlightenment project for a science of man. The opposition to this project, which was only implicit in Ranke, becomes fully explicit in Droysen, who begins the historicist campaign against positivism.¹⁴ While positivism had not been a serious threat for Ranke, who formed his views in the 1830s, it becomes a great challenge to Droysen, who was developing his ideas in the 1850s. And so, with Droysen, there begins that antithesis between historicism and naturalism that many have regarded as definitive of historicism itself. The attempt of later historicists to establish the independence of history from the methods of the natural sciences, which will be crucial for Dilthey, Windelband, Rickert, Simmel and Weber, starts with Droysen.

There is another respect in which Droysen shapes the direction and development of the historicist tradition. In his resistance to positivism Droysen opposed the paradigm of explanation according to general laws, and he went to great pains to develop alternative models and methods of explanation. The result was the famous method of *Verstehen* or understanding, which is often taken to be the main alternative paradigm to the nomothetic paradigm of the natural sciences. Dilthey is often regarded as the father of the method of *Verstehen*, or at least the method is usually associated with his name.¹⁵

However, decades before him, Droysen had already made understanding the method of history, and he had already provided the method with a systematic foundation. Droysen took his method of understanding from hermeneutics, and self-consciously and deliberately stressed its application for the understanding of human action. Human actions were to be understood as if they were texts in need of interpretation. We have already seen how the hermeneutical and historicist traditions ran alongside one another in Chladenius, Humboldt and Herder. With Droysen, however, the traditions merge, because the method of understanding texts now becomes the method for understanding human action itself.

Given his historical achievements, there are strong reasons to examine Droysen's chief doctrines, which have been much neglected in the Anglophone world. Our task here will be only to provide an introduction to the main aspects and issues of Droysen's historical theory. As with any major historical figure, Droysen's work has been the source of controversy. Since the growth of interest in his work, several questions have arisen that have no simple and straightforward answers. What is Droysen's model of historical explanation? How does his conception of history as a science square with his critique of objectivity? Does theology still play a vital role in his historicism? We shall, in the course of our exposition, have occasion to consider some of these questions.

2. Historicism

What did Droysen mean by "historicism"? *Historik* was already something of an established genre when Droysen began giving his lectures in 1857.¹⁶ There had been many attempts to give general introductions to the study of history which would treat its special methods and problems. In his 1857 lectures Droysen considers some of these earlier efforts, and acknowledges that he is not the first in his field (L 50–3). Still, he gives the term a special meaning all his own, which he is eager to distinguish from the work of others. He explains that his historicism is not an *encyclopedia* of history, which will provide a summary of knowledge in the field; it is also not a *philosophy of history*, which will interpret history according to general philosophical principles; and still less is it a *poetics* of history, which will determine the best form of historical writing (L 43). Droysen implies that these were the main forms of historicism before him.

What, though, was new or distinctive about his historicism? It is striking that in all his attempts to define his project Droysen stresses its epistemological dimension. In his

lectures and *Grundriß*, he described his project using the discourse of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century epistemology. Like Bacon, Locke, Hume and Kant before him, he said that his task was to determine the origins and limits of knowledge, though, of course, he would deal with only *historical* knowledge. "It is incumbent upon history," he wrote in the preface to the *Grundriß*, "for it to be clear about its goals, its means and its foundations; only in this way can it raise itself to the heights of its task, only so can it transcend "the anticipations", the *idola theatri tribus fori*, to use Baconian expressions, that still dominate it..." (H 322). It is also telling that Droysen repeatedly referred to his historicis as a "*Wissenschaftslehre der Geschichte*" (L 44; H 377). *Wissenschaftslehre* is, of course, a Fichtean term, and in many respects Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre* was the epitome of the epistemological tradition. The task of the *Wissenschaftslehre*, the science of science, was to determine the place of each science in the general economy and system of human knowledge.¹⁷ Similarly, Droysen's *Wissenschaftslehre der Geschichte* wanted to determine the place of history within the general domain of human knowledge. If we consider all these historical allusions, it becomes clear that, in its simplest and most basic sense, Droysen's historicis was the *epistemology of history*, i.e., an enquiry into the sources, conditions and limits of historical knowledge.

The *Grundriß* does provide an official definition of historicis, though it is compressed to the point of opacity: "Historicis is not an encyclopedia of the historical sciences, not a philosophy (or theology) of history, not even a physics of the historical world, and least of all a poetics for writing history. It must give itself the task to be an organon of historical thinking and investigating." (§16).¹⁸ Droysen seems to use the word "organon", which he does not further define, in the classical Aristotelian and Baconian sense: an instrument of thought, a means of reasoning. We learn that this organon consists in three main parts: *methodics*, which comprises not only critique but also heuristic and interpretation; *systematics*, which examines the various forms of historical action; and *topics*, which treats different forms of exposition (§17).

Droysen's definition is more negative than positive, telling us more about what historicis is not than what it is. The negations are still significant, however, for an understanding of Droysen's project. Some deserve detailed comment. (1) Historicis is not a philosophy of history because it does not attempt to explain the final end of world history according to philosophical method. Droysen identifies the philosophy of history with Hegel, who, on his reading, determines the final end of history according to the *a priori* principles of his logic. If history is to be a science, Droysen argues, then it must follow an *empirical* method. "The science of history," he tells us flatly in the *Grundriß*, "is the result of empirical perception, experience and investigation." (§3). (2) Historicis is not a *physics* of the historical world because it does not explain history on

naturalistic principles. Here Droysen expressly defines historicism against naturalism, the positivist attempt to reduce history to the mathematical methods of the physical sciences. (3) Historicism is not a *poetics* of history, because its goal is to make history a science rather than an art. Unlike Ranke, Droysen rejected the romantic attempt to unite art and science, and he was especially critical of recent attempts to write history as if it were a novel.¹⁹ “There would be nothing more fateful for history,” he wrote, “than for one to get used to seeing it as a form of literature whose criterion of value is the approval of the so-called educated public.” (H 273). If history is to be a science, Droysen believed, it should be less popular, adopting forms of exposition suited to scholars alone. “Each science is in its very nature esoteric and must remain so. For the best part of scientific cognition is the labor of knowing.” (H 273). (4) The most interesting negation in Droysen’s definition, though it appears only in parentheses, is his exclusion of the theology of history. This marks an important break from his earlier thinking. In his personal preface to the *Geschichte des Hellenismus* (1843), Droysen carefully distinguished the philosophy of history from a theology of history; and while he rejected the former, he endorsed the latter, whose task was to explain the workings of providence in the historical world. He continued to affirm this project in the foreword to his *Vorlesungen über die Freiheitskriege* (1846), where he declared that the most noble calling of the historian lies in tracing the finger of providence throughout history.²⁰ But now, in excluding theology from history, Droysen was distancing himself from his own earlier project. The reason is not hard to surmise: if history is to be a science, theology has no place in it, and should be relegated to the sphere of personal faith. It is an important feature of the 1882/83 *Historik* that Droysen’s earlier theological views make virtually no appearance.²¹ At least in principle, then, theology was to play no role in Droysen’s conception of history as a science—a point all too often underappreciated by those scholars who see Droysen as a theologian even in his mature writings.²²

The sources and influences shaping Droysen’s historicism were many and varied. Droysen was a student at the University of Berlin in the 1820s, perhaps the most fruitful and formative decade of historicism. It was during these years that Ranke lectured on world history, that Humboldt gave his academy address on historiography,

that Schleiermacher taught hermeneutics, that Hegel set forth his philosophy of history, and that Boeckh expounded the methods of philology. The young Droysen did not take advantage of all these riches: he rarely visited Ranke's lectures, and probably never attended Schleiermacher's.²³ However, he did enjoy some of them: he had met Humboldt; he was a close student of Boeckh; and he went to many of Hegel's lectures. Boeckh, Humboldt and Hegel all had an important influence on the development of Droysen's historicism.

In the summer semester of 1827 Droysen attended, and took careful notes on, Boeckh's lectures on the "Enzyklopädie und Methode der philologischen Wissenschaften,"²⁴ which many scholars regard as a milestone in the history of hermeneutics. Boeckh had been a student of Schleiermacher, and followed him closely on many points—so closely, in fact, that he said he could not distinguish his views from those of his teacher. From Boeckh, Droysen would learn the basics of the hermeneutical tradition: the concept of understanding, the hermeneutical circle, the varieties of criticism and interpretation. Such was the influence of Boeckh upon Droysen that the structure of his lectures on historicism closely follows that of Boeckh's lectures on philology.²⁵ There were, however, significant, though subtle, differences between Boeckh and Droysen. While Boeckh's chief interest was in philology, and specifically in the interpretation and reconstruction of ancient texts, Droysen's main interest was in history, the interpretation and reconstruction of historical events.²⁶ It is noteworthy, however, that Boeckh conceived of his philology in historical terms.²⁷ The subject matter of his philology was any linguistic expression, so that whatever a people wrote or said in history fell under the philologist's purview. However, Boeckh never extended his methodology to history in general, and its proper subject matter remained limited to the written word. The fundamental difference between teacher and student emerges in their different conceptions of critique. For Boeckh, the purpose of critique is to reconstruct texts, regardless of their historical accuracy; for Droysen, however, the purpose of critique is also to determine whether the texts are "correct" or historically reliable.

The influence of Hegel on Droysen is profound and pervasive, but it is also more difficult to assess because Droysen was so ambivalent about him.²⁸ For a time, Droysen

seems to have been an avid student, so much so that friends said he had been infected by “the Hegelian virus.” He was certainly devoted to Hegel's lectures. In the summer semester of 1827 he visited Hegel's lectures on *Logik und Metaphysik* and *Philosophie der Religion*; in the winter semester 1827 he went to lectures on *Geschichte der Philosophie* and *Philosophie des Geistes*; and, finally, in the winter semester of 1828 he attended lectures on *Philosophie der Geschichte* and *Ästhetik*. After such exposure it is not surprising that many Hegelian themes surface in Droysen's work: the concept of ethical life, the belief in reason in history, the theory of dialectical development, the cunning of reason, the critique of Niebuhr and the critical school. However, Droysen quickly began to keep a more critical, if respectful, distance. Shortly after Hegel died in 1831, he criticized him for his apparent association with the Restoration and for his speculative attempts to fathom the plan of world history.²⁹ Rather than Hegel's flights of speculation, he preferred the solid ground of experience. We are finite beings, and as such we cannot pretend to fathom providence or the world as a whole. Like Ranke, Droysen was skeptical of Hegel's rationalism, specifically any attempt to force history into preconceived patterns.³⁰ Hegel's method smacked too much of the old scholasticism, which would attempt to know things by a mere analysis of words. Droysen was also repelled by Hegel's purely logical absolute, which was at odds with his own more traditional Lutheran faith. He complained that Hegel's absolute is not God, the eternal father revealed through Jesus Christ, whom we know through faith and personal experience, but a mere logical machine, the hypostasis of human rationality.³¹

Perhaps the most important influence on Droysen's historicism—at least if we heed his own testimony—was Wilhelm von Humboldt. When he was first struggling with issues of historical method, he wrote in the preface to the *Grundriß*, it was Humboldt who showed him the path forward (H 324). Such, indeed, was Droysen's admiration for Humboldt that he called him “the Bacon of the historical sciences,” “the founder of the science of history” (L 53). What, precisely, did Droysen learn from Humboldt? Unfortunately, he does not explain, offering only a few hints here and there. In the 1857 lectures he states that there is no single writing of Humboldt's from which one can find the core of his doctrine (L 52). The famous essay on the task of the historian is important, but it is by no means sufficient to fathom his position. It is necessary, Droysen advises, to read almost everything he wrote, even the correspondence with Schiller. Fundamental to Humboldt's thinking, Droysen notes, is his *Einleitung in die Kiwisprache*, “one of the greatest books ever written” (L 52). In the preface to the *Grundriß* Droysen praises Humboldt for making the ethical world the center of his worldview, and for making language the focal point for the investigation of the ethical

world. This is interesting because it suggests why Droysen would think the methods of philology provide the key to unlock the historical world. If language is the key to understanding the ethical world, and if the ethical world is the subject matter of history, then the methods of criticism and interpretation formulated by Schleiermacher and Boeckh become the key to understanding the historical world itself. Hence the root metaphor of his *Historik* is that explanation in history is like understanding someone speaking to us. When we understand an historical event we translate it into our own terms, just as we understand a sentence of a foreign language by translating it into our own language. Not the least attraction of such a model of explanation for Droysen was that it provided a clear alternative to that of the natural sciences.

Regarding Droysen's relations to his contemporaries in Berlin, none was more problematic than that to his fellow historicist, Ranke. Droysen and Ranke had much in common. Both aimed to make history a science; both defended its autonomy; both advocated an empirical method and opposed Hegelian speculation; and both were practicing historians well trained in philosophy. Nevertheless, despite their common goals, they had very different views about how to realize them. They were indeed antipodes, both historiographically and politically. Historiographically, Ranke championed detachment in writing history, Droysen defended moral and political commitment. Politically, Droysen was a liberal nationalist, Ranke a conservative cosmopolitan. Given these differences, it would seem better the two never met; but, as fate would have it, they knew one another all too well. As a student, Droysen, in the company of his close friend Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy,³² visited Ranke's lectures, which did not impress him. Ranke, for his part, refused to recommend one of Droysen's books for a prize. The two men kept a polite and prudent distance from one another; but one chance encounter reveals their animosity. When Droysen came to Berlin as a delegate of the National Assembly in March 1849, he bumped into Ranke, who greatly disapproved of Droysen's advocacy of the *Kaiserwahl*. A personal friend of Friedrich Wilhelm IV, Ranke shouted "You do not understand history"; Droysen shot back: "History will show us who understands it better, we or you!"³³

3. The method of understanding

In his 1857 lectures Droysen stated bluntly and frankly his hopes and ambitions for the study of historicism (L 11). While it was Ranke's and Niebuhr's great contribution to have introduced critical methods in history, it was his goal to develop a new model of explanation of human action. This model was his famous method of interpretation of understanding (*Verstehen*). Given the importance this method had for Droysen, and

the historical significance it acquired after him, we should investigate in more detail what exactly he meant by this method.

Droysen introduces his concept of understanding in the *Grundriß* by comparing the method of history with those of the other sciences. There are three possible methods, he says, according to their objects and the nature of human thinking (§14). They are the philosophical, mathematical–physical and the historical. The aim of the philosophical method is to know (*erkennen*), the task of the mathematical–physical method is to explain (*erklären*); and the goal of the historical method is to understand (*verstehen*). Though Droysen does not define these verbs, we can infer their meaning from his lecture notes.³⁴ To know is to derive from first principles; to explain is to subsume under general mathematical laws; and to understand is to interpret or translate, to make someone's meaning comprehensible to me by putting it in my own terms.

In the 1857 lectures Droysen introduces his method by calling it “morphological”. This he regards as the distinctive feature of historical method (L 17). His usage of the term “morphological” is somewhat unusual. He uses it in its classical sense as the study of form and structure. He explains that it is human nature to create form, and that, because history studies “the world that man has created,” it is a science of forms (L 15). This is all perfectly straightforward; but it is important to see that, in calling his method morphological, Droysen has in mind a very specific kind of form or structure. He does not mean *general* or *universal* forms but *specific* or *individual* forms. While general forms or laws are the special concern of the natural sciences, specific or individual forms are the special interest of history (L 20, 21). Hence Droysen goes on to describe the morphological method as individualization (*Individualisierung*) (L19). He explains that the method of history is individualization because the historian wants to know what is unique, anomalous or singular about a person, society and epoch (L 32–3). The connection of form with individuality seems to be this: that individual things realize and reveal their unique and characteristic natures through their form-giving activities. This formulation of his method, which does not appear in the 1882/83 lectures, show how clearly Droysen held to the principle of individuality characteristic of historicism.

In both the 1857 and 1882/83 version of the lectures Droysen expounds his methodology in the context of a discussion of the general problem of historical knowledge (L 8–10, 67–8; H 20). The purpose of his method is to solve this problem. If history is to be a science, Droysen first explains, it must follow an empirical method. Like physics or biology, it has to be based upon observation, the evidence of the senses. “The science of history,” he writes in the *Grundriß*, “is the result of empirical perception, experience and research.” (§4). But it is precisely this demand that seems impossible to satisfy in history. The claim of history to be an empirical science seems undermined by its very subject matter: the past. All that is given to a finite mind is the present; by its very nature the past is gone; the past is not here and now but there and

then. Although, in a sense, the past lives on in the present, which is the result of the past, the past is still not immediately given to us. If, however, the past is gone, we cannot observe it (H 26). The past is not only slipping away every second into non-existence, but it is also, at least in the case of human rather than natural history, unique and irrepeatable. But if the past no longer exists to be observed, and if it cannot be repeated, how is it the object of an empirical science?

The answer lies, of course, in what the past leaves behind. Although the past is gone, it still leaves behind its remnants, its traces. These are “the spiritual presence of the past”; they are still in the here and now, and so possible objects of experience (§6). Droysen calls these traces or remnants the *materials* of history. There are three kinds of material. There are *remains* (*Überreste*), *monuments* (*Denkmäler*) and *sources* (*Quelle*) (§§21–4). Remains are works of art, artifacts, relics, customs, written records dealing with business; monuments are remains made for the purpose of memory, such as statues, testaments, titles and shields; and sources are written records made for the express purpose of noting what has happened in the past. In all these materials the past lives on in the present, and so they make history possible as empirical science.

Droysen would often stress that, since these materials are the only object of understanding, the past exists for us only through our understanding of it. We never know a past that somehow exists beyond our understanding of it. Rather, the past has a strictly ideal status, existing only in the general image we form from these materials (§6).³⁵ The idea that there are facts existing in addition to our understanding of them—the main dogma of the critical school of history—is for Droysen simply an hypostasis, a fetish. We must never be so confident, Droysen insists in a critical aside aimed at Ranke, that we will know the past “as it really was.” Since all we are given are remnants, our knowledge remains fragmentary. It relates to the past, Droysen put it, “as a death mask to a living person.”

Granted we know only remnants of the past, what does it mean *to understand* them? To understand the past means—and this is Droysen's guiding metaphor—that we translate it into our own terms. We understand the past in the same manner that a listener understands a speaker (H 25). Our task as historians is to understand the materials of history by interpreting them; and we interpret them when we translate them. Whether we are dealing with remains, monuments or sources, we treat them as the signs whereby people in the past communicate to us. They are all words, as it were, in the great text of history.

Pursuing the analogy with ordinary speech, Droysen writes in the *Grundriß* that understanding someone requires the listener taking what the speaker says as an expression, embodiment or externalization (*Äußerung*) of the speaker's mental events. For understanding to take place, the speaker must express, embody, or externalize,

i.e., make perceptible inner processes or events (*innere Vorgänge*) (§9). From the expression we *infer* something about the inner life of the person who speaks to us (§10). Understanding therefore involves first of all an inference from the external to the internal, from the expression to the character of the whole person. To understand a speaker and actor chiefly means to understand what they want or intend (H 26), because the will (*der Wille*) is the moving force behind all human actions; it is what distinguishes the ethical or human from the natural world (H 12–13).

Although Droysen sometimes describes understanding in terms of the listener's empathy or sympathy with the speaker, he does not think that it consists in feeling alone, let alone an act of immediate intuition. True to its name, understanding is for Droysen a fundamentally intellectual operation. It is a discursive activity that involves concepts, judgments and inferences. We understand something, he writes, when we place something individual under a universal that explains why it happens; all understanding involves universality and necessity, which are the distinguishing characteristics of thought (H 27). Admittedly, Droysen sometimes describes understanding as if it were an intuition, as if it were “a flash of light between two electrophoric bodies” (H 26). But these passages should not be taken out of context.³⁶ When we read Droysen more closely we see that such flashes of insight presuppose processes of reasoning and inference, whether conscious or subconscious, on the part of the reader or listener. Hence he is careful to distinguish between “the logical mechanism of understanding” and “the act of understanding,” where the latter is the result of the former (§11). Noting the intellectual dimension of understanding is important because it shows how misleading it would be to interpret Droysen's historicism as a form of “irrationalism”. In stressing this intellectual dimension, Droysen reveals himself to be a true heir of the Hegelian tradition.

Droysen does not limit the intellectual operation behind understanding to acts of inference alone. He sometimes explains it in holistic terms. The relation between individual and universal is for him that between part to whole. When we understand someone, he writes, we take the individual expression to be an example, a single instance, or a part of the whole character or person (§10). We cannot understand a single word, or a single sentence, on its own, but we must see it as part of a whole, whether that is the whole discourse, the historical context or the language in general (L 28). Droysen does not think, however, that such holistic understanding is simply a matter of placing the part within a whole, of subsuming the individual under a universal. For he stresses that understanding involves a constant movement back and forth between part and whole, because knowledge of one depends on and grows with the other. “The individual is understood in the whole, and the whole is understood from the individual.” (§10). This is the famous “hermeneutic circle”, already pointed

out by Schleiermacher and Boeckh, now endorsed and propagated by Droysen. Because of the circularity in knowledge of whole and part, Droysen says that the method of historical understanding is not exclusively inductive or deductive; rather, it is a combination of both (§10).

Prima facie Droysen's theory of understanding involves little more than interpreting another person's words or actions by placing them in their proper context. This is indeed the general formula behind understanding, which is essentially holistic explanation. It is necessary to note, however, that Droysen's theory is more complicated and nuanced. He goes on to distinguish between four different forms of interpretation or understanding.³⁷ First, there is *pragmatic* interpretation, which reconstructs causal context behind an event (§39). Second, there is the *interpretation of conditions*, which analyzes the specific conditions—whether physical or moral—that make an action possible (§40). Third, there is *psychological* interpretation, which determines the motives for a person's action (§41). Fourth and finally, there is *interpretation of ideas*, which determines the general principles or ideals behind someone's action (§42). Although Droysen writes of them as different kinds of interpretation, it is clear that he thinks all of them are necessary for a full understanding of human action. The basis of Droysen's distinction between forms of interpretation, though it is never made very explicit, is Aristotle's distinction between the four causes.³⁸ Pragmatic interpretation determines *efficient* causes; interpretation of conditions concerns *material* causes; psychological interpretation finds *final* causes; and interpretation of ideas investigates *formal* causes.

Although Droysen thinks that pragmatic interpretation is a necessary element of the full understanding of a human action, he does not think that it is a sufficient condition. We do not have a complete understanding of a human action when we subsume it under universal laws, the paradigm of explanation of the positivist. Like Dilthey after him, Droysen often distinguishes between understanding (*Verstehen*) and explanation (*Erklärung*), where explanation involves subsuming an event under general laws (L 163). There are two reasons why Droysen thinks that explanation is insufficient for historical understanding. First, historical understanding concerns the individual, what makes it this individual thing rather than something else, whereas the interest of explanation is to know how the individual is like others. Second, historical understanding interprets acts of will, which cannot be understood according to natural laws because they are free or spontaneous. Although Droysen insists that understanding involves placing an individual in a whole and seeing it as part of a more universal order, he denies that this will be sufficient to demonstrate the necessity of its action (L 29–30, 162). Hence individuality and freedom are the two chief barriers to a full explanation of human action.³⁹

Now that we have a basic idea of Droysen's methodology, it is necessary to consider some of the general philosophical principles behind it. Droysen's talk about inferences from external expressions to internal events makes it seem as if he regards understanding as a matter of locating events inside the consciousness of a Cartesian subject, which exists independent of its embodiment in the social and historical world. His doctrine has been interpreted in this light, as if its basis were Cartesian or Kantian.⁴⁰ There are indeed passages in the 1882/83 *Historik* where Droysen appears to accept something like a Cartesian philosophy of mind. Note, for example, the following: "... *cogito ergo sum* is not a basic proposition, a principle; but it is a fact, the first in a series of facts, of which we are certain." (H 16). Or, in a similar vein: "The *cogito ergo sum* is the fact whose certainty is the essence of our human existence, and our spiritual and ethical being confirms it at every moment. From it are derived our representation of nature and history; both, as represented, are only in our mind." (H 302). However, it would be a mistake to see these passages as the basis of Droysen's position. They testify to his belief that all knowledge has a subject, that it must be confirmed within ourselves; but they do not mean that he regards understanding as an inference about a Cartesian subject. We begin to understand Droysen's methodology only when we see how it is based on anti-Cartesian assumptions.

There are two respects in which Droysen breaks with the Cartesian tradition. First, he is highly critical of Cartesian dualism. Following Humboldt, Droysen stresses the spiritual–physical unity of human beings. This means that the relationship between the mental and physical is not accidental or external, as if mind and body were heterogeneous entities that happen to interact now and then; rather, the relationship is more like that between an activity and its expression, where the expression embodies and actualizes, i.e., makes determinate and concrete, what is inchoate and potential in the activity itself. Droysen insists that the very possibility of understanding rests upon this assumption, i.e., we can make safe inferences about the mental from physical evidence only because the mind expresses, embodies or externalizes itself in words and actions. Second, Droysen denies that the self is a self-sufficient mental substance and stresses that its identity depends upon its place in a social–political world. What makes understanding possible is that people share a social and cultural identity. Their community consists in norms—be they linguistic, moral or political—that guide their understanding of one another. Following Hegel, Droysen calls the community governed by intersubjective norms the ethical world (*die sittliche Welt*). It is for him the basic unit of history, the framework within which all intersubjective understanding takes place.

Droysen sometimes writes as if his methodology involves a completely new and original metaphysics (L 64). In a remarkable passage from the *Grundriß* (§13), he

declares that this concept of the ethical world, which is the basis of understanding, reveals the false alternatives of idealism and materialism. The very essence of the ethical world, he argues, is that it resolves the opposition between the mental and the physical, but that it resolves this opposition only to renew it, and it renews only to resolve it. Unfortunately, as so often, Droysen does not elaborate this cryptic remark. Part of his meaning seems to be this. Since the ethical world is a whole of which each individual is only a part, it is more than simply each individual's experience or awareness of it (contrary to idealism); but since this world only exists in, or is realized only in and through, the activity of self-conscious individuals, it does not have an independent existence outside them (contrary to materialism). This suggestion already appears in Hegel,⁴¹ and to an extent Droysen was simply drawing out the implications of Hegel's position. But the more general point behind Droysen's remark is that the relationship between self and world is reciprocal and dynamic: reciprocal, because the self creates its world as much as it is a product and part of it; and dynamic, because the self constantly struggles to overcome its opposition to the world, but resolves it only to face it on a higher level. This conception of the relationship between subject and object already appears in Fichte and Hegel, but it was a *Gedankengut* of the entire romantic generation.⁴²

4. The question of objectivity

One of the most important issues posed by Droysen's theory of understanding is the possibility of historical objectivity. The ideal of objectivity that was so important for Ranke is for Droysen a chimera. There is for Droysen no single perfectly objective understanding of the past which holds for all historians from all perspectives. Like Chladenius, he insists that all understanding is necessarily partial and perspectival, limited by the interests, methods and goals of the historian, and limited by the culture in which he lives. What we know depends on the questions that we ask, and the methods we apply (H 18, 35; L 218); and there are no *a priori* constraints upon these questions and methods, which depend solely upon the interests and ideals of the historian. More significantly, all understanding is limited by the language and culture of the historian, because these provide the terms into which he translates the words and deeds of the past. There can no more be a single perfect understanding of the past than there can be a single perfect translation of a sentence; just as understanding a sentence is relative to the language into which it is translated, so understanding the past is relative to the perspective of the historian; and just as there are as many legitimate translations as there are languages into which a sentence is translated, so there are as many legitimate understandings of the past. And since the perspectives on the past are always changing,

the past must always be rewritten (H 83; L 231). It is for each culture and epoch to rewrite history, to rediscover *its* past and to translate it into its own terms.

Given his differences with Ranke, it comes as no surprise to find Droysen attacking his ideal of objectivity. Time and again in his lectures he would take issue with Ranke, though he rarely mentions him by name. According to Droysen, Ranke's ideal demands the impossible: that the historian jump beyond the horizon of his culture, the very culture that has created him. The difficulty is not just that pure objectivity is an ideal we can approach but never attain; it is impossible even to approach it. Simply because he has to translate the past into his own terms, according to the goals of his enquiry and the perspective of his own culture, the historian will always have *per necessitatem* some partial, one-sided and limited perspective. There is no single privileged perspective, from which we can somehow determine the "objective" nature of the past, but there are many different, equally legitimate, perspectives (H 28). In some blunt lines that seem particularly directed against Ranke, Droysen declares flatly that we cannot determine the past objectively or reproduce it in all its breadth and depth; that would be as much nonsense as the squaring of the circle (H 27). Part of the problem is that the past is never simply given to us as a whole; we have only fragments, which we must reassemble into a whole according to our own perspective. All we that we can do to improve upon our understanding of the past is to increase the perspectives from which we view it (H 27). The Rankean faith in objective facts was for Droysen nothing more nor less than an hypostasis, the reification of an abstract entity (H 133–4). Ranke wants to let the facts speak for themselves, but he fails to see that the facts themselves do not speak other than through the mouth of the person who understands them (L 218).

Droysen's skepticism about Ranke's ideal of objectivity appears most vividly in his outspoken contempt for "*Anschaulichkeit*", i.e., Ranke's attempt to draw portraits, to write history in a vivid way, as if the whole person were in front of one right now. In a revealing passage from the 1857 lectures, where he expressly mentions Ranke, Droysen confessed that he had "the greatest reservations" (*die größte Scheu*) for this, because he never found it possible to understand any human being as a whole (L 239). If this is difficult for someone in the present, it is virtually impossible for someone in the past. One has to be skeptical, therefore, about Ranke's portraits, because they are more the creations of his artistic imagination than any real human being. In doubting Ranke's historical portraiture, Droysen was in effect doubting Ranke's whole intuitive or contemplative approach to history. He was saying, as Hegel had implied decades before him,⁴³ that there are no pure immediate intuitions of historical individuals.

Droysen's critique of Ranke's ideal of objectivity is, in part, the result of his general epistemological principles, which he sketches in the first section of the 1882/83

Historik. Referring to Wilhelm Wundt's *Physiologische Psychologie*,⁴⁴ Droysen notes how each sense perceives the same phenomena in a different manner according to its specific nervous constitution. The real world is never simply given to us, he argues, because what we know depends on the activity of our senses. Things themselves are not blue, sweet, or warm, but they are so only relative to our sense organs. Droysen therefore rejects the classical realist theory of truth, according to which a representation is true if it resembles its object (H 7). A sensation is not a copy of its object, which is somehow similar to it, but a sign, a signal or symbol of something that has acted upon us, and that we interpret according to our needs and past experience (H 6). Hence objectivity is not the awareness of some thing-in-itself, but simply the constant patterns by which we associate specific signs with specific stimuli (H 6–7). Since sensations are signs, we have to interpret our experience, just as we would read a book. Now just as our present experience is a construction, an interpretation, the same is so for past experience, which is much more fragmentary. Though Droysen does not seem to have studied Vico,⁴⁵ he would have endorsed his maxim *verum et factum convertuntur*. Hence he would often insist that knowledge of the past is not given but created by the historian (H 20, 62).

It is not clear, however, how far Droysen was willing to push his perspectivalism. Is there a single fact in history that we interpret from different angles? Or is such a fact an hypostasis? Are there instead as many facts as there are perspectives? There are passages in the lectures where Droysen seems to envisage and endorse a strict relativism. Thus he writes in the 1882/83 lectures that the order and connection that we bring into the facts of history is not in them but solely in our apprehension of them (H 62). He enjoys reminding Ranke and his school that even primary sources are not hard facts but simply someone's "apprehension" or "take" (*Auffassung*) on them (H 134, 137). In the 1857 lectures he flatly declares at one point that truth is simply relative: "The known historical truth is of course only *relative* truth; it is truth as the narrator sees it, from his standpoint, from his point of view, from his stage of education; in a transformed time it can appear differently; one can say, each age has to rework, to rethink, the totality of history anew." (L 230–1). There are other passages in the lectures, however, where Droysen seems to shrink back from anything like a radical relativism that would identify facts with our understanding of them. Hence he never relinquishes the demand for what he calls "correctness", i.e., determining whether a source is an accurate account of reality (H 132–4). And even when he stresses the variety of perspectives on the past, he stresses that this variety enriches us because it allows us to see the past "*stereoscopically*", i.e., to see one and the same thing from different angles (H 139). Although he defines truth as the conformity of factuality (*Tatsächlichkeit*) with a complex of thought, there is still the remnant of factuality (L 230). This is important for him because he distinguishes the artist from the historian precisely because the historian, unlike the artist, "takes his thoughts from the reality of things." (L 232).

Whatever the limits of Droysen's perspectivalism, he was deeply committed to it, not only for epistemological but also moral and political reasons. Though the historian *could* not be completely objective and neutral, it was just as well because he *should* not be so. The necessity of perspective was not the historian's limitation but his opportunity, if he only had the honesty to admit it and the prudence to exploit it. For it gave the historian the right—indeed the duty—to reconstruct the past according to one's own social and political commitments and convictions. The historian had an obligation to promote the self-awareness of his nation, to create a sense of national identity and civic responsibility among the public (L 235) The direction of history is of the utmost importance for the present; and the historian should participate in the great struggles of his day by showing how history supports them. Droysen therefore utterly rejected the ethics of impartiality and neutrality that had been recommended by Ranke. Impartiality was not the epitome of history but its betrayal. In one of the most striking passages of the *Historik* Droysen sarcastically and scornfully rejects Ranke's ethic:

I am thankful for this kind of eunuch-like objectivity. [But] I do not want to appear to have more or less than the relative truth of my standpoint, insofar as my fatherland, my political and religious conviction, and my earnest study have helped me to reach it. That is by far not meant to be the work for eternity, but in every respect it is one sided and limited. But one must have the courage to confess this limitation, and to console oneself that the limited and particular is richer than the universal. (H 287)

Such a *credo* raises questions of its own, which no amount of confession could absolve. One is how it squares with Droysen's claim for the scientific status of history. Some scholars have celebrated Droysen's perspectivalism as a prescient anticipation of post-modernism.⁴⁶ But such an interpretation is one-sided and anachronistic, ignoring the other side of Droysen: his belief that history could and should be a science. The very ideal of science seems to imply a commitment to objective truth, results that are intersubjectively valid, and not merely true from a cultural perspective. Aware of this issue, Droysen replies that the relativity of the historian's perspective does not imply that it is arbitrary or personal.⁴⁷ We have definite methods and objective criteria to correct, justify or deepen our knowledge, even though that knowledge will be dependent on a specific perspective. Just as translation from one language into another has to conform to definite rules, so understanding the past into our own terms has to conform to rules all its own. Objectivity does not mean knowing things as they really are, but simply conformity to these intersubjective standards and methods. Furthermore, the historian does not speak for himself and his own personal commitments, but for his entire culture and nation. It is not his personal ego that speaks when he is an

historian, but his entire culture and nation that speaks through him. After dismissing Ranke's "eunuch-like ideal," Droysen writes:

Naturally, not from subjective caprice, from my little and trivial person, will I attempt to solve the great tasks of history. Insofar as I consider the past from my standpoint, from the thoughts of my nation and state, from my religion and past, I stand high above my individual ego. I think, as it were, from a higher ego, in which the slag of my little person has been melted away. (H 287)⁴⁸

Another no less pressing question raised by Droysen's perspectivalism is how it prevents the ethnocentrism exposed and banished by historicism. Droysen, no less than Ranke, Herder and Möser, deplored ethnocentrism in history. He stressed that "the greatest danger and difficulty" came from reading the standards and values of our own contemporary culture into the past. We should be careful not to write about the past, he warned, in the same manner as Shakespeare wrote about the Greek heroes in *Troilus and Cressida*: he could imagine them only as Elizabethan courtiers! (H 156). Yet was not Droysen himself flirting with this very danger when he wrote about the past from the political agendas of the present? To see history as tending in the direction of a single nation-state could be at best a *regulative* principle, deriving its validity from promoting the agenda of liberal nationalism; but it could never be taken as a *constitutive* principle, as if there really were a *telos* inherent in history itself. This was a distinction, however, that Droysen failed to make. One of the most common criticisms of his *Geschichte der preußischen Politik* is precisely that Droysen read his nationalist ideals into the Prussian past, as if it had always been the mission of Prussia to unite all of Germany. It is not surprising that such a tendentious reading of Prussian history received Ranke's disapproval and cost him the Verdun prize.⁴⁹

5. Critique of the critical school

Crucial for Droysen's views on historical method is his attitude toward "the critical school of history," i.e., the position of Niebuhr and Ranke, which had become immensely influential by the middle of the nineteenth century. Often in his lectures, and especially in chapter II of the 1882/83 *Historik*, Droysen would engage in a relentless, if usually tacit, polemic against the critical school. The question of the purpose and limits of historical criticism had become a very controversial topic in the 1850s and 1860s, the decades when Droysen first began to give his lectures. It was inevitable, therefore, that he would want to take a stand on these issues. Sure enough, he refers to them in the beginning of chapter II, noting "how very controversial it is in our discipline what criticism should do and how far its competence extends" (H 92).

The debate about the limits and powers of historical criticism began in the late 1820s when Hegel, in the introduction to his lectures on world history, attacked the methods of Niebuhr and Ranke.⁵⁰ As a student who attended these lectures, Droysen was a direct witness of the birth of the controversy. It is not surprising, therefore, that in many of his criticisms of Niebuhr and Ranke we can hear faint echoes of his former teacher. Not that Droysen was carrying on the debate between the philosophical and historical schools; he had too many scruples about Hegel's method to be regarded as a philosophical partisan.

Although Droysen had great reservations about critical history, and although he would never miss an opportunity to take issue with it, he never doubted its value, its outstanding contribution to historical research. There could be no question that if history were to be a science, it would have to investigate its sources with a critical eye; there could be no going back to the naive pre-critical days, when historians were content to pass on tradition. If Germany were so far ahead of other nations in its historical scholarship, Droysen declared, that was because of the influence of Niebuhr and the critical school.⁵¹ In the beginning of his 1857 lectures he would pay handsome tribute to it:

In our science, like every other, everything depends on the correct appraisal of the sources of knowledge; scientific work begins only when one has become aware of this need. It is the great contribution of German science in the last century to have grasped this point, and with justice the students of Niebuhr and Ranke boast the title of the critical school. It has developed a great and acute method of historical critique, and it makes critique the essential technique of the historical art. (L 11)

The chief problem with the critical school, Droysen explained in his 1857 lectures, is that it never sees beyond critique and makes a fetish out of it. It thinks that the *whole* and *sole* method of history lies in critique (L 113). While critique is indeed indispensable, it is not all there is to history. Of no less importance to history is understanding and interpretation (L 11). The critical school, however, conflates the critical examination of sources with history itself, so that the means of doing history becomes the end itself (H 131). Behind this twisted reversal of means and ends, Droysen suspected, lay Niebuhr's philological training. Like any good philologist, Niebuhr thought his work was done when he had sifted his texts. In his *Römische Geschichte*, for example, he went to great pains to show that Fabius Pictor's account of the origins of Rome came from a compilation of sources. After sorting through Fabius' sources, he leaves it at that. But the task of history is not to reconstruct what Fabius Pictor *thought about* the history of Rome, Droysen protests, but to reconstruct the history of Rome itself (H 131–2). Similarly, Niebuhr demonstrated that Livius is not a reliable source of

Roman history because his writings are a mishmash of Polybius, Coelius Antipater, Silanus and Valerius Antias. But, Droysen asks, assuming Niebuhr's argument is correct, what does it show about Roman history itself? (H 132, 136). Niebuhr fails to see that the task of criticism is not simply to reconstruct the sources but to determine their *correctness*, i.e., whether they are true of history itself. Throughout Droysen's criticism of Niebuhr it is possible to detect the voice of his old teacher; for Hegel had argued long ago that critical history is the history of history rather than history itself.

Another major problem of the critical school, in Droysen's view, was its naive optimism, its boundless, indeed uncritical, confidence in what criticism can do. He insists that the limits of the critical method are much greater than its practitioners realize. It provides results only in some areas of history, but is of little value in others. It applies best to medieval history where there are many original and derived sources and it is necessary to discriminate between them (L 113). But in ancient history there are often too few sources for the method to work; and it is not of much use in assessing the public literature—newspapers, flysheets, pamphlets—of early modern history. Here the task is not to determine whether a source is genuine, but to find one's way through the multitude of opinions, each of which provides a distinct take on events. Who is to say now that one opinion is correct rather than another? (L 114). A large part of the critical historians' naive confidence is that they seemed to think that, if they only sifted and sorted enough, they would finally be able to distinguish truth from falsehood, and so see “how things actually were.” Such optimism, in Droysen's view, is based on a misconception about the very subject matter of history. What the historian has before him is fragments, bits and pieces of a much larger and richer reality; on their own, these fragments are incomprehensible because they do not amount to a coherent whole (H 85–6). Their coherency, however, is never given but created by the historian; and there are as many kinds of coherency as there are perspectives and enquiries. What coherence the historian gives to his fragments depends on the questions he asks, the interests that motivate him, and the terms into which he translates the language of the past. Furthermore, Droysen argues, it is naive to think that these fragments themselves are hard facts (H 62, 134, 137, 145). What is given to the historian, even in the most basic primary sources, are not the events in themselves but someone's *perception* of, or *take on*, the events (*Auffassungen*).⁵² What would be, for example, the perfectly objective account of a battle? We cannot assume that even eyewitness reports are the final perspective on the matter. We have to take into account many such reports, some of them very limited and some of them contradictory, before we begin to comprehend the broader picture, which was never fully apparent to the actors themselves. So, ironically, the problem with the critical historians is that they are not critical enough.

They have made a fetish out of primary sources, as if they were somehow authoritative about “how things actually were.”

Another facet of the naive optimism of the historical school, Droysen argues, is its attempt to determine origins, the very beginnings of a civilization or tradition. It was Niebuhr's ambition in his *Römische Geschichte*, for example, to trace the origins of the Roman state and agriculture. Against this tendency, Droysen declares flatly that it is impossible to investigate *the* beginning of any historical phenomenon (H 149). To understand something historically means, he argues, that we place an event or action within a network of relations, within a series of causes and effects, where each term in this network or series has still further relations with other things. Nothing in history is a first cause or comprehensible on its own, as if everything else depends on it and it on nothing else. What we regard as the beginning or end is essentially the result of an act of abstraction, depending entirely on the purpose of our enquiry. When we begin a narrative, he explains, we have to admit that our beginning is essentially ad hoc. Nowhere is the search for origins more plainly problematic, Droysen thinks, than Bruno Bauer's search for the ultimate origins, “the original cell,” of Christianity. For what would this cell be? The personality of Jesus? The teachings of Jesus? The sects from which Jesus came? Whatever we take as essential to Christianity will determine our views about the beginnings of Christianity. There is no *one* beginning, *the* authoritative starting point. Peeping through Droysen's polemic here we can hear an old Hegelian refrain: “Nothing on heaven or earth is unmediated.”

Droysen provides a clear summary of his criticisms of the critical school in his 1882/83 lectures when he attempts to dispose of three misconceptions surrounding the critique of sources (H 133–4). Although he never mentions Ranke or Niebuhr explicitly, the context makes it evident that he attributes these misconceptions to them. The first misconception is that the purpose of critique is to reveal objective facts (H 133). To think that history deals with objective facts is a complete misunderstanding of the nature of its subject matter, Droysen says. There are no objective facts in history, because no event is comprehensible on its own, independent of any context; something becomes a fact only when it is comprehensible to us; and it becomes comprehensible only when we place it in some context, into some cause–effect nexus (H 134). The second misconception is that whatever is reported by an eyewitness is reliable, as if simply witnessing an event makes what one says about it correct. All sources, even those by eyewitnesses, are attempts to comprehend events; and the question is whether their comprehension is correct (H 134). The third misconception is that the sources are somehow complete, as if from them alone we could reconstruct history as it really happened. Upon critical reflection, what historian would ever want to say that the primary sources give us the complete account of events? All the materials that have been handed down to us are fragments (H 145).

Granted the critical historians had misconceptions about their method, that left the question what the goal and limits of criticism should be. Droysen turned to this question in chapter II of his 1882/83 *Historik*. He began by noting that the term

“critique” has a loose and vague meaning. It means one thing to a philologist, another to an aesthete, and still another for a philosopher. What does it mean for the historian? Critique in history used to mean, he notes, making moral judgments about the characters and actions of the past (H 93). This was the role of critique in the pragmatic history of the Enlightenment, whose main purpose was moral instruction. If history were to instruct, it would have to pass judgment, telling us which actions were to be emulated and which shunned. Like Ranke and Hegel before him, Droysen completely rejects this whole tradition (H 93). Does the historian ever have sufficient information, he asks, to approve or condemn the actions of the past? History does not have the standards to judge a military campaign, an economic policy or a work of art. Pragmatic history was doomed simply by the growing specialization of the sciences alone, he says. The historian today simply does not have the specialized knowledge to make informed judgments about the past. So, for all his belief in the necessity of moral and political commitment, Droysen still wanted the historian to refrain from moralizing. Just where, exactly, lay the border between moral commitment and moralizing he did not explain.

Such was Droysen's disapproval of all the old pragmatic history that he would write in his lectures that, rather than judging the past, the historian should attempt solely to give us reliable knowledge of it. It is precisely in this respect, he argues, that critique is so indispensable. The purpose of critique is to determine, Droysen argues, whether the materials of history—written documents, relics and monuments—are reliable to answer the questions that we pose for them (H 92,144). It is necessary to ask four questions about this material: (1) Is it genuine or spurious? (2) Is it unaltered, just as it has come down to us from the past, or has it been changed through the generations? (3) Is it correct? Assuming that it is genuine and unaltered, are the events reported in the document really facts or invented? (4) Finally, are the materials complete, sufficient to answer all questions we have about the events? (H 144). Corresponding to these questions, Droysen divides criticism into four facets: (1) the criticism of genuineness (*die Kritik der Echtheit*); (2) the criticism of earlier and later (*die Kritik des Früheren un Späteren*); (3) the critique of correctness (*die Kritik des Richtigen*); and (4) the critical ordering of materials (*die kritische Ordnung des Materials*) (§§30–5; H 336–8).

Droysen discusses each form of criticism in detail; but these discussions, and the classification underlying them, are less important to us than the polemical point he makes through them. In the *Grundriß* Droysen defines the critique of sources (*Quellenkritik*) as the application of the critique of correctness to written sources (§36). In other words, the critique of sources asks whether what is stated in written documents really corresponds to the facts. Droysen advises us that he make this definition quite intentionally because critical history assumes that the critique of sources is the *sole* form of criticism, and indeed the *whole* method of history (H 131). It is clear from Droysen's classification, however, that the critique of sources is only one aspect of criticism, and only one small part of historical method. The critical historians unduly restrict the scope of criticism, he argues, because they have a very limited view of these materials

themselves (H 96). They assume that these materials are *written* sources; but there are also relics, artifacts and monuments, which often are of no less importance. Droysen was fully aware of the advances in archeology in his day, and he stresses its importance for history (H 40). While this is not a fair criticism of Niebuhr, who was a master in epigraphy, it was telling against Ranke, who had limited himself almost entirely to written sources. In Droysen's criticism of Ranke here we can hear echoes of the old debate between *Sprach-*and *Sachphilologen*. It was no accident that Boeckh, Droysen's teacher, was the main representative of *Sachphilologie*, which hoped to reconstruct all of antiquity from all sources, written and unwritten, whereas Hermann, Ranke's teacher, was the chief protagonist of *Sprachphilologie*, which wanted to reconstruct antiquity from written sources alone.

6. Nature and history

One of the foremost goals of Droysen's historicism was to serve as a bulwark against positivism, and more specifically its attempt to explain history according to the paradigms of the natural sciences. When Droysen saw in the early 1850s that positivism was a growing influence in German cultural and political life, he became very alarmed and resolved to counter it with his lectures on historicism. Thus he wrote Heinrich von Sybel, February 13, 1852:

Already no one believes anymore in the ideal powers, and now Napoleonic polytechnics [i.e., positivism] have sneaked into the German sciences. *Ad vocem*. Our wisest men in Jena already teach that only the microscope and scales are science, and that their materialistic method is the method in general, just like the Hegelians once did with the philosophy of Hegel until philosophy itself landed in muck. To counter this dangerous tendency I will read this summer [semester] *Methodology and Encyclopedia of historical science*.⁵³

What arguments did Droysen bring to bear against positivism? Why did he think that explanation in history is in principle different from that in the natural sciences? His most detailed arguments are not in the *Historik* itself, still less in its accompanying *Grundriß*, but in some short essays he wrote in the 1860s and appended to the *Grundriß*. Two of these essays are of special importance.

The first essay, "Die Erhebung der Geschichte zur Rang einer Wissenschaft," was a lengthy review of H.T. Buckle's *History of Civilisation in England*, which Droysen first published in 1863 in Sybel's *Historische Zeitschrift*.⁵⁴ The first chapters of Buckle's work are something of a positivist manifesto, which declares that history can raise itself to the status of a science only if, like the natural sciences, it explains events according to

general laws. Buckle denies that there is any difference in kind between natural events and human actions, and insists that, though the circumstances behind human actions are more complex, they still conform to the same causal regularities of nature; under the same circumstances, the same causes produce the same effects, whether in the human or social world. To explain a human action is therefore simply to subsume it under a causal generalization. Buckle put forward, in other words, a primitive form of the “covering-law” model of explanation. In his review Droysen was concerned less with Buckle's specific attempt to formulate such laws—he proposed many—than the more general question of whether any such effort could succeed (H 388). The bulk of his review is devoted to showing that such efforts must fail. Droysen first points out that even if everything in history were perfectly explicable according to natural laws, this still would not prove that the methods of the natural sciences were the *sole* form of explanation appropriate for history (H 391). It is still possible that history could be explained according to some other methodology that is not reducible to that of the natural sciences. “Is there only one way, one method of knowledge?” Droysen asks skeptically. This leaves open the possibility that there are different methods to explain the same phenomena, that history could be explained naturalistically or in some other way depending on our perspective and interests. But are human actions *completely* and *entirely* explicable according to natural laws? The brunt of Droysen's argument is directed against this extreme thesis. Droysen does not deny that the methods of the natural sciences are applicable to human actions, and that many aspects of human action are explicable according to them alone (H 392). However, he insists that there are still some aspects of human action that are not so explicable; the very subject matter of history is such that it in principle excludes complete explanation according to natural laws. The main problem with Buckle's argument, Droysen contends, is that he failed to investigate precisely the identity of his subject matter, i.e., what history is and how it differs from nature (H 392–3, 399). The subject matter of the natural sciences is something given to our senses; we can observe it, and we can reproduce it in experiments. The subject matter of history, however, is not given, simply because it is the past, which no longer exists. All that we can do in history is reconstruct the past by a process of inference (H 393). Here our task is not to subsume the material under general laws but simply to understand it in all its individuality (H 396–7, 403). While the natural scientist is interested in general uniformities, what makes events similar to one another, the historian is more concerned to know their unique characteristics, what makes them different from one another (H 403). Resorting to a word analogy, Droysen argues that we cannot explain a human action according to natural laws any more than we can explain a statue by the materials from which it is made (H 400). It is also necessary to know the purpose of the statue, the idea behind it in the mind of the artist. When we explain something by causes, he says, we must remember something said by “an old philosopher”: that there are four different kinds of cause (H 400–1). The formal and final causes are just as important as the material and efficient causes, and

the former are not reducible to the latter. Aristotle's doctrine of the four causes thus play an important role in Droysen's argument against positivism.⁵⁵

Fully aware that he had only begun to examine such weighty issues, Droysen explored them from a more fruitful angle in a later essay, "Natur und Geschichte."⁵⁶ Here he again argues that methods of history and natural science are distinct because of their distinct subject matters; but he now offers a new explanation about the difference between their subject matters. Nature and history, insofar as they are the objects of their respective sciences, are very different from one another. Nature is the realm of space, history is the realm of time (H 409). Of course, this is an artificial distinction because space and time are closely connected: nature has a history; and history appears in nature. However, the *special interest* of the natural scientist is not the temporal aspects of nature but its permanent, constant and lawful aspects, what appears in space regardless of its specific time. Conversely, the *particular concern* of the historian is not what appears constantly in space but what is new, unique and irrepeatable in time (H 411) When the natural scientist sees things as part of nature he is not interested in the differences between them but only in their general kind; the individual concerns him only as an instance of a general type. When the historian understands actions in the past, however, he is interested precisely in their individuality, what distinguishes them from other actions in other times and places. There are clear weaknesses in Droysen's argument here, especially in his formulation of the distinction between nature and history in terms of space and time.⁵⁷ But the deeper point emerging from his argument—that history deals with the individual, and that the natural sciences deal with the universal—would become a focal point of later discussion between Dilthey, Windelband and Ricket.

These arguments from earlier essays resurface in the 1882/83 lectures, though in them they are not as focused or sustained. There are in these lectures, however, some interesting points, only adumbrated in the earlier essays, that are important in defining Droysen's attitude toward naturalism. In the first section Droysen again provides another formulation for the specific subject matter of history. He first defines history very broadly: "the sum of whatever has happened in the course of time" (H 6). But he realizes, of course, that this is too broad to specify the special subject matter of history proper. The historian does not study whatever happens in the past, and not even whatever happens in the human world. He is interested specifically in human actions,

or human actions insofar as they are intentional or purposive. Since the cause of these actions is the will, the will is the specific object of history (H 12, 13). But it is not just any voluntary actions that interest the historian: it is those voluntary actions that take place in the agent's ethical world. The ethical world comprises all those institutions, values, practices and traditions in which the individual participates, the social and historical whole of which the individual is a part. Now when we understand historical actions, Droysen explains, what we are doing is placing them within the context of the individual's ethical world; we are not placing them under general laws of cause and effect, but attempting to understand them according to their general norms (H 28, 155–6). The fundamental difference between the natural sciences and history, Droysen suggests, is that between causal and normative explanation. In both cases we subsume the individual under the universal; but there is a big difference between the universality of a causal generalization and the universality of a norm. As Droysen puts the point in the Buckle review: "Are the rules of a language laws?" (H 396) Unfortunately, Droysen did not fully explore this issue nor explain in more detail the precise difference between the forms of explanation.

It was a *leitmotif* of all Droysen's arguments against naturalism that history and the natural sciences differ from one another essentially because of their different subject matters. It was his general principle, which he stressed time and again, that different subject matters require different methods of explanation and investigation (H 18, 392–3, 399). Of course, there are differences in the forms of explanation themselves, because historical understanding deals with formal and final causes, whereas natural explanations work with material and efficient causes; nevertheless, this difference in form derives from the more fundamental difference in subject matter. We need formal and final causes in history because we deal with purposive actions and social norms; and we need material and efficient causes in physics and chemistry because we are dealing with inanimate matter. Behind Droysen's methodological distinction, then, there lay a deeper *ontological* distinction between the ethical and natural worlds. There were aspects about the human or ethical world that made it different in kind from the natural world. Droysen would often refer to the ethical world as a second creation, which is made by man alone, and the natural world as the first creation, whose cause is God alone. We can understand ourselves better than the natural world, Droysen would argue, because we make the world in which we live, whereas the natural world is something simply given to us.

One of the underlying motivations for Droysen's resistance to naturalism was his belief in moral freedom. If the naturalistic worldview were correct, he feared, all actions would be the necessary result of chemical, biological and physical causes, so that it would be impossible for a person to think or act otherwise. In that case it would be indefensible to hold people responsible for their actions. The purpose behind his ontological dualism between the historical and the natural is therefore to secure the possibility of moral freedom. Since the ethical world of history is a distinct ontological

order—the second creation—the laws that hold for the natural world do not necessarily apply to it.⁵⁸

That Droysen believed that freedom is incompatible with the causation of the natural world there can be little doubt. He tells us explicitly in the 1882/83 *Historik* that the methods of natural science are limited to whatever is measurable, calculable and weighable, and that such methods end where the realm of personal existence and freedom begins (H 186). In the review of Buckle he explains that even if the natural sciences come closer to a full explanation of human actions, there will always be a mysterious remainder, an X, that represents the core of human individuality and freedom (H 397). Such, indeed, was Droysen's belief in the mysterious depths of human individuality that he held it was completely unfathomable by any method, naturalistic or historical (H 178).

Although there are clear dualistic inclinations in Droysen, it is important to note that there is another competing side to his thinking, a holistic side. It seems that Droysen wants to unite the natural and historical worlds as much as he wants to separate them. The holistic tendencies are no less clear than the dualistic ones. What inspired him about Humboldt, he revealed in the *Grundriß*, is that he understood the unity of our mental and physical being, especially how our mental activities must embody themselves in the physical forms of language. Droysen implies that this insight of Humboldt was the inspiration for his own work (H 324). And toward the close of the Buckle review he stresses how the ethical world of history is both idealistic and materialistic, mental and physical (H 405). In general, Droysen, like many thinkers of his generation, wanted to cut through the stalemate involved in the endless debate between idealism and materialism; he too wanted to find some principle that could unite both standpoints. But just what this principle was—precisely how it unites the material and spiritual—he does not reveal, let alone explain. There is an unresolved tension in Droysen, then, between his dualistic and holistic tendencies. Somehow, there was to be both a difference in kind and a continuum between the natural and historical worlds. The ultimate solution for this problem lay deep in Hegel's metaphysics, and in the theory of powers (*Kräfte*) and potencies (*Potenzen*) of romantic *Naturphilosophie*.⁵⁹

It was a sad truth, however, that Droysen did not have the time, energy or sympathy for the very metaphysics that could save him.

7. The problem of value

From the very beginning of his reflections on history, Droysen was concerned about the foundation of value judgments. His early 1843 essay "Theologie der Geschichte" attempts to sketch an answer to this question. It was indeed more of an issue for him than it was for Ranke, whose proclamation of value neutrality had apparently freed the historian from having to justify his own ethical viewpoint. If, however, as Droysen insisted, the historian must write history from his own moral and political perspective, what justification could there be for it?

The question was all the more pressing for Droysen since he could not accept one of the oldest and most venerable solutions to it: the natural law tradition of the Enlightenment. No less than Savigny, Droysen rejected this tradition, which had been irredeemably discredited by its doctrinaire application during the French Revolution. The principles of natural law seemed to him to be either empty generalities or covert ethnocentrisms: empty generalities, because they are abstracted from all the differences between cultures and epochs; and covert ethnocentrisms, because they receive their paltry content, if they have any at all, only by illegitimately generalizing the values of their own age. Droysen explains in a little detail in the 1882/83 *Historik* what he found problematic about the tradition. The concepts of eternal or natural rights, he argues, are completely unintelligible (H 256). The concept of a *natural* right makes no sense because a person's rights are determined not by nature but by his place in a specific social and political order. It is indeed in the nature of man that he deserves rights, at least in the sense that he should have *some* place in the ethical order; but the concept of human nature alone does not provide a basis to infer someone's *specific* rights. We determine these rights not in abstraction from a social and political order, but only by determining a person's concrete place within it. Hence I have rights not as a human being as such, but as a citizen of this country, or as a consumer, a patient, a property owner, a representative in Parliament, a taxpayer, and so on. The concept of an *eternal* right also makes no sense, Droysen thinks, for all social and political orders, which give rights their precise meaning, change in history (H 256). So rights are by their very nature historical: "The substance of the life of right (*Rechtsleben*) and of the state of rights (*Rechtszustände*), is not in the state, still less in property, but in history and its progress." (H 257). Even such fundamental ethical concepts as freedom and personality are historical: "...the concept of freedom, and of personality, and therefore the basis of all rights, is a constantly growing result of culture, of history" (H 256).

Although he holds that the basis of rights lies in history, Droysen does not think that *whatever* happens in history is *ipso facto* right just because it has happened. If this were the case, the status quo would be right, or whatever people did in virtue of power alone would be right just because they did it. Droysen despised any simple identification of

right with the status quo or the powers-that-be. For just these reasons he was at odds with the historical school of law of Eichhorn and Savigny, which, on his interpretation, derived the normative basis of right from tradition and precedent.⁶⁰ The problem with such a theory of right, he argued in “Theologie der Geschichte,” is that the criterion of right then becomes nothing more than *fait accompli* (H 382). If this is all there is to right, then the historical school has no basis to criticize the Revolution itself, which is no less a *fait accompli*. The historical school was right, Droysen thinks, to criticize the Enlightenment doctrine of natural law; but it did not provide a sufficient foundation for its own doctrine of historical rights (H 383).

Droysen rejected, therefore, the extremes of both the natural law tradition and the historical school of law. If the natural law tradition ignored history for the sake of theory, the historical school neglected theory for the sake of history. Alternatively, the former surrendered practice for the sake of principle, while the latter abandoned principle for the sake of practice. What was the *via media* between these extremes? Droysen only hints at his middle path here and there in his “Theologie der Geschichte” essay. He describes it as “the true historical view,” whose fundamental concept is “the right of history.” He distinguishes “the right of history” (*Recht der Geschichte*) from both “the right of reason” (*Vernunftrecht*) of the Enlightenment and the “historical rights” (*historische Rechte*) of the historical school. If one examines the texts carefully, Droysen's “right of history” turns out to be nothing less than the goal or *telos* of history, its underlying plan or design. The historian should believe, Droysen thinks, in providence, in God's wise and benevolent design in history (H 373). History is a science insofar as it attempts to give some conceptual formulation, some empirical evidence, for this belief.

Such is the sum and substance of Droysen's position on the foundation of right. He never gave “the true historical view” a more exact exposition or defense, and never got beyond the vague suggestions of the “Theologie der Geschichte” essay. There was nothing original in Droysen's position, and its provenance was unmistakable. Its source lies in Hegel. For it was Hegel who first made teleology, the doctrine of providence, into the *via media* between the rights of reason and historical rights. Hegel's famous doctrine of reason in history was his attempt to avoid the extremes of rationalism or natural-law doctrine, which gave no place to history, and the historical school, which undercut the rights of reason. Droysen probably learned this doctrine directly from the master himself, perhaps from attending his lectures on the philosophy of history. The Hegelian dimensions of Droysen's thinking become even more apparent from his 1857 lectures where he states that the guiding thread of history is the idea of freedom, and that we should see all epochs of world history as so many stages toward the realization of this idea (L 368–9, 371–2). Droysen comes close to acknowledging his debt to

Hegel, because he credits Hegel with having legitimized the standpoint of world history (L 256).

It is important to see, however, that Droysen endorses only the content of Hegel's theory, not his method for justifying it. Although he accepts Hegel's teleological conception of history as the basis for right, he rejects Hegel's speculative logic, his attempt to determine the end of history *a priori* through the dialectic. Hence, in the 1857 lectures he is careful to distinguish *what* Hegel says from *how* he said it, and he rejects the "abstract" or "constructive" form of Hegel's method (L 256). Not the least problem with the Hegelian dialectic, in Droysen's view, is that it made history a necessary process, leaving no room for human freedom (L 162). But Droysen's rejection of Hegel's method left him with a very difficult question: How is it possible to justify the belief in providence? In his early years, in the "Theologie der Geschichte" essay and before his lectures on *Historik*, he seemed content to hold that it is the vocation of the historian to provide empirical evidence for this belief. But the more Droysen became concerned with the autonomy of history, the more it became necessary for him to suspend the idea of providence and to bracket the whole theology of history. As we have already seen, the account of history in the 1882 *Grundriß* denies that it is a theology of history. The problem became all the more critical when Droysen stated in the 1882/83 lectures that the empirical method could never provide sufficient evidence to determine the end or plan of history (H 269–70). From all the particularities and contingencies of history no universal and necessary conclusion could ever follow. But now the whole foundation of right is left hanging in the balance. If speculative history is impossible, and if empirical history cannot provide sufficient evidence for providence, what basis remains for belief in the right of history?

There are passages in the 1857 lectures where Droysen grapples with this problem, though his efforts provide no obvious solution. In one passage he declares that the belief in providence and progress is only "a postulate of reason" (L 371). But on what is this postulate based? What right do we have to make it? Droysen does not say. He could not appeal to *practical* reason, as Kant would do, because that would involve a return to the natural law doctrine, whose principles he had already rejected. In another passage Droysen states that just as we have the power to put ourselves into the place of another, so we have the power to escape the limits of our empirical ego and to ascend to the standpoint of a universal ego who sees everything from the standpoint of universal history (L 364–6). But this assumed, contrary to all his teaching about self-identity, that the self had the power to escape the forces of historical and social conditioning. Furthermore, what would the standpoint of the universal self be but a mere abstraction, empty of all content like the principles of natural law?

The difficulties of justifying Droysen's doctrine were compounded by his own hesitation and ambivalence about it. For there is some question whether Droysen could fully commit himself to the realization of "the true historical view" he outlined in "Theologie der Geschichte." That view presupposes a complete historicization of all value, because it places all value and right in a social and historical context and insists

that contexts change in history. If that is so, there could be no sacred realm outside history, no norms immune to change, and no inner conscience impervious to social and historical forces. There are indeed many passages in 1882/83 lectures where Droysen seems to accept just such a conclusion. He insisted that personality and freedom are realized only within ethical life (H 192, 203), that each individual belongs *entirely* to the state (H 203, 266), and that we become who we are only through history (H 15–16). There are also passages from the 1857 lectures where he appears ready to admit that there are no universal values because the content of all ethical ideas has to be determined historically (L 202). There have been families, states and churches in all epochs of history, but their specific meaning depends entirely on their historical context (L 203). But there are many other passages in his lectures where Droysen seems reluctant to historicize all value. For all his belief in the power of history, Droysen was enough of a Protestant to maintain that the inner life remains sacrosanct, unblemished by historical change. There is an inner realm of conscience, he argues, that no historical interpretation, no matter how well informed, will ever penetrate. Note the following remarkable passage from the 1882/83 lectures, a confession that could have been written by Kierkegaard:

I have explained all this [about friendship and love] so that it is clear what historical interpretation cannot achieve. In the most sacred depths of the human heart penetrates only that eye which tests heart and soul, and to a certain extent the eye of mutual love and friendship; but not the eye of the judge, whether legal or historical. In this sacred depth every man has the secret and living source of his will, the proper determining ground of his actions; those moments he will justify or damn before himself and before God, which alone decide his moral worth...Personality as such does not have its measure of value in history, in what it achieves, does or suffers. It has its own proper circle in which it communes with its own God....It is not simply a molecule in the historical world, but a world unto itself.... (H 178)

All that history can fathom, Droysen went on to explain, are those actions of the individual that have some major effect on the social and political world (H 180). But this dualism between the inner and the outer, the personal and the historical, hardly seemed to cohere with his earlier hermeneutical principle, so crucial for his method of understanding, that our mental–physical natures unite in language. If this dualism were pushed far enough, there could be no safe inferences about the inner realm at all, so that nothing about a person could be understood.

So, despite all the depth and originality of Droysen's historicism, it left the philosopher and historian alike with troubling tensions. Droysen's religious faith pushed him toward a dualism between the inner and outer; but his hermeneutics and historicism forced him to unite the two realms. He insists that the historian write from his moral and political commitments; but he leaves no basis for the justification of these commitments. Since there are no constraints upon these commitments, history can be written from any perspective and there is no defense against relativism. What Droysen sorely needed to provide a justification of value was a philosophy of history; but the strictly

empirical guidelines he laid down for historical research could never justify any philosophical conclusion. In renouncing metaphysics, Droysen had abandoned the only catapult that could help him hurtle Lessing's "broad ugly ditch," the gulf between the particularity and contingency of history and the universality and necessity of reason. From Droysen's aporias we can detect the glimmerings of what some would later call the "crisis of historicism."

Notes:

(1) The forward was a letter inserted in only a few copies of *Geschichte des Hellenismus* (Hamburg: Perthes, 1843). Droysen considered publishing it as an appendix to his *Grundriß* but decided against it on the grounds that it would not be so interesting for the reader to know his earlier personal views. It was published for the first time by Erich Rothacker as an appendix to his edition of the *Grundriß der Historik* (Halle: Niemeyer, 1925), pp. 87–104.

(2) On the genesis of Droysen's lectures, see Friedrich Meinecke, "Johann Gustav Droysen," *Historische Zeitschrift* 141 (1929), 249–87, esp. 278–87.

(3) The first complete edition is *Geschichte des Hellenismus* (Gotha: Perthes, 1877–78), 3 vols. *Geschichte der preußischen Politik* (Leipzig: Veit, 1868) 5 vols.

(4) On Droysen's role in this school, see Robert Southard, *Droysen and the Prussian School of History* (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 1995).

(5) It is noteworthy how historians of historiography have either ignored or paid only lip service to Droysen's theoretical work. Fueter and Barnes never mention it; Thompson and Gooch devote only a paragraph to it. Von Below makes a nod to its significance but writes nothing about its contents. Collingwood dismisses it peremptorily. Only Srbik, who devotes several pages to it, begins to give it the attention it deserves. See his *Geist und Geschichte vom deutschen Humanismus bis zur Gegenwart* (Munich: Verlag F. Bruckmann, 1950) I, 373–6. The difference between Srbik and his predecessors is that he had the advantage of the Hübner edition. The first scholar to take account of the lecture manuscript was Joachim Wach in his treatment of Droysen in *Das Verstehen* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1933), III, 134–88. Wach got permission to use the manuscript before its publication.

(6) Thompson complains: "The *Historik* is obscure, not to say unintelligible, to those unfamiliar with the jargon of Hegelian philosophy." See *History of Historical Writing* (New York: Macmillan, 1942), II, 218n27. He cites Antoine Guillaud's opinion of the work: "a veritable Chinese head-racker written in German gibberish." *Modern Germany & her Historians* (London: Jarrold & Sons 1915) p. 216.

(7) It is worth noting that two significant works on Droysen's historicism appeared before 1937: Christian Pflaum's *J.G. Droysens Historik in ihrer Bedeutung für die moderne Geschichtswissenschaft* (Gotha: Perthes, 1907); and Hildegard Astholz, *Das Problem "Geschichte" untersucht bei Johann Gustav Droysen* (Berlin: Emil Ebering, 1933). Though Pflaum and Astholz did not have access to the lecture manuscripts, their studies made good use of the available sources and are still valuable. In an appendix to his book, pp. 68–115, Pflaum published some student notes on Droysen's 1858 lectures. These notes, which are designated here as "Man," are somewhat antiquated by the publication of the Leyh edition (see below, note 8), but they have been widely used in the literature.

(8) *Historik, Vorlesungen über Enzyklopädie und Methodologie der Geschichte*, ed. Rudolf Hübner (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1937). Hübner's edition was based mostly on the final, 1882/83 version, of Droysen's lectures, though some twenty percent of it consists in insertions of earlier material. All references to this edition are designated by H.

(9) *Historik. Die Vorlesungen von 1857*, ed. Peter Leyh (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1977). All references to this edition are designated by L.

(10) Herbert Schnädelbach, *Geschichtsphilosophie nach Hegel* (Freiburg: Alber, 1974), p. 89.

(11) Hayden White, review essay on Droysen's *Historik* in *History and Theory*, XIX (1980), 73–93.

(12) Jörn Rüsen, *Konfigurationen des Historismus. Studien zur deutschen Wissenschaftskultur* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1993), p. 243.

(13) Since World War II, the main monographs devoted to Droysen's historicism are Jörn Rüsen, *Begriffene Geschichte: Genesis und Begründung der Geschichtstheorie J.G. Droysens* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 1969); Karl-Heinz Spieler, *Untersuchungen zu Johann Gustav Droysens Historik* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1970); Werner Obermann, *Der junge Johann Gustav Droysen. Ein Beitrag zur Entstehungsgeschichte des Historismus* (Bonn: Bouvier, 1977); Irene Kohlstrunk, *Logik und Historie in Droysens Geschichtstheorie* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1980); Christine Wagner, *Die Entwicklung Johann Gustav Droysens als Althistoriker* (Bonn: Bouvier, 1991); Christian-Georg Schuppe, *Der andere Droysen* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1998).

(14) Thus, in his 1857 lectures, Droysen complains about how history, having freed itself from the bondage of philosophy and theology, is now threatened by the hegemony of the natural sciences (L 16). The very thought is expressed by Dilthey twenty-five years later in the introduction to his *Einleitung in die Geisteswissenschaften*. Dilthey, *Gesammelte Schriften* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1966), I, xv.

(15) See, for example, Hans Georg Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode in Gesammelte Werke* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1990) I, 202. But, as Herbert Schnädelbach has argued, many ideas held to be original to, and characteristic of, Dilthey already appeared in Droysen and Burckhardt and were a commonplace of the historicist tradition. See his *Geschichtsphilosophie nach Hegel* (Freiburg: Alber, 1974) p. 115. Some of the confusion has its source in Dilthey himself, who tended to underrate Droysen's achievements. He placed Droysen within a metaphysical tradition of philosophy of history that regards history as the realization of ideas and a providential plan. See *Aufbau der Geschichtlichen Welt in den Geisteswissenschaften, Schriften VII*, 113–4. The problem with this tradition, in Dilthey's view, was that it did not face the epistemological task of justifying history as a form of knowledge. In the case of Droysen, however, such a claim is evidently false, neglecting entirely the whole purpose of his *Historik*. It is noteworthy that Gadamer, who appreciated Droysen, later attributes to Droysen the very achievement he first ascribes to Dilthey. See *Wahrheit und Methode*, I, 221.

(16) On this tradition, see Horst Blanke, Dirk Fleischer and Jörn Rüsen, "Historik als akademische Praxis.' Eine Dokumentation der geschichtstheoretischen Vorlesungen an deutschsprachigen Universitäten von 1750 bis 1900", *Dilthey Jahrbuch 1* (1983), 182–255.

(17) Fichte, "Ueber den Begriff der Wissenschaftslehre," in *Sämmtliche Werke*, ed. I.H. Fichte (Berlin: Veit, 1845–46), I, 55.

(18) All references to the *Grundriß der Historik* are, unless otherwise noted, to paragraph numbers (§) of the final 1882 edition.

(19) See his essay "Kunst und Methode," *Historik*, pp. 416–24. Here Droysen was less uncompromising, admitting that history could be an art (419).

(20) *Vorlesungen über das Zeitalter der Freiheitskriege* (Gotha: Perthes, 1886), I, ix–x. The foreword is dated March 15, 1846.

(21) In the 1882/83 lectures Droysen does make a few references to providence (e.g., H 253, 307), but it is significant that he clearly affirms that history cannot have knowledge of the end of history (H 267). In the 1857 lectures he does say that history can be understood as a theodicy (L 35), and that we learn God from history as we learn history only from God (L 30). But these are more expressions of piety than statements of a philosophical position. Even in the 1857 lectures Droysen distinguishes historicism from theology (L 33), and he is careful to say that history cannot provide any but an analogical knowledge of the divine (L 35).

(22) See Georg Iggers, *The German Conception of History* (Middletown CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1968), p. 111; and Wolfgang Hardtwig, "Geschichtsreligion—Wissenschaft als Arbeit—Objektivität. Der Historismus in neuer Sicht," *Historische Zeitschrift* 252 (1991), pp. 5–6.

(23) The influence of Schleiermacher on Droysen is difficult to determine. Obermann, *Der junge Droysen*, p. 134, refers to this as “the Schleiermacher problem.” He suggests that Schleiermacher might have been influential in moving Droysen away from Hegel.

(24) On the relationship between Boeckh and Droysen, see Christiane Hackel, *Die Bedeutung August Boeckhs für den Geschichtstheoretiker Johann Gustav Droysen* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2006).

(25) *Ibid*, pp. 113–5.

(26) *Ibid*, pp. 95–6, 100, 107.

(27) August Boeckh, *Enzyklopädie und Methodologie der philologischen Wissenschaften*, ed. Ernst Bratuscheck, 2nd edn. (Leipzig: Teubner, 1886). pp. 18, 46, 56, 338.

(28) For a more extensive account of Droysen's attitude toward Hegel, see Rösen, *Begriffene Geschichte*, pp. 16–23, 117–54; Wolfgang Hock, *Liberales Denken im Zeitalter der Pauluskirche: Droysen und die Frankfurter Mitte* (Munster: Aschendorff, 1957), pp. 6–17; and Christoph Johannes Bauer, ‘*Das Geheimnis aller Bewegung ist ihr Zweck*’. *Geschichtsphilosophie bei Hegel und Droysen* (Hamburg: Meiner, 2001) (*Hegel Studien Beiheft* 44), pp. 103–19.

(29) See Droysen to Ludwig Moser, May 28, 1831, *Briefwechsel* ed. Rudolf Hübner (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlagsanstalt, 1929) I, 33.

(30) See Droysen to his son, July 31, 1864, *Briefwechsel* II, 849.

(31) See Droysen to Friedrich Perthes, February 8, 1837, *Briefwechsel* I, 118.

(32) On Droysen's relationship to Mendelssohn-Bartholdy, see the article by Gustav Droysen, “J.G. Droysen und Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy,” *Deutsche Rundschau* 111 (1902), 107–26, 193–215, 386–408.

(33) The story is told in Gunter Berg, *Leopold von Ranke als akademischer Lehrer* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1968), p. 44n43.

(34) *Man*, 77–8; *L* 31–3, 65.

(35) Droysen anticipates Collingwood's idealist theory of history. See Collingwood, “*Outlines of a Philosophy of History*,” in *Idea of History*, pp. 480, 487. Droysen's theory involves, however, none of the extravagancies and difficulties of Collingwood's theory of re-enactment.

(36) As Wach does, *Das Verstehen* III, 180–1, when he stresses the mystical aspect of understanding. Wach conflates Droysen's position with Ranke's; and though he sees the important distinction between act and mechanism, he does not realize its full implications.

(37) Droysen gives a detailed account in *L* 159–216 and *H* 156–87.

(38) See *H* 193 and *L* 201.

(39) It is for this reason that it is misleading to minimize Droysen's differences with the materialists, as if he could accept their thesis that circumstances make men as much as men make circumstances, and as if he saw explanation as the complement of understanding. See Schuppe, *Der andere Droysen*, pp. 25, 68. Schuppe's argument overlooks the limits that Droysen wants to place on naturalistic explanation.

(40) See Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, *Werke* I, 216. Gadamer later acknowledges, however, that for Droyen history concerns not individuals as such but only their acts within the ethical world (217).

(41) Hegel, *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts*, “Die Sittlichkeit,” §§144–7, *Werkausgabe* VII, 293–6.

(42) See chapter 6, section 5, above.

(43) In the introduction to his lectures on world history Hegel himself expressed his distaste for Ranke's portraiture. See *Die Vernunft in die Geschichte*, p. 15.

(44) Wilhelm Wundt, *Grundzüge der physiologischen Psychologie* (Leipzig: Engelmann, 1874).

(45) Vico's *Scienza nuova* is mentioned *en passant* in the 1857 lectures, L 49.

(46) See Schuppe, *Der andere Droysen*, pp. 94–5, 97; and White, “Droysens Historik: Geschichtsschreibung als bürgerliche Wissenschaft,” in *Die Bedeutung der Form. Erzählstrukturen in der Geschichtsschreibung* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1990), p. 120.

(47) See *Historik* p. 287; and the essay “Kunst und Methode,” in Hübner, *Historik*, p. 422.

(48) Cf. L 368. Here Droysen writes about the standpoint of a universal ego who holds not only for my nation and state but humanity in general. It is necessary to have such a standpoint, Droysen argues, to write world history.

(49) See Berg, *Ranke als akademischer Lehrer*, pp. 44–5n47.

(50) See Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Weltgeschichte*, ed. Johannes Hofmeister (Hamburg: Meiner, 1970), pp. 10–21, especially 20–1.

(51) See Droysen's statement in “Kunst und Methode,” H 418.

(52) Hence Droysen pointed out that the Venetian *Relazione*, in which Ranke had placed such trust, often were written for a specific audience in mind, and were different in content from an ambassadors' *Depeschen*. See his article “Zur Quellenkritik und deutschen Geschichte des 17. Jahrhunderts,” in *Forschungen zur deutschen Geschichte* 4 (1864), 15–65.

(53) *Briefwechsel*, II, 54.

(54) The review first appeared in *Historische Zeitschrift* 9 (1863), 1–22. Droysen later reprinted it as an appendix to his *Grundriß der Historik*. All references are to Hübner's 1937 edition.

(55) Droysen used Aristotle's doctrine to classify the different forms of historical activity. See *Historik*, p. 193.

(56) Droysen does not specify when he wrote his essay, or where it first appeared; he said only in the forward to the *Grundriß* that he wrote it as a response to a discussion where “all the advantages of the metaphysical standpoint were on the side of my opponent.” According to Horst Walter Blanke's Droysen bibliography, it was written in 1866, though first published in the 1868 edition of the *Historik*. See *Historik, Supplement; Droysen Bibliographie* (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Holzboog, 2008), pp. 63, 65.

(57) Collingwood dismisses Droysen's argument, failing to see the deeper point behind it. See *The Idea of History*, pp. 165–6. It is Collingwood's sole comment upon Droysen.

(58) The role of Droysen's dualism in protecting freedom has sometimes been overlooked, and it has been suggested that he was even a compatibilist. See Schnädelbach, *Geschichtsphilosophie nach Hegel*, p. 98. Schnädelbach argues that Droysen is a compatibilist because he states in the *Grundriß* that freedom and necessity are false alternatives in ethical life (§78). In the 1882/83 *Historik* Droysen indeed writes that freedom and necessity are joined in ethical life because there freedom means self-determination, accepting the norms and ends of the community as my own and acting according to them (H 243). Freedom means not the absence of limits but fully accepting the limits imposed by law, which obliges me to treat others as I would have them treat me (H 244). Yet it is important to see that this reconciliation between freedom and

necessity applies only within the ethical world and does not extend to the natural world itself; it offers an interpretation of what Droysen means by political or social freedom, but not the meaning he ascribes to freedom in the metaphysical sense.

⁽⁵⁹⁾ On this theory, see my *Hegel* (London: Routledge, 2005), pp. 80–109; and *German Idealism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), pp. 529–50.

⁽⁶⁰⁾ On the merits of this interpretation, see chapter 5, section 6, above.

Dilthey and the Foundations of the Human Sciences

1. The critique of historical reason

During his inaugural lecture at the University of Basel in 1867,¹ the young Wilhelm Dilthey (1833–1911) began by frankly expressing his fear that what he had to say might seem rather old-fashioned to his audience. He confessed that he was a Kantian regarding both the basic problem of philosophy and its solution. Kant was correct that the central problem of philosophy is the possibility of knowledge, and that the solution to this problem consists in limiting knowledge to experience. Dilthey also put forward a perfectly Kantian conception of philosophy: that it is the science of science, the second-order epistemological investigation into the possibility of science. Like all good neo-Kantians in the 1860s, Dilthey then proclaimed that philosophy had to go back to Kant.

So far, then, Dilthey's lecture seemed standard neo-Kantian fare, enough to make a Zeller or a Liebman smile. But this self-confessed young fogey then went on to propose an important addition to the neo-Kantian program, one which neither Zeller nor Liebman would have imagined. If philosophy is to be the handmaiden to the sciences, he reasoned, then it should not ignore the sciences of the mind (*Geisteswissenschaften*). These too are sciences, and they should not be ignored by the critical philosophy. After a quick survey of German poetry and philosophy from 1770–1800, Dilthey then announced his new philosophical agenda: “following Kant's critical path, to establish an empirical science of the human mind in collaboration with researchers from other disciplines; it is now time to know the laws that govern social, intellectual and moral phenomena.” (27). These were fateful words. Dilthey would spend the rest of his intellectual career going down this path.

What, more exactly, was Dilthey's agenda? His best statement of his plans appeared much later in his first major work, his massive but incomplete *Einleitung in die*

Geisteswissenschaften, which was first published in 1883.² Toward the close of the first part of that work, Dilthey declared that his fundamental goal was to provide “an epistemological foundation for the sciences of mind” (*eine erkenntnistheoretische Grundlegung der Geisteswissenschaften*). The project devoted to this task he called, in a redolent phrase, “the critique of historical reason” (I, 116).³ The aim of such a critique would be to investigate the possibility of knowledge of history and society.

The critique of historical reason was Dilthey's chief contribution to the historicist tradition.⁴

Though Dilthey is perhaps more famous for his hermeneutics and method of understanding, the credit for developing these belongs more properly to Droysen, as we have seen.⁵ The critique of historical reason has, however, a much greater claim to originality and historical importance. Though Droysen would write of “the Kant of history,” he never got beyond metaphor to connect his historicism with Kantian criticism. It is with Dilthey that the historicist and neo-Kantian traditions first converge, beginning their fruitful—yet fraught and fragile—relationship that will dominate the historicist tradition until its close in the 1920s. Dilthey's great feat to make the chief problem of the historicist tradition—the possibility of historical knowledge—a central concern of a nascent neo-Kantianism, a movement rapidly rising in the 1860s. This would achieve two things at once: it would give the historicist tradition all the subtlety and sophistication of Kantian epistemology; and it would broaden the neo-Kantian agenda, which was in danger of limiting its focus to the epistemic problems of the natural sciences and of neglecting the rapidly rising status of history and the social sciences. A revitalized Kantianism, Dilthey realized, would have to be one that could abreast of

all the latest developments of science, one that could expand itself to consider the possibility of science in all its forms.

It would be a mistake, however, to see Dilthey's contribution to the historicist tradition entirely in Kantian terms, as if all he did was widen the Kantian agenda. For in crucial respects Dilthey's project also involves a break with Kant. All his life Dilthey had a very ambivalent attitude toward Kant's philosophy. He would be not only its advocate but also its critic. All his ambivalence emerges in the ambiguity of the phrase "critique of historical reason." On the one hand, history is the *object* of Kantian criticism, and so brought within its agenda; on the other hand, however, history is also the *agent or instrument* of criticism. Dilthey intended his project to be a critique of the ahistorical pretensions of reason, and he was convinced that Kant's philosophy had more than its fair share of those.

The anti-Kantian animus of Dilthey's project emerges explicitly in the preface to his *Einleitung in die Geisteswissenschaften*. There Dilthey makes two criticisms of Kantian epistemology. First, it has a much too intellectual conception of experience, as if its purpose and content were entirely theoretical, the detached contemplation of the world; but experience is much more than that: it is conditioned by *all* our powers, by the *whole* human being, and as such it is as much the product of emotion and volition as cognition. Thus Dilthey wrote in some often cited lines: "In the veins of that knowing subject constructed by Locke, Hume and Kant there runs no real blood but merely the thinnest vapor of reason..." (xviii). Second, Kant had removed his transcendental standpoint from history itself, as if our basic forms of thought and perception were entirely *a priori*, originating entirely from a self-sufficient transcendental subject. This is the hypostasis of an artificial abstraction from history, Dilthey believed, because these forms are the product of society and history. Hence he wrote: "Not the assumption of a rigid *a priori* of our faculty of knowledge, but only historical development...can answer the questions that we have to direct to philosophy" (xviii). The rejection of a rigid *a priori*, and the insistence on examining the forms of thinking and perception in their historical development, are portentous signs of an impending historicization of reason itself.

The target of the historical critique of reason was by no means limited to Kantian epistemology. Dilthey generalized his program, extending it to the entire sphere of culture, so that every discipline and human activity—law, literature, science, religion, education and morality—would be historicized, placed in its proper historical context and perspective. A critical reason is for Dilthey an historical reason, one that is self-conscious of its historical starting point and presuppositions, one that refuses to make to generalize from its own culture and age, as if they also had to hold for all mankind. The project for an historical critique of reason was already implicit in Dilthey's predecessors; but in Dilthey it becomes for the first time a self-conscious and general program. Dilthey, not Nietzsche, is the true father of historical critique.⁹

Our chief concern in this chapter will be to examine Dilthey's critique of historical reason: its basic aims, claims, problems and development. We will find that the path toward this project was by no means simple or straightforward. Dilthey's intellectual development was one of the most complex and convoluted of all the great historicists.

2. The concept of the Geisteswissenschaften

Like his two great predecessors in Berlin, Ranke and Droysen, Dilthey made it his goal to defend the autonomy of the human sciences. He too wanted to show that these sciences could have their own methods and standards, independent of metaphysics and the natural sciences. He too thought that metaphysics, and specifically the *a priori* methods of the philosophy of history, were a danger to this autonomy. And so, like Ranke and Droysen, he attacked the philosophy of history, dismissing it as an attempt to square the circle or to find the philosopher's stone.⁷ But, less like Ranke and more like Droysen, Dilthey found the major threat to this autonomy came not from metaphysics but the new natural sciences. Since the 1840s, German idealism had fallen into irreversible decline, so that its metaphysics and philosophy of history had ceased to pose such a serious danger to the fledgling human sciences. Ranke's passionate battles against Fichte's and Hegel's philosophy of history were a real necessity in the 1830s; but now that the titans of idealism had been defeated, these struggles had lost their drama and significance. But the battle to come was against an even more potent enemy: positivism, the new naturalism, which would model all the human sciences according to the methods of the natural sciences. Dilthey put his finger firmly on the problem in the preface to his *Einleitung in die Geisteswissenschaften* (xvii). Rather than liberating all the sciences, he explained, the growth of the natural sciences had enslaved the human sciences. Thinkers like Mill and Comte imposed the methods of the natural sciences upon the human sciences, as if their subject matter were the same as the natural sciences. However, there was one fundamental fact, Dilthey argued, that casts doubt upon the entire positivist program: the rise of the historical school in Germany. The achievements of this school show, Dilthey claimed, that the human sciences have their own methods, no less rigorous than those of the natural sciences, and that they can achieve reliable results, no less solid than those of the natural sciences. What gives scientific status to the work of the historical school is its "purely empirical manner of investigation, its loving absorption in the particularities of an historical event, a universal spirit of historical investigation that determines the worth of every set of facts from its context of development" (xvi). Dilthey would sometimes describe the rise of the historical sciences as a new scientific revolution: what the seventeenth century had been for the natural sciences, the nineteenth century was for the historical sciences.⁸ Thus his work as a critical philosopher was now cut out for him. Just as it

was Kant's task to determine the conditions for the possibility of natural science, so it was his to determine the conditions for the possibility of the human sciences. The fact of human science was given in the form of history; it was now necessary to explain what made such a fact possible.

For Dilthey, the best means of securing the human sciences, of protecting their autonomy against the natural sciences, was to make the proper distinction between them. Autonomy was a matter of settling boundaries, so that each kind of science could have its rightful domain independent of the other. With Dilthey, the distinction between history and the natural sciences that began with Droysen becomes more firm and final. The old naturalistic program for a science of man, which had been so influential in early historicism, was now not even a faint memory.

What, then, is the proper province of the human sciences? How do we distinguish them from the natural sciences? Over the years Dilthey devoted much attention to this question, and he gave different answers to it. The more he thought about it, though, the more he became convinced that there is no single *a priori* distinction, no clear and neat dividing line, between these sciences, but that there is instead only a web of interweaving distinctions. Still, Dilthey did have a basic position, a fundamental viewpoint, about how the distinctions should be drawn, which his later formulations presuppose, refine and develop. He first set forward his position, if only in a tentative spirit, in his 1883 *Einleitung in die Geisteswissenschaften*.

Dilthey's basic proposal is that the distinction between the natural and social-historical sciences should be between two distinct kinds of experience (8). While the social–historical sciences deal with *inner experience*, the natural sciences treat *outer experience*. Inner experience is what we are aware of through reflection, the self-awareness of our own activities, whereas outer experience consists in our sense perception of the external world. Since these forms of experience are so different from one another, Dilthey argues, they suffice to separate the domains of the different sciences (9). How are they different from one another? Dilthey does not explain in any detail in the *Einleitung*. He states that we find through self-awareness basic facts, such as the power of our will and moral conscience, which cannot find any straightforward explanation in the physical world. But he does not regard this point as conclusive or give it any final metaphysical weight. He insists that his distinction is only tentative, a hypothetical starting point he hopes to clarify and defend in the course of his argument. As it happened, Dilthey provided little further argument for his distinction in the *Einleitung*, which was an incomplete work. However, he defended and developed it in his later work, as we shall soon see.

In the *Einleitung* Dilthey was careful to explain how his distinction differs from other attempts to distinguish between the sciences. First of all, the distinction should not be *ontological*, between distinct kinds of substance or entity, viz., the mind and the body. The distinction between inner and outer experience does not imply, he stressed, the existence of distinct kinds of thing (8, 11). It was meant to be purely *phenomenological*, referring only to what is given in experience; it therefore brackets ontological issues

about kinds of entity or causal questions about the origins of experience. Dilthey rejected mental–physical dualism, which he regarded as artificial, an abstraction from the living unity of a human being, whose mental and physical functions are inseparable (14–15). Second, Dilthey thinks that the distinction between the sciences should also not be *methodological*, i.e., between different forms of explanation or kinds of concepts. In the *Einleitung* he argued that the social–historical sciences use methods of abstraction, and attempt to formulate general laws, no less than the natural sciences (27). The historical and social sciences need to use methods of induction and generalization no less than the natural sciences (42). Since human beings are so different from one another and their interactions so complex, Dilthey doubts that laws in the historical and social sciences will ever have the same precision as those in the natural sciences (37); but he does not question, and indeed stresses, the importance of general causal laws in the social–historical sciences (27). They need to determine the interconnections within elements of a whole, and these interconnections are formulable in terms of cause and effect (44). In thus rejecting a methodological distinction, and in stressing the importance of general laws in the human sciences, Dilthey formulated a position that would later put himself at odds with the neo-Kantians.

The chief reason Dilthey insisted on a phenomenological distinction between the sciences ultimately goes back to the Kantian doctrine that the limits of knowledge lie within experience. Dilthey affirmed this Kantian principle as one of the lasting achievements of the critical philosophy; and for him abiding by it meant excluding all metaphysics from the foundations of the social and historical sciences. The Kantian principle also meant that the distinction between the sciences could not be ontological, for any ontological distinction would presuppose metaphysical doctrines transcending the limits of experience. Since the foundation of the sciences must lie in experience, the distinction between the human and natural sciences would have to be phenomenological, grounded on different kinds of experience. The only question then was how to draw the boundary within the limits of experience.

It was clear that the foundation of the human sciences could not come from *external* experience, which is limited to sense perception, the awareness of objects in space and time; the only other plausible candidate was then *internal* experience, the awareness of our own mental activities and states. The social and historical sciences therefore have their foundation in what Dilthey calls “facts of consciousness” (*Tatsachen des Bewußtseins*) (xviii). Hence he comes to the conclusion: “The analysis of these facts is the center of the *Geisteswissenschaften*” (xviii). For this reason, Dilthey held that the social and historical sciences would have to have their foundation in psychology. From his earliest years, it was one of his chief ambitions to found a new psychology that could be the foundation for the human sciences.

We are now in a position to understand why Dilthey chose the term “*Geisteswissenschaften*” to refer to the human or social–historical sciences. He was not the inventor of this term, though it is now persistently associated with him. The term gained wide currency in Germany by mid-century when it was introduced as a translation for Mill's

concept of the “moral sciences.”⁹ In his *System of Logic* Mill had distinguished between the natural and moral sciences, which he based on the distinction between the mental and physical.¹⁰ Dilthey did not like the term because of its metaphysical connotations; it smacked of Hegel's *Geistesphilosophie*, and it seemed to imply that we can treat the mind apart from its place in nature. For just this reason, he would often attempt to avoid the term entirely, using instead phrases like “moral–political sciences” or “sciences of the practical world.” However, in the *Einleitung in die Geisteswissenschaften* he resolved to retain it after all. The main reason he kept the term, he explained, is that it designates accurately enough the realm of inner experience that is the characteristic domain of the social–historical sciences (6). Despite the undesirable connotations of disembodied spirits, the term firmly *excludes* the realm of external experience and nature, which are the proper domain of the natural sciences. So, despite its metaphysical connotations, the term had a strictly phenomenological meaning for Dilthey. It was based on his distinction between forms of experience and had nothing to do with metaphysical dualism.

Dilthey's concept of the *Geisteswissenschaften* proved to be controversial. It was the subject of severe criticism in Wilhelm Windelband's famous 1893 Strasburg Rectoral Address, “Geschichte und Naturwissenschaft.” We will have occasion to consider Windelband's speech in detail in the next chapter.¹¹ Suffice it to say for now that Windelband made two points against Dilthey: first, that the distinction between the sciences should be methodological rather than substantive, formal rather than material; and, second, that the concept of the *Geisteswissenschaften* cannot provide a sufficient distinction between them, because psychology is the paradigm of a *Geisteswissenschaft* but follows the same nomothetic methods as the natural sciences. How did Dilthey respond to these points? Referring explicitly to Windelband's address, he replied in a short essay later attached to his *Beiträge zum Studium der Individualität*.¹² This essay is important in the present context because of its clarification of Dilthey's own distinction. Dilthey began by agreeing in principle with Windelband that the distinction between the sciences should not be material or between different classes of *objects*; he thus made it clear that he never intended to propose the substantive distinction Windelband attributed to him (248). He disagreed with Windelband, however, that the distinction should be formal or methodological. Such a distinction does not really locate the *differentia specifica*, Dilthey argued, because the social–historical sciences and the natural sciences use nomothetic methods (257–8). If we were to make nomothetic

methods the crucial distinguishing feature of the natural sciences, as Windelband does, then economics, which is concerned to formulate general laws, would have to be a natural science. But if we are not to make a distinction in terms of objects or methods, what is there to separate the two kinds of science? Here Dilthey introduces an important qualification and clarification into his earlier distinction. The distinction between inner and outer experience, we now learn, is not between distinct kinds of *event* or *activities* but between two distinct kinds of *content*. The aim of the different social-historical sciences is not to provide a description of mental events or activities as they pass through consciousness—hence Windelband's objection against introspection misses the mark—but to identify and analyze the content within our inner experience. And so the distinction between the natural and social–historical sciences should be fundamentally a distinction about kinds of content (253). This is not a distinction between objects because one and the same object can have different content depending on the perspective of the inquiry; thus the same physical object can be the content of chemistry, physics and mathematics (253). What determines the content is the system of relations into which we analyze the object, and which system we develop depends on the specific enquiries we make.

Although Dilthey gave a spirited defense of his position against Windelband, the irony is that he was already modifying his earlier views. While he would continue to hold onto the distinction between inner and outer experience as his bottom line, he began to supplement it with other distinctions, which would virtually overshadow the original. The more he worked on his new psychology, the more he distinguished it from other forms of psychology, especially the naturalistic psychology of his day. The distinction between his *descriptive* or *analytic* psychology, and *explicative* or *mechanical* psychology, led him to make a more methodological or formal distinction between the sciences. The new formal distinction is firmly and clearly announced in his 1894 *Ideen über beschreibende und zergliedernde Psychologie*. Dilthey now makes a declaration of independence for the *Geisteswissenschaften*. They will only realize their autonomy, he argues, when they follow their own methods, when they cease to imitate slavishly the methods of the natural sciences (143). What are these different methods? Dilthey only hints at them in some dense lines: “We *explain* nature, we *understand* the life of the mind” (144; my italics). To explain nature means to subsume it under causal regularities; but to understand the mind means to apprehend or intuit the experience of another (172). While mechanical psychology begins with simple elements—nerve impulses, ideas, impressions—and attempts to reconstruct a whole from them, descriptive or analytical psychology begins with the whole of our inner experience and proceeds to analyze it into its separate parts (172–4). In the *Ideen* Dilthey develops only the sketchiest account of what he means by the method of understanding; but he is firm that it is the distinctive method of the social and historical sciences. This new formal distinction was not, however, a shift toward the neo-Kantian position, which stressed formal and methodological distinctions alone. For Dilthey's formal distinction is still founded on top of his original phenomenological one. Unlike the neo-Kantians,

he does not think that the sciences have different methods that apply to the same kind of experience; rather, each method covers a distinct kind of experience (143). Since these forms of experience are so different from one another, Dilthey argues, they must have different methods. He loved to cite Bacon's dictum *natura parendo vincitur* (nature is conquered by obeying her), which for him meant that we must choose methods appropriate for the kind of object.

After his response to Windelband, Dilthey would continue to reflect on the differences between the social-historical and natural sciences. One of the most important products of these reflections is a study, of which there are three drafts, entitled "Abgrenzung der Geisteswissenschaften," which was probably written around 1905 and intended to be part of the *Aufbau der Geschichtlichen Welt in den Geisteswissenschaften*.¹³ Dilthey now has a simpler formulation for the common subject and foundation of all the social–historical sciences. What all these sciences have in common, and what provides their foundation, is lived experience (*Erlebnis*) (70–1). This concept of *lived* experience now replaces what Dilthey earlier called *inner* experience, though it is essentially only a new formulation of what he had meant all along. When he declared in the preface to the *Einleitung in die Geisteswissenschaften* that the social–historical sciences should be founded on a richer notion of experience than mere sense perception, when he stressed that their concept of experience would have to be based upon the whole human being, he had already anticipated his later concept of lived experience. Now he had a simpler, richer and more suggestive term for what he had originally meant but never fully explained.¹⁴ Dilthey was confident that the concept of lived experience could explain all the basic differences between the natural and human sciences. It was now possible to see why basic concepts or categories, like time, reality and cause, have a very different meaning in the social–historical sciences than in the natural sciences. As soon as we place these concepts in the context of lived experience, they assume a completely different meaning from what they have in the context of sense experience alone. Furthermore, everything said to be characteristic of the human sciences by others follows from the more fundamental concept of lived experience. Since lived experience is essentially individual, the experience of a unique person, it has the individuality that Windelband held to be essential to the social–historical sciences (71). Since lived experience is constituted by a person's volition, it also comprises the realm of values that Rickert thinks is characteristic of the human sciences (312). The concept of lived experience could therefore explain on a more fundamental plane everything the neo-Kantians held to be characteristic of the human sciences.

What, more precisely, did Dilthey mean by lived experience? We will have occasion to examine it in more detail later; but for now we need at least a preliminary account. Basically, lived experience is what someone lives through in the course of their life. It involves what they perceive through their senses, to be sure, but it also includes what they dream, fear, hope and expect; its content is determined not only by cognition, but also by emotion and volition. Hence lived experience comprises the whole of what we perceive, feel and desire. Since it is a unity of cognition, emotion and volition, lived experience permits no clear distinction between fact and value, which was so important for the neo-Kantians. What we perceive, feel and desire is directed first and foremost by the needs of life and our fundamental values. Lived experience is indeed determined by our views about what makes life worth living or what gives it meaning.¹⁵

Another fundamental dimension of lived experience is temporality (*Zeitlichkeit*). Lived experience is not simply the whole of what we perceive, feel and desire at any single moment, but the whole of what we perceive, feel and desire through the entire course of our lives. The whole character of lived experience, Dilthey stressed, is determined by the experience of time, and more specifically by the awareness of our "corruptibility".¹⁶ If we think of time mathematically, apart from what it is an experience of, it consists in equal and homogeneous units. But the time that we live through consists in the restless movement of the present away from the past and toward the future, where the present immediately becomes the past and the future the present. The nature of real time consists in "the steady sinking of the present backwards into the past and the making present of what we have expected, wanted or feared."¹⁷ Lived experience therefore involves our sense of mortality, and our encounter with the world as we attempt to realize goals important to our lives. Dilthey's insistence upon the temporal dimension of lived experience is of the first importance because it is the basis for his belief in the fundamental role of history. He understands lived experience essentially as historical experience. What we live through in time is nothing less than history. Hence the demand that the human sciences be based upon experience went hand-in-hand with the foundational role of history. All the human sciences, if based upon lived experience, would have an historical foundation.

3. The master science

Following his belief that the human sciences should be based on inner experience, Dilthey believed for a long time that their foundation rests upon psychology. Psychology was the science of inner experience, and therefore the master science, the *Grundwissenschaft* for all the human sciences. Psychology could do for the *Geisteswissenschaften*, he hoped, what mathematics did for the *Naturwissenschaften*.¹⁸ Dilthey's

program for a new foundationalist psychology goes back to his earliest years,¹⁹ and he gave it its clearest formulation in two works of the mid-1880s, *Ideen über eine Beschreibende und Zergliedernde Psychologie* (1894) and *Beiträge zum Studium der Individualität* (1895/96). The inspiration for much of his psychology appears to have come from a fellow student during his early Berlin years, Franz Brentano, and more specifically from his *Psychologie vom empirischen Standpunkt* (1874), a work which Dilthey had studied thoroughly while developing his project.²⁰ At least Brentano and Dilthey shared many basic doctrines: that intentionality is characteristic of mental life; that psychology should be based on inner experience; that there is a distinction between descriptive and experimental psychology; that knowledge of inner experience is more certain than knowledge of the external world.

However respectable its origins, Dilthey's psychology had become extremely controversial by the late 1880s. It was attacked by the neo-Kantians and Husserl for confusing questions of validity with questions of fact, and it was duly charged with the sin of psychologism. Before we can assess these criticisms and their impact on Dilthey, we need to address some more basic questions. First, what was Dilthey's conception of psychology? What did he think its tasks and methods should be? Second, why did Dilthey have such faith in psychology in the first place? Why did he regard it as the foundation for the *Geisteswissenschaften*?

Dilthey provides the best explanation of his psychological project in his 1894 *Ideen*.²¹ Here he makes a sharp distinction between two different kinds of psychology, one of which he deplures, the other of which he celebrates. The psychology he condemns he calls "explanatory psychology" (*erklärende Psychologie*); the psychology he advocates he calls "descriptive" or "analytic psychology" (*beschreibende oder zergliedernde Psychologie*). The main advocates of explanatory psychology were James Mill, John Stuart Mill and Spencer in England, and Herbart, Fechner and Helmholtz in Germany. Explanatory psychology attempts to follow the methods of natural science, and to explain the mind in the same way that chemistry and physics explain the physical world (139). It strives to determine the regular laws of psychic life according to the principle of causality, which states that the cause equals the effect (*causa aequat effectum*) (158). Following the analytic–synthetic method of physics, it postulates basic units (viz., ideas, drives, impulses), finds the causal relations between them, and from these relations proceeds to construct all the phenomena of mental life. Again like physics, explanatory psychology attempts to quantify psychic phenomena—such as the intensity of sensation and the duration of nerve stimulation—and to find the precise ratios between these

quantities (165). Descriptive or analytic psychology follows the reverse procedure from explanatory psychology. Rather than beginning from basic units and attempting to reconstruct the whole of psychic life from them, it begins from the whole of psychic life given in our ordinary experience and then proceeds to analyze and describe its elements and relations. Dilthey's name "analytical psychology" is somewhat misleading because the method he advocates is more holistic than analytical; analytical psychology takes one part of psychic life and attempts to understand it by showing how it depends upon the whole in which it takes place. This holistic dimension of descriptive or analytical psychology is perfectly explicit when Dilthey states that the method characteristic of the *Geisteswissenschaften* consists in understanding (*Verstehen*), and that understanding consists in grasping some part within its whole (172). While Dilthey thinks that his concept of a descriptive psychology is new, he thinks that it has had practitioners through the ages; these were the poets and artists, who have provided some of the best psychological knowledge.

What is wrong with explanatory psychology? Throughout the *Ideen* Dilthey makes many objections against it. One of his main objections is that though explanatory psychology models itself on the natural sciences, it does not have the same tests and criteria as they do. We accept or reject hypotheses in the natural sciences according to whether they fit the facts better than alternatives; but in explanatory psychology there is no such test. We cannot determine the facts precisely enough to determine whether the theory corresponds with them. Hence there arises a confusing welter of hypotheses for which there is no verification or refutation in experience. Since there is no empirical test for these theories, it seems arbitrary what one takes as the basic unit of mental life, viz., ideas, drives, nerve impulses (141–2). Another major objection against explanatory psychology is that it is too reductivistic, i.e., it does not consider human life as a whole but analyzes it into atomic elements, each of which is meant to be self-sufficient (156). One of the implicit but crucial themes behind the *Ideen* is Dilthey's distinction between two kinds of whole: the composite whole that is formed by adding together its parts, each of which is an independent unit; and the organic whole that precedes its parts and makes each of them possible. This contrast between two forms of whole was endemic in German idealism—it is Kant's distinction between an analytic and synthetic universal, Hegel's distinction between an abstract and concrete universal—and Dilthey presupposes it in his account of the difference between explanatory and descriptive psychology. While explanatory psychology adopts the composite whole as its paradigm, descriptive psychology follows the organic whole. Yet a third major objection against analytical psychology is that it does not really consider the *content* of mental life, i.e., it does not consider what our ideas are about or what they mean, but simply how they follow one another according to laws. What descriptive psychology will attempt to do, in contrast to explanatory psychology, is to account for the content of mental life. Hence Dilthey stresses the need for a psychology that will do justice to "the complete contentality of mental life" (*die ganze Inhaltlichkeit des Seelenlebens*) (156). His emphasis upon this point is noteworthy because it shows

that, even before his encounter with Husserl in 1900, he wanted to make the whole dimension of intentionality crucial to psychology.²² Husserl did not change the direction of Dilthey's work, but confirmed it and gave new impulse to it.

In addition to these theoretical objections, it is important to note the moral motivations for Dilthey's resistance to explanatory psychology. He disapproved of this psychology first and foremost because of its apparent deterministic and materialistic implications. Explanatory psychology tended in the direction of materialism when it identified material causes for all mental events (163). Mill, Spencer and Taine developed a system of criminal law on the basis of their explanatory psychology that has deterministic implications (192). A descriptive psychology, however, would attempt to do justice to the inner experience of spontaneity and choice. While Dilthey did not think that such inner experience proves the reality of freedom, he insisted that the *belief* in freedom is still a vital component in the understanding of human action, and that this belief found no place in explanatory psychology.

Descriptive psychology could avoid all the problems of explanatory psychology, Dilthey believed, simply by beginning with psychic life as a whole. To designate the whole of psychic life, Dilthey introduces his concept of "lived experience" (*Erlebnis*). Already in the *Ideen*, then, he applies the concept that plays such a central role in his later attempt to distinguish between the human and natural sciences. He distinguishes between two dimensions of lived experience, both of them crucial for understanding his psychology (213). The first dimension is synchronic: the unity of every aspect of a living person at any given time, which involves not simply their perception of the world, but also their feelings, attitudes and drives. It comprises cognition, volition and feeling, which are inextricably intertwined in every experience (201, 216). The second dimension is diachronic: the unity of different experiences throughout time, and what makes them episodes in the life of a single person. The second dimension has to be understood as a purposive system, Dilthey explains, where every action is understood as acting toward ends, and where these ends are hierarchically organized according to their value and priority. Lived experience fundamentally involves values, but these are not simply what satisfies a person's basic drives but also attitudes and beliefs about what makes life worth living. We understand an episode in a person's life only when we see how it plays a role in realizing his basic values, his conception of what makes life worth living (216–17). Now when we understand a human action, Dilthey holds, what we are doing is placing it within the context of lived experience. We are seeing it as part of the person's life as a whole, as playing a necessary role in his system of values, in his conception of what makes life worth living.

When we explain an action according to descriptive psychology we are also doing something else: we are attempting to understand it from within, according to the agent's own beliefs and values, rather than attempting to observe it simply from

without, as an event in space and time. Dilthey believes that the agent's own self-consciousness, his own conceptions of value and life, are constitutive of his mental life. As Dilthey later put the point: "Consciousness of lived experience and its constitution...are one. Lived experience does not exist as an object for the observer apprehending it, but it is indistinguishable from what it is for me."²³ Since such self-awareness is constitutive of who we are, there is a kind of identity between subject and object, knower and known, in mental life that we do not have in external experience.

Now that we have a basic idea of Dilthey's psychology, it is necessary to ask why he had such confidence in it. Why did he think that it could be the foundation for all the *Geisteswissenschaften*? To answer this question, it is necessary to go back to the first drafts of the planned second volume of the *Einleitung in die Geisteswissenschaften*, the so-called *Breslauer Ausarbeitungen*, which were written in the early 1880s.²⁴ It is in these drafts that Dilthey was most careful and thorough in explaining the foundationalist aspects of his psychology. He begins with one basic principle, which he makes the first principle of his psychology, and indeed all philosophy. He calls it the principle of phenomenality (*Satz der Phenomenalität*). This principle states that "all objects, including even persons, with which I stand in relation, exist for me only as facts of consciousness" (58). There are two further propositions involved in this principle: (a) all the evidence that I have for the existence of the external world, other persons, and even my own body, derives from my perceptions, and (b) these perceptions exist only within me. What Dilthey has in mind with this principle is essentially Descartes' famous point in the *Meditations*: that though it is doubtful that I perceive a really existing X, which continues to exist when I do not perceive it, it is not doubtful that I *perceive* X. Hence self-awareness of my inner states is self-evident, even if it is doubtful that these states give knowledge of something that exists outside them.

However self-evident, this principle is also notoriously problematic: it had been the starting point of skepticism and idealism from Descartes to Hume. The skeptic and idealist used it to argue that all knowledge of an external world is doubtful. If my belief in the external world is based only on causal inferences from inner states (the effects) to the objects outside them (the causes), then it is easy to doubt this belief, for it is always possible that these effects have their cause in me or in something other than the objects themselves. It then seems as if I am caught inside the circle of my own consciousness, incapable of knowing with certainty anything beyond myself. This predicament had been pointed out by Kant in his Critique of the Fourth Paralogism. Perfectly aware of this problem, Dilthey goes to much trouble to explain why his principle does not imply either idealism or skepticism. Although I *know* the object only through my perceptions of it, he argues, it does not follow that it *exists* as only these perceptions. "From the fact

that the object is for me only from my perceiving it, only from *percipi*, it does not follow, as Berkeley concluded, that this *percipi* dissolves all *esse*. From the fact that *percipi* is the only manner in which *esse* is for us, it does not follow that *esse* cannot be in some other sense.” (74) While Dilthey admits that inferences to the causes of perceptions are doubtful in principle, he still insists that such doubts are purely philosophical, and that, from the standpoint of lived experience, awareness of external objects is immediate, as certain as my own inner states. (70) Although he recognizes that one cannot prove the existence of these external objects, he also argues that we have no serious philosophical reason to doubt their existence.

The *Breslauer Ausarbeitungen* clearly show, then, that Dilthey made psychology the *Grundwissenschaft* of the human sciences because, following the Cartesian tradition, he believed in the self-evidence of self-knowledge. Psychology would have more certainty than other disciplines because its primary subject consists in “facts of consciousness” (*Tatsachen des Bewusstseins*), which are immune to doubt in ways that facts about the world are not. This is the ultimate reason Dilthey wants to make inner experience the special subject matter of the human sciences: inner experience is more certain than outer experience. Hence he would often argue in the *Einleitung in die Geisteswissenschaften* that the human sciences can attain greater certainty than the natural sciences, which are based on observations of the external world.²⁵ There is plenty of evidence that Dilthey continued to follow this Cartesian line of thinking throughout the 1880s, and even into the 1890s. In his 1890 *Beiträge zur Lösung der Frage vom Ursprung unseres Glaubens an die Realität der Aussenwelt* he begins by reaffirming the principle of phenomenality, and by explicitly acknowledging the validity of the Cartesian starting point: “If there is any universal truth for a human being, it must be that thought should begin from the facts of consciousness and proceed toward the reality of the external world.”²⁶ In a draft from late 1896 or early 1897, “Übersicht meines Systems,” he gave great importance to the principle: “The reality of our inner states is the certain basis for all knowledge.”²⁷ There are other passages in the *Ideen* where he explicitly affirms the Cartesian distinction between certain self-knowledge and inferred knowledge of the external world.²⁸ All these passages seem to provide all the evidence we need for the conclusion that Dilthey held psychology to be the *Grundwissenschaft* because he accepted, as Brentano did before him,²⁹ the Cartesian theory of the primacy of self-awareness. We shall soon see, however, that his faith in this theory proved all too shakable.

4. The fate of psychology

One of the most controversial questions of Dilthey scholarship concerns whether Dilthey abandoned his psychology by the early 1900s. Some scholars have claimed that Dilthey, under pressure from his critics, dropped his psychology by then they have taken his 1900 essay “Die Entstehung der Hermeneutik” as a turning point in his development away from psychology and toward hermeneutics as the foundation of the human sciences.³⁰ Other scholars, however, have defended the continuity of Dilthey's development, arguing that he never abandoned but simply reformulated his psychology.³¹ There is much at stake in this question, which is not simply about the niceties of Dilthey's philosophical development; for it concerns how Dilthey conceived the very foundation of the human sciences. Clearly, there is a big difference between making psychology or hermeneutics the basis of these sciences.

A strong case can be made that Dilthey abandoned his psychology. There is a fair amount of evidence that, after the criticisms of Ebbinghaus, Husserl and the neo-Kantians, Dilthey's faith in psychology began to waver. The most compelling evidence for his waning confidence in psychology is a notebook entry from 1903: “The whole of psychology is problematic for the indefinite future.”³² It is surely significant that in his later discussion of the foundations of the human sciences, his 1910 *Plan der Fortsetzung zum Aufbau der geschichtlichen Welt in den Geisteswissenschaften*, Dilthey discusses the basics of an hermeneutical foundation of the human sciences without referring once to psychology. The fundamental concepts for the human sciences are now the trilogy of “lived experience-expression-understanding,” which are repeated like a mantra; but the principle of phenomenality, which played such a fundamental role in the *Breslauer Ausarbeitungen*, is never mentioned at all. Ebbinghaus' savage review of the *Ideen* also seems to have played a decisive role in turning Dilthey away from psychology.³³ After Ebbinghaus' attack, Dilthey dropped his plans to write the second volume of the *Einleitung in die Geisteswissenschaften*, which would have discussed the foundations of the human sciences, and he returned instead to his studies on Schleiermacher. With the new study of Schleiermacher, there came the rediscovery of hermeneutics, which seemed to offer a path out of the aporia of psychology. The criticisms of Husserl and the neo-Kantians were also important in convincing Dilthey of the dangers of psychologism. He would now stress, as he never did before, the neo-Kantian point that epistemological questions of validity cannot be decided by

psychological facts;³⁴and he endorsed Husserl's point that the foundations of philosophy should be sought not in psychological acts but in the objects or content of mental life. He declared Husserl's work to be pathbreaking and readily acknowledged its importance in helping him to formulate his own position.³⁵Such, indeed, was the influence of Husserl upon Dilthey, it has been argued, that it turned him away from psychology and toward a more phenomenological approach to the human sciences.

This is not, however, the end of the matter. A strong case can also be made that Dilthey kept his psychology. Although he had growing doubts about it, and although his later work on the foundations of the human sciences gravitated toward hermeneutics, there is still much evidence that he continued to embrace psychology. In his 1906 work *Das Wesen der Philosophie*, for example, he still declares inner experience to be the proper starting point for logic and epistemology (V 361, 363). And in the first of his 1905 *Studien zur Grundlegung der Geisteswissenschaften* he defends the fundamental role of psychology and stresses how the abstractions of epistemology need to be complemented by a psychological account of experience as a whole (VII, 11–12). Finally, in his 1906 study *Die Abgrenzung der Geisteswissenschaften* he continues to see psychology as the science of experience that will complete the work of the human sciences (VII, 313). All these reaffirmations of psychology were not simply face-saving gestures on Dilthey's part, as if he only wanted to maintain his dignity after having invested so much in psychology. He continued to have philosophical reasons for upholding the worth of psychology. The great value of psychology for Dilthey is that it could treat the genesis and historical origins of psychic phenomena that were ignored by epistemology. Although he appreciated the neo-Kantian distinction between questions of validity and origins, he continued to affirm that these questions are not entirely separable, and that their separation would lead to false abstractions; epistemology had to be complemented by psychology if it was to provide a full account of cognition.³⁶It is also worth noting that Dilthey did not simply reaffirm psychology in principle; he also reworked it in practice. In his 1906 *Studien zur Grundlegung der Geisteswissenschaften* he would go to great efforts to reformulate his psychology in all the basic categories of cognition, feeling and volition.

There is not only strong evidence for Dilthey's retention of psychology, but also strong reasons to doubt some of the usual accounts about why he abandoned it. It is sometimes said that Dilthey abandoned psychology because he could no longer trust the method of introspection, and so he turned instead toward expression as the more reliable objective manifestation of the mind.³⁷ It is true that Dilthey ceased to give such importance to introspection; the concept of *Selbstbeobachtung*, which plays a central role

in the *Breslauer Ausarbeitungen*,³⁸ disappears in later works. Yet the problem is that, even in some of his earliest manuscripts, Dilthey was sharply critical of introspection.³⁹ All the doubts he could raise against introspection in 1900 are unlikely to have surpassed those he had already voiced in the 1870s. This leaves the question: Why did he not abandon psychology much earlier? It is also false to assume that Husserl's concept of intentionality marks a fundamental shift in the direction of Dilthey's thought. As we have already seen, Dilthey had stressed the importance of intentionality in the 1895 *Ideen* and he had already made it one of the chief points of his criticism of explanatory psychology. Dilthey was familiar with the concept of intentionality long before his acquaintance with Husserl, who at most helped to reinforce the direction of his thinking.⁴⁰

Although Dilthey did not abandon his psychology, the fact remains that he never developed it into the foundation he originally envisaged. His plans for a descriptive psychology, which could somehow unify and justify the various human sciences, remained just that: plans. The closest he came toward developing a psychological foundation for the human sciences is in the *Breslauer Ausarbeitungen*; but it is significant that he never returned to revise it. The principle of phenomenality, which was once his first principle, ceases to play any central role. Why? The answer, I believe, has little to do with Dilthey's critics, and it has much to do with a more basic tension and ambivalence in his own thinking. Although Dilthey's psychology was a foundationalist project, he also had the gravest doubts about foundationalism. While he affirmed fundamental principles of the Cartesian tradition, he also cast the greatest doubts upon them. Those scholars who have portrayed Dilthey as a lingering Cartesian stubbornly loyal to the foundationalist tradition have seen only one side of a much more complicated truth.⁴¹ For Dilthey was the heir not only of neo-Kantian foundationalism but also of romantic *anti*-foundationalism. From Lotze and Trendelenburg, two of his great teachers, he learned some of the fundamental difficulties of the foundationalism tradition,⁴² and these virtually paralyzed his psychological project from the beginning.

The evidence for Dilthey's doubts about foundationalism is abundant in his early writings. In some early fragments written in the 1870s,⁴³ the young Dilthey engaged in a sustained critique of the classical ideal of a first philosophy. It is impossible for

philosophy to be completely presuppositionless, he argued, because we can investigate something only if we begin with some presuppositions that direct our inquiry (16). We recognize that these presuppositions are fallible, and we correct and adjust them as our inquiry progresses; but we cannot prove them before we begin. Any attempt to prove them would be circular, because we would have to apply the rules of thinking whose validity the proof presupposes (35). We aspire to some absolute criterion to test our knowledge before we begin inquiry; but such a criterion would amount to a claim to knowledge itself; and we can only know of its validity through the actual attempts to acquire knowledge (11, 40). Since the philosopher has no Archimedean point where he can stand outside the world of experience, he has no choice but to begin his inquiry in the middle of it. The only test for his principles is their agreement with the facts and their consistency with the general web of our beliefs (11–12).

Apart from his explicit critique of foundationalism, there were other powerful strands in Dilthey's thinking that ran completely counter to the Cartesian and Kantian tradition. One of these is Dilthey's profound historical sense, i.e., his awareness of how the individual is a part and product of history. This made him question several assumptions of the Cartesian and Kantian tradition, first and foremost the assumption that the knowing subject is self-sufficient, having perfect knowledge of itself independent of the world in which it lives. Already in the *Breslauer Ausarbeitungen* there are passages where Dilthey questions this assumption (XIX, 76, 89); but these doubts are fully explicit in the *Einleitung in die Geisteswissenschaften*: "Man as a fact preceding history and society is a fiction...whereas the real man, which sound analytic science takes as its object, is the individual as a component of society." (I, 31–2). Once he began to stress the role of society and history in forming the individual, Dilthey began to question another basic premise of the Cartesian–Kantian tradition: the primacy of self-knowledge itself. If we are to know who we are, we must see our place in society and history, which makes us who we are. We cannot know ourselves by introspection, by reflecting upon ourselves and abstracting from everything outside us. "What man is," he wrote in the *Ideen*, "he knows not from soul-searching (*Grübeleî*), still less from psychological experiments, but from history."⁴⁴ The same historical perspective made Dilthey question whether epistemology is an *a priori* science that knows the conditions and limits of knowledge simply by sheer reflection. We know what knowledge is, he argues, only from the history of attempts to acquire it. "Whether a knife is sharp we know best by cutting. The fruitfulness of a method can only be determined by whether one makes discoveries with it."⁴⁵ Hence he argued in the *Einleitung* that to know the proper form of knowledge for the *Geisteswissenschaften* we must first examine the history of attempts to acquire such knowledge; the epistemological foundation of the

Geisteswissenschaften would have to be based on an historical description of past efforts to gain knowledge.⁴⁶

Dilthey's distance from the Cartesian and Kantian tradition becomes even more apparent from his critique of its attempt to prove the existence of the external world. One of the characteristic features of the Cartesian project is its attempt to ground knowledge of the external world upon the certainty of self-awareness. From the certainty of his *cogito* Descartes hoped to derive the certainty of knowledge of the external world. Although in the Critique of the Fourth Paralogism in the first *Kritik* Kant was highly critical of Descartes' argument, his famous "Refutation of Idealism" in the second edition would essentially repeat the same strategy: it would begin with the awareness of my own inner states in time and show how they presuppose the awareness of objects in space outside me. Starting in the 1870s, Dilthey began to question both Cartesian and Kantian arguments.⁴⁷ The weaknesses of the Cartesian and Kantian proofs, he argued, made it necessary to expand the concept of experience beyond its intellectualist confines in traditional epistemology and to give a fundamental role to volition in the constitution of our experience. Dilthey's mature formulation of his position appears in his 1890 *Beiträge zur Lösung der Frage vom Ursprung unseres Glaubens an die Realität der Aussenwelt und seinem Recht*.⁴⁸ This tract begins from apparently orthodox Cartesian and Kantian premises: that inner experience is certain and the basis for our knowledge of the external world. Here Dilthey seems to reaffirm the principle of phenomenality. However, he soon questions radically what is involved in inner experience and how it gives us reason to know the external world. *Pace* Descartes and Kant, he does not think that we can take inner experience to be the premise for an argument whose conclusion would be the reality of the external world. He doubts that there can be any demonstration of the existence of the external world, any knock-down proof that would convince the skeptic that he is really seeing things rather than just dreaming or hallucinating them. Since the content of our experience can be the same whether we are dreaming or awake, it is always logically possible that we are having a dream or an hallucination. All such attempts to prove the existence of the external world begin from a false premise: that knowledge of the external world is in some way inferential, based upon an implicit act of reasoning, whether that is an inference from effect to cause (Descartes), or an inference from inner to outer sense (Kant), or a postulate of the understanding (Rickert). Our knowledge of the external world arises not from our faculty of cognition or understanding, Dilthey argues, but from our faculty of volition or the will. The origin of our belief in the external world, the beginning of our distinction between ourselves and things outside us, comes from

the self-consciousness of our drives and impulses and the awareness of our resistance to them. What is outside us is what stops us from moving, what thwarts our drives from getting satisfaction. This does not mean that our knowledge of the external world is simply immediate and certain, on the same footing as knowledge of our inner states. This knowledge is based upon some rather complex activities: the awareness of our drives, the feeling of resistance to them, and so on. But these complex activities give us more than sufficient assurance that there is something outside us. A purely rational or intellectual being would never have reason to believe that there is something outside himself; but a human being, who is essentially “a bundle of drives,” has every reason to think that there is such a world. He will no more doubt its existence than he will affirm that he can always have whatever he wants. As Dilthey summarizes his position:

Impulse, pressure, resistance are, as it were, the firm elements that impart solidity to external objects. Will, struggle, work, need, satisfaction are the constantly returning primal elements, which make up the structure of spiritual events. Here is life itself. It is forever its own proof. (131).

So, although Dilthey's psychology *begins* by appearing to endorse the traditional foundationalist project of early modern philosophy, it *ends* with a critique of that project. Dilthey's argument in the 1890 *Beyträge* marks a profound break with the whole foundationalist tradition in modern philosophy. It attempts to show the limits of reason before the fundamental fact of the existence of the external world. It argues that there cannot be a theoretical demonstration of the existence of the external world, and that the only way that we can believe in its reality is by stepping outside the intellectual realm entirely and admitting the reality of lived experience. If we were purely intellectual beings, Dilthey insists, we would have to be complete idealists; but we are also conative beings, which alone compels us to believe in the existence of the external world. Ultimately, it was this kind of ambivalence and doubt that doomed Dilthey's psychology as a foundationalist project. Its demise came from self-paralysis, not the attacks of critics.

5. Early psychology

Dilthey's early fascination with psychology, and his eventual disenchantment with it, are two of the greatest mysteries of his thought. It is very difficult for us now to understand Dilthey's obsession with psychology, given that contemporary psychology has a very different meaning and purpose in the academic division of labor than it had in the second half of the nineteenth century. Psychology was then very much a discipline in the making, and there were constant debates about its methods, aims and very identity. We can understand Dilthey only if we see how his project fits into those debates. We cannot investigate here this broader context, which would take us too far afield. We can, however, shed a little light on Dilthey's project if we trace, if only in a crude and cursory fashion, the development of his views.

Dilthey's views about psychology appear as early as the 1860s. They first surface in some drafts for the essay "Ueber das Studium der Geschichte der Wissenschaften vom Menschen, der Gesellschaft und dem Staat," which were written in 1865/66.⁴⁹ Dilthey formulated his conception of psychology in the context of his early plan for a new system of the sciences of man, society and history. This system would demonstrate the unity of the human sciences, and show how they differed in their methods, subject matter and standards from the natural sciences. One essential task of philosophy, as Dilthey then saw it, is to formulate the general system of the sciences, and to show their relation to one another. Philosophy is continuous with the positive sciences, and it differs from them chiefly in its level of generality, in its attempt to organize all their partial efforts into a whole. Dilthey saw his special contribution to this task as his attempt to join the study of man with his history: "What is new in my method is the connection of the study of man with history."⁵⁰ To bring together the study of man with those of society and history, Dilthey held, is the special task of two disciplines: logic and psychology. Logic shows the common structure to the different sciences; and psychology demonstrates how the contents of the mind are determined by culture and history. Dilthey's early project was therefore essentially a *social* or *cultural* psychology; its main purpose was to establish how the individual's inner psychic life is determined by its place in society and history. The inspiration for this program came partly from the *Völkerpsychologie* of Steinthal and Lazarus.⁵¹ Its oldest precedent was Hegel, whose conception of objective spirit was a primitive form of social psychology. Fully aware of this debt, Dilthey even stated at one point that his project was following "the tendency of the phenomenology of spirit."⁵²

Already in the 1860s Dilthey was fully aware that his conception of psychology was at odds with the prevalent conceptions of his day. First of all, he was opposed to the individualistic psychology of the empiricist tradition that sees the mind as a self-sufficient unit independent of society and history. This psychology assumed that the individual is prior to the social whole, and it would attempt to construct the social realm by postulating certain natural drives, or by inventing the fiction of a social contract between self-interested individuals. For Dilthey, such a psychology failed to take into account one of the fundamental findings of the historical school: that the self is the product of its place in society and history. His opposition to individualistic psychology appears in his early project to write a critique of the natural-law tradition.⁵³ Second, Dilthey was no less opposed to the mechanistic or naturalistic psychology advocated by Comte, Mill and Herbart, which attempted to apply the quantitative and experimental methods of the natural sciences to the study of the mind. Already

anticipating his later critique in the *Ideen*, Dilthey is extremely skeptical whether this psychology will produce the certain results expected of it. Unlike this mechanical psychology, his psychology will study the inner contents of the mind rather than their external causes in the body and nature. Dilthey emphasizes, more than in the *Ideen*, that it is also the task of his psychology to discover laws, uniform connections between phenomena; but even here his differences from mechanical psychology are apparent, for he wants to undertake this task from within, by examining the connections between mental contents rather than the connection between the physical and mental. Again anticipating his *Ideen*, Dilthey states that the basic aim of psychology should be descriptive and analytical rather than explanatory.⁵⁴

The young Dilthey had even greater dreams for psychology. Its task was not only to unify the realms of man, society and history, but also to provide a secure foundation for all the human sciences. If psychology were to limit itself to the modest task of describing and analyzing the contents of inner experience, Dilthey held, it would be able to provide a safe foundation for all the human sciences. There is something about the very nature of inner experience, he argued, that makes knowledge of it more certain than that of the natural sciences. While there is a separation between observer and object in the natural sciences, so that the observer will often make mistakes about his object, there is no such separation between observer and object in the human sciences. What a thing seems to be, that it is; and what it is, that it seems to be.⁵⁵ We tend to hypostasize the elements of the mind, as if its feelings, ideas and desires have an independent existence from the subject; but the very nature of perceptions, hopes, desires and expectations is that they cannot exist without a subject who has them, without at least the possibility of self-awareness of them. Mechanistic psychology has forfeited this very advantage, because it treats psychic life as if it were another object in nature; by making a distinction between the observer and its subject matter, it hypostasizes the mind.⁵⁶ The entire realm of the mind is such, Dilthey believed, that there is an identity of subject and object; self-awareness is not extrinsic but essential to subjectivity. This point, already fully clear to Dilthey in the 1860s, would assume an important role in the development of hermeneutics in the 1900s. It was another legacy of the idealistic tradition, the result of Kant's principle of the unity of apperception and Fichte's theory of self-awareness.

The great expectations that the young Dilthey had for psychology placed an enormous burden upon it. The crucial question here is whether the strain was too great. There is an implicit tension between its two roles. If psychology remains within the realm of inner experience, simply describing and analyzing it, how does it ever get outside this realm to connect the human being with society and history? To insist upon the foundational role of psychology, as Dilthey did, was also to invite the classical

problem of the egocentric predicament: how do we get outside the contents of our consciousness? How do we establish that our inner experience is connected with the wider world of society and history? This tension goes to the very heart of all Dilthey's thinking, which grew out of two apparently incompatible components: his critical sense, which he acquired from Kant; and his historical sense, which he learned from Ranke. These components appear to conflict: the more critical we are, the more we examine the evidence for all our beliefs; but the more we examine this evidence, the more we find that it lies in the contents of the mind; and the more we are thrown back into the dark inner recesses of the mind, the further away we are from the broad daylight of society and history. Ranke, however, had taught him that we cannot know ourselves in abstraction from society and history because our very identity depends upon them. The problem with the critical tradition of Kant is that it could not bring the self into society and history; but the problem with the historical tradition of Ranke, Dilthey often stressed, is that it could not provide a philosophical foundation for history. Hence Dilthey was left with the problem of how to bridge the gap between the realms of inner experience and those of society and history.

No one was more aware of, and troubled by, this problem than the young Dilthey himself. In some important fragments from 1874/79 he declared that the fundamental goal of the theory of the sciences (*Wissenschaftslehre*) was "to reach objectivism from the execution of the empirical standpoint."⁵⁷ Dilthey is still very far, however, from his later position in the *Beiträge*. He still thinks that it is possible to construct a theoretical proof for the reality of the external world. The decisive argument for him is that if we were purely ideal beings, then the succession of states in the mind would be completely uniform; the irregularity of phenomena is explicable only from stimuli outside the mind.⁵⁸ It was not for long, though, that Dilthey would keep this position. For in another set of fragments,⁵⁹ dated only sometime before 1880, he already sketches the central theme of the *Beiträge*. The external world would not exist at all for us, he argues, if we were purely intellectual beings; we believe in its existence only because we are also active and conative beings who experience resistance to our goals and desires.⁶⁰ Already Dilthey is extremely critical of the intellectualism of idealist epistemology, which assumes that the world exists for us only through our faculty of representation.

After formulating his new theory about the source of our belief in the external world, Dilthey could claim some success. He had achieved his goal of reaching the objective world from the empirical standpoint: the key to his success came from broadening the empirical standpoint, so that it included the experience of the human being as a whole, not only as an intellectual but also as an emotive and conative being.

The victory, however, was also pyrrhic. For in another respect Dilthey's answer to the problem of the external world came only by abandoning foundationalism itself. The result of his reflections was that no foundational program could succeed because there is no satisfying theoretical proof of the reality of the external world.

There were other profound problems with Dilthey's psychology that made its foundational role questionable. Since it makes everything outside me knowable only through representations within me, the principle of phenomenality subordinates outer to inner experience. But this undermines the distinction between the *Geisteswissenschaften* and *Naturwissenschaften*, which assigns them to separate but equal kinds of experience. If the principle of phenomenality is the fundamental principle of the *Geisteswissenschaften*, the *Naturwissenschaften* are then only a small part of them, only another form of representation within the mind. Another problem is that Dilthey's principle of phenomenality, with its emphasis on the primacy of inner experience, held only from the standpoint of my own experience; it had underrated the fundamental role of outer experience and other minds in constructing the social and historical world. Society and history exist only if there are many other minds having an equal and independent status to my own; but the only evidence that I have for the existence of these minds is from my representations, from my observation of their actions and speech. The self-evidence of immediate experience is lost, however, as soon as I have to assume the existence of other minds; then I have to make inferences about their existence from observations of external behavior and signs. Dilthey himself would always insist that I know of the existence of other minds only through analogy, by assuming that the causes of signs and actions in others are conscious intentions like those within myself.⁶¹

In the end, it was these kinds of difficulties that made Dilthey's psychology unviable. It was not the objections of Ebbinghaus, Windelband or Rickert that doomed the project—for he had replied to their objections—but simply the enormous burdens that Dilthey had placed upon it. The project simply imploded, collapsing of its own weight. Dilthey saw that he could not sustain the grand foundationalist claims that he once made for psychology. Although he never really abandoned psychology in his later years, he ceased to give it the foundational role he once dreamed for it. Psychology became a science of lived experience but not a foundation for all knowledge.

6. The concept of *Verstehen*

Today, Dilthey's name is usually associated with the controversial doctrine of *Verstehen* or understanding.⁶² Starting in the 1880s, Dilthey began to give this doctrine increasing

importance to designate the characteristic methodology of the human sciences. His theory of understanding became the source of much discussion in the early 1900s, chiefly among Dilthey's students, the neo-Kantians and Max Weber. Since the early 1900s, *Verstehen* has been seen as the chief alternative to naturalistic methods in the human sciences; the claim to methodological autonomy in the human sciences seems to stand or fall with it. Not surprisingly, then, the doctrine became a *cause célèbre* of the historicists, and the central target of the positivists, who held that understanding is either no method at all or ultimately reducible to those of the natural sciences.⁶³ The net result of all this controversy is that the concept of understanding has been twisted beyond recognition. It is no exaggeration to say: "There has probably been more arrant nonsense written on this subject than on any other key concept of modern thought and inquiry."⁶⁴ We do well to return to Dilthey's writings, then, to remove some of these misconceptions.

Dilthey gives several definitions of *Verstehen*, but his most common is along these lines: "the procedure from which we know something psychic from signs given externally to the senses."⁶⁵ The concept of understanding here is taken from ordinary language when we say that we "understand" someone's words, actions or gestures. (Here the German verb "*verstehen*" is used in the same way as the English word). The model of understanding in the human sciences takes its paradigm from these ordinary situations: understanding is essentially comprehending what someone is communicating through words and gestures, or what they are attempting to do in their actions. The human sciences attempt to understand just as we do in ordinary life. However, their objects are less familiar—ancient texts, legal codes, historical actions, the practices of a remote tribe or the beliefs of a religious sect—and their practice more self-conscious and methodical.

The inspiration for Dilthey's theory of understanding was Schleiermacher, who had used the word "*Verstehen*" in a similar sense in his lectures on hermeneutics. One of Dilthey's life projects was a life of Schleiermacher, which he never completed; but it

was from his work on Schleiermacher that he learned of the general significance of hermeneutics. It was Schleiermacher who convinced him that the human sciences could have their own characteristic methodology for understanding human life and action independent of the natural sciences. Although Schleiermacher limited his hermeneutics to the interpretation of texts, Dilthey could see its application to human action and speech. Just as we interpret texts, so we should interpret life and action, which can be treated as texts speaking to us. Understanding life and action is therefore more like interpreting texts than applying general laws of cause and effect.

Dilthey recognized the significance of hermeneutics for the understanding of human life and action as early as the 1860s. He wrote a prize winning essay on Schleiermacher's hermeneutics in 1860,⁶⁶ in which he argued that the development of hermeneutics involved a shift from the interpretation of classical and sacred texts to the understanding of human expression in general. Here he already sketches the idea of a general hermeneutic that would apply not only to texts but to human life and history. As Dilthey developed his own theory of the human sciences in the 1870s and 1880s, he gave the concept of understanding a crucial role. While it does not appear in the first volume of the published 1883 *Einleitung in die Geisteswissenschaften*, it has a central place in the *Breslauer Ausarbeitungen* where, along with self-reflection, it becomes part of the methodology of the *Geisteswissenschaften*. Dilthey now defined "understanding" as the "the interpretation of the state of the soul from the context of its entire life under the condition of its milieu."⁶⁷ In the "Zusätze" to the 1900 essay "Die Entstehung der Hermeneutik," Dilthey dropped introspection and made understanding into the fundamental method of the human sciences. Understanding had now become "the fundamental procedure for all further operations of the human sciences."⁶⁸ Dilthey's major exposition of his theory of understanding appears in some late fragments that were given the title "Entwürfe zur Kritik der historischen Vernunft."⁶⁹ The text rewards careful scrutiny, not least because its contents correct common misconceptions about Dilthey's methodology.

Dilthey begins by discussing the phenomena to be explained by understanding. His general concept for these phenomena is the externalizations of life (*Lebensäußerungen*). This is an expression of something mental (*Ausdruck eines Geistigen*) (205). The relation of the expression to what it expresses, Dilthey states, is not that of cause to effect (207). Cause and effect are distinct events, but the expression stands in a closer relation to the state of mind; it makes what is implicit, indeterminate and potential into something explicit, determinate and actual. The kind and degree of understanding depends on the specific kind of externalization or expression. There are three forms of externalization.

First, there are linguistic expressions, which appear in concepts, judgments and more extensive discourse. Here understanding is most perfect, because there is an intention to communicate, and speech can have a general meaning independent of context and person. Second, there are actions. Here understanding is less perfect because there need not be any intention to communicate, and because a person's actions reveal only one side of his character, one aspect of his thinking. We do not know from the action itself all the reasons for it, the thinking that went into why it was done rather than some other action. Third, there are gestures and movements (*Erlebnisausdruck*). These often reveal more of a person than the person could know himself. However, we need to be careful in using them as aids to interpretation because of the possibility of dissemblance and deceit.

What makes it possible for one mind to understand another is not simply the specific relation between an individual mind and its products, i.e., the fact that the mind reveals itself in its products, or the fact that its activities embody themselves in words, deeds and gestures. This is a necessary but not a sufficient condition of understanding. There is another crucial condition that must be added to it: that each externalization of mind takes place in a public sphere. Each objectification of the mind, Dilthey argues, also reveals or embodies something public, something communal between the I and Thou (208). We understand each word, action and gesture only because it takes place in, and has been formed by, a communal medium. Each individual lives, thinks and acts in a communal sphere, and he understands another only because both live and dwell in the same public space. Following Hegel, Dilthey calls this intersubjective dimension of understanding "objective spirit." He defines objective spirit as "the manifold forms in which the communality among individuals objectifies itself in the sensible world." (208) After borrowing this term, he is very eager to purge it of other more metaphysical Hegelian associations.⁷⁰ He denies that objective spirit is the objectification of reason; and still less does he think that objective spirit is a stage in the realization of absolute spirit. His objective spirit is meant to be nothing more than the intersubjective dimension of a specific community at a specific point in history. Yet the fact that Dilthey introduces and retains this Hegelian concept is of the greatest significance, for it represents the social and historical dimension of meaning. Unlike his neo-Kantian contemporaries, Dilthey appreciates fully that there is no ahistorical or asocial realm of meaning; an ahistorical and asocial being would never understand anyone, least of all itself.

It is a point of some importance to Dilthey that understanding arises directly from the context of practical life (207). Just to co-operate, people must understand one another; one must know what the other wants. Out of this context arise the most elementary forms of understanding. All the complex forms of understanding in the human sciences arise from these elementary forms; they are simply more complicated

forms constructed from the elementary ones (207). The understanding of life and action in the human sciences is therefore continuous with that in ordinary life, and it is only a more refined and systematic form of it. Dilthey stresses this point because it provides an empirical foundation for the human sciences: since they directly grow out of reflection on lived experience, they are based upon it. Such reflection is indeed constitutive of lived experience and not external to it.⁷¹ It is one of the great strengths of the human sciences, he thinks, that their fundamental concepts are exoteric, and that often the best insights will come from an ordinary person rather than the professional. Bismarck's reflections will teach us much more about politics, he says, than the average political scientist.⁷²

Dilthey attributes a specific form of analogical or inductive reasoning to the elementary forms of understanding. He is explicit that they are a form of inference or reasoning, and he attempts to find for them "a logical construction" (210, 212). Although he does not go into such detail, the reasoning he attributes to elementary understanding has the following structure: (1) There is a uniform connection between a specific kind of expression E and the mental state M that it expresses. (2) There is in this specific case C an expression of kind E. (3) Therefore, in case C, E is an expression of the mental state M. In the most elementary form of understanding we take some particular externalization—a sentence, an action or a gesture—and apply some more general law to it, so that we see it as an instance of that law. More complicated forms of understanding arise when we consider not only one particular externalization but many different kinds of externalization, and when we have to consider the changing circumstances and precise initial conditions under which the general law applies (211).

In addition to the elementary forms of understanding, Dilthey devotes special attention to what he regards as the highest form (213–16). He calls the highest form transposition (*Hineinversetzen*), reimagining (*Nachbilden*) and reliving (*Nacherleben*). This takes place, he explains, when we place externalizations in a context or whole, of which we have had direct experience ourselves. We understand someone else's experience all too well because we have had the same kind of experience. We place ourselves in their situation and attempt to relive what they have thought, felt or done. It is important to see that transposition does not mean reading my experience into someone else, but rather attempting to put myself in their shoes and situation. Dilthey admits that this is sometimes very difficult to achieve; and he gives as an example his own attempt, as a modern secular thinker, to understand Luther's religious experience (215–16). Despite the distance between our modern secular culture and the religious culture of early modern Europe, Dilthey still thinks that it is possible to relive Luther's religious experience. To do so is part of the reward of doing serious history, which demands that we learn about the context in which Luther lived and worked. Transposition does not mean reading the world of another in terms of my experience,

then, but extending my experience through imaginatively entering into the world of another.

Now that we have a rough idea of Dilthey's account of understanding, it is possible to correct the two most common misconceptions surrounding it. The first misconception is that understanding is an essentially immediate or intuitive awareness of the states of minds of other persons. Rather than involving concepts, judgments and reasoning, it is said to be the result of feeling, empathy and imagination. Since understanding involves primarily the use of imagination and intuition rather than concepts or reasoning, it has been regarded as a method more appropriate for the arts rather than the sciences. This interpretation of understanding has been a favorite among its positivist opponents, though it has by no means confined to them.⁷³ The second misconception, closely affiliated with the first, is that the doctrine of understanding claims that one person understands another only when he or she is able to recreate, relive or reimagine the experience of the other. On this interpretation, all understanding comes from the listener having the same kind of experience as the speaker, and from his recreating it in his mind after listening to the speaker. This interpretation has been especially popular in the Anglophone world, having been propagated by Collingwood.⁷⁴ It is essentially Collingwood's own theory of historical understanding read into Dilthey.

There is some evidence for the first interpretation. Dilthey himself would stress the affinity between understanding and the arts, and he famously held that artists gave the greatest insight into human nature. He also would sometimes write about how understanding requires imagination and intuition, and that it is a mysterious and puzzling matter that cannot be entirely reduced down to rules.⁷⁵ The problem with this interpretation, however, is that these points are stretched into an extreme doctrine that Dilthey never held. Never did he say, and often would he deny, that understanding is *entirely* a matter of intuition and imagination. We have already seen that the elementary forms of understanding involve concepts, judgments and reasoning. It is also important to recognize that Dilthey held understanding to be the result of careful methodological investigation, and he condemned the attempt to base it on intuition alone as "aesthetical mysticism" and "enthusiastic obscurity."⁷⁶ Although he held that imagination and sympathy are important aids to understanding, he never believed that they were by themselves sufficient to establish an interpretation. While he acknowledged that the interpreter often *begins* with some feeling or insight, he stressed that he

should never *end* with it. At the beginning of inquiry, the interpreter's intuition has a strictly provisional status; it takes the form of an hypothesis or conjecture, which he must test, correct or modify in the light of further evidence. Rather than relying on flashes of inspiration, the interpreter must follow a combined inductive and deductive procedure, whereby he formulates his ideas about the whole after carefully studying each of the parts, and whereby he reinterprets the parts in the light of his knowledge of the whole. This was Schleiermacher's famous "hermeneutical circle," which Dilthey would invoke time and again. He did not regard this circle as "an offense to logic," however, but as essential to all inquiry, whether in the natural or human sciences.

There is also some evidence for the second interpretation, though it too is not sustainable in its general form. It is indeed the case that Dilthey stressed the importance of reliving, reimagining and empathizing as elements of understanding. The concepts of transposition (*Hineinversetzen*), reimagining (*Nachbilden*) and reliving (*Nacherleben*) play an important role in all his later expositions of the concept. Furthermore, there are passages where Dilthey seems to say that understanding involves the interpreter actually reproducing and reliving the experience behind a speaker's or writer's words.⁷⁷ The more closely we examine his texts, however, the more we find that he never meant the doctrine in such a crude form. He did not see these acts as necessary conditions of *all* understanding. In his most careful and detailed exposition of the doctrine, he is explicit that they are elements of the *highest* understanding, but he does not include them in his account of the *elementary* accounts of understanding. These elementary acts are more intellectual, involving the application of concepts and general laws to particular words, actions and gestures. The higher acts of reimagining and reliving are the *products* of these more elementary acts, what results when they are put together and grasped as a whole.

The question remains, however, in what sense the method of understanding differs from that of the natural sciences. It is clear that the reasoning Dilthey attributes to the elementary forms of understanding does not differ in kind from that of the natural sciences. The same kind of inductive inference takes place in the natural sciences whenever they attempt to explain a specific phenomena. Here too we understand a particular phenomenon by placing it under a general law that we know holds for analogous phenomena. Dilthey himself notes the close affinity between the human and natural sciences regarding the use of induction.⁷⁸ He would indeed sometimes stress that understanding fell under the general concept of knowledge, and that it was like explanation in the natural sciences in attempting to subordinate the particular to the universal.⁷⁹ This should not be taken as a concession on his part, though, because Dilthey had always stressed, much more than the neo-Kantians, that the human sciences need to know general laws, uniformities between phenomena, no less than the natural sciences. But if this is so, one wonders what is the difference between the

method of understanding and that of the natural sciences. It would seem that the main difference has less to do with the structure of reasoning than with different goals of inquiry and different subject matters. The aim of understanding in the human sciences is to know a person's intentions and their mental life as a whole, whereas the goal of the natural sciences is to know the laws by which phenomena appear to the external senses. This means forfeiting, however, any methodological distinction, and falling back on the earlier distinction between inner and outer experience.

Dilthey was very eager, however, to uphold a methodological distinction. But to do so he resorted, in a remarkable much cited passage from a late fragment, to a desperate stratagem. After noting that the elementary forms of understanding are identical in structure with those of the natural sciences, he insisted that the higher forms are not forms of reasoning at all. Transposition, reliving and reimagining, he argued, are derived from the whole of our living powers, and as such they are not reducible to rules or formulae. They came from imagination, empathy and sympathy, which are activities characteristic of a living human being rather than a pure intelligence. Hence Dilthey concluded: "So in all understanding there is something irrational, just as life itself is such; it cannot be represented through any formula of logical activity" (218). But in drawing this conclusion Dilthey compromised the very heart of his position: that the methods of the human sciences embody a distinctive form of rationality. To save his faith in the *sui generis* status of understanding, Dilthey took a leap into the irrational, the chief sin of the *Lebensphilosophen*. Rather than saying that understanding is a distinct form of rationality, he declares that it is not a form of rationality at all. Such a position only fuelled the flames of his critics, who accused him of advancing an irrationalist *Lebensphilosophie*.⁸⁰

What is so unfortunate about this argument is that Dilthey need not have advanced it at all. It forgets or neglects another earlier line of reasoning that provides a much more promising and plausible account of the difference between the natural and human sciences. This argument appears in Dilthey's 1905 "Erste Studie zur Grundlegung der Geisteswissenschaften."⁸¹ The purport of this argument is that the main methodological difference lies in the *specific form* of the generalities employed in the human sciences. Although both the natural and human sciences both deal with universals and general concepts, there is a difference in the kinds of universals and concepts. While the concepts and universals of the natural sciences are *causal* laws, the concepts and universals of the human sciences are units of meaning, the content of representations. What is characteristic of the human sciences, Dilthey stressed, is that they attempt to analyze and reconstruct the structure, the patterns of meaning involved in mental life; they examine the relation of part to whole involved in the content of representations. This emphasis on the content of representations, rather than the act of representation

and its causes, is already apparent in Dilthey's earliest writings; but it received an added boost in the early 1900s after his reading of Husserl.⁸²

7. A philosophy of life

As early as the 1870s Dilthey began to organize his philosophy around the fundamental category of life (*das Leben*), and to conceive his philosophy as a *Lebensphilosophie*.⁸³ Several steps led inevitably in that direction. We have already seen how, in manuscripts from the 1870s, he was critical of the narrow intellectualist conception of the subject, and how he insisted that the subject be seen not simply as a thinking but also as a feeling and willing being. The general meaning he gave to the concept of experience, so that it comprised not only what I perceive but also what I desire or feel, made it necessary to see all aspects of experience as parts of a single living being. We have also seen how, in manuscripts dating back to the 1880s, he saw feeling and will as the fundamental facts of psychic life in the constitution of the external world. By the early 1900s Dilthey drew more general conclusions from these points and began to expound his philosophy in more explicit terms as a *Lebensphilosophie*. The fundamental proposition from which philosophy should begin now became for him not “I think” but “I live”. He reformulated Kant's principle of the unity of apperception—“the ‘I think’ must be able to accompany all my representations”—so that the purely intellectual or theoretical “I” became a full-blooded practical and acting “I”.⁸⁴ What unifies all my representations, what gives them a meaning for me, is not simply the fact that I can be self-conscious of them, but the fact that they all have some relation to my desires and feelings. There is nothing in my experience, he argues, that I see in a purely detached and intellectual way. Everything that I see is an object for my interests, because it promises to increase, or threatens to decrease, my activity.

Dilthey's conception of his work as *Lebensphilosophie* has proven to be one of the more troubling aspects of his legacy. The term *Lebensphilosophie* was already in wide use before Dilthey's time. It first meant any philosophy that rejects the value of contemplation, and that has a practical orientation, dealing especially with the meaning and conduct of life; but it later meant any philosophy that stresses the primacy, irrationality and irreducibility of life, and the subjugation of the intellect to the will. Among the *Lebensphilosophen* were Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, Tolstoy, Bergson, Carlyle. Although Dilthey accepted *Lebensphilosophie* in the former sense, he repudiated it in the latter sense. His choice of the term was therefore misleading, and for some scholars it was reason enough to regard his philosophy as a species of irrationalism, as kindred in spirit

to the philosophy of Nietzsche and Schopenhauer. One of the earliest, and most influential, critics in this regard was Rickert, who saw Dilthey as the father of modern *Lebensphilosophie*, as the leading apostle of irrationalism.⁸⁵ Another potent and vocal critic was Georg Lukács, whose opinion became the standard Marxist view. Lukács had no hesitation in placing Dilthey squarely within the tradition of Nietzsche and Schopenhauer, though he saw him more as a transmitter rather than founder.⁸⁶ Given the central role Dilthey gave to the concept of life, and the misunderstandings surrounding it, we do well to examine it in a little more detail.

Dilthey's conception of life is connected, both etymologically and essentially, to his idea of lived experience (*Erlebnis*). Life (*Leben*) is what someone experiences in the sense of lives through (*erlebt*). The centrality that Dilthey gave to the concept of life in his later philosophy reflects the primacy he gave to the concept of lived experience, which he eventually made the subject matter of all the human sciences. To say that these sciences have lived experience for their subject matter is also to say that their main interest is in life itself.

It is a basic, though easily overlooked, point that Dilthey means by life simply the life lived by human beings. He restricts the concept of life to the human world alone, and does not extend it beyond this sphere to designate something cosmic. The subject matter of his philosophy of life, he insists, is "life as lived by human beings" (*das von den Menschen belebte Leben*).⁸⁷ In the important fragment "Die Kategorien des Lebens" he makes this restriction explicit: "I use the expression 'life' in the human sciences in its limitation to the human world; it is definite in its meaning, and exposed to no misunderstanding, if it is used in this sphere." (VII, 228). In limiting the term to the human sphere Dilthey was only upholding his principle that philosophy cannot transcend the limits of possible experience.

Dilthey's insistence on the purely immanent meaning of life is one of the major differences between his conception of life and that of the idealist and romantic tradition, with which it has been all too readily conflated. Schelling, Schlegel, Hölderlin, Novalis and Hegel all understood life as a single cosmic force that manifests itself in all levels of organization in nature, and that eventually comes to self-awareness in social and historical life. Dilthey rejects that conception of life as illegitimate metaphysics.⁸⁸ We not only lack sufficient empirical evidence for such an hypothesis, he warns, but we also have reason to be skeptical about it, because it derives from projecting our own human purposes onto nature itself.⁸⁹ Dilthey's skepticism regarding the metaphysics of life again reveals his Kantian heritage; for here he took to heart Kant's strictures on teleological judgment in the third *Kritik*. For similar reasons, he also

was not willing to accept the essentialist and teleological conception of life, common to the idealist and romantic traditions, according to which life involves the realization of purposes inherent in the very idea or concept of a thing. We can talk about development in history, he argues, only insofar as we make sense of our lives in terms of the accomplishment of certain values and goals; but these goals and values are not inherent in individuals, nations or history itself.⁹⁰ If we think of some goal or end inherent in them, we go beyond the evidence of experience. So, for Dilthey, life involved no conception of teleology beyond the purposes of human agents themselves.

It is also important to see that Dilthey's conception of life is more social and historical than biological. He expressly defines life with respect to humanity as a whole: "Life is the totality of what we live through and understand as a whole comprising the human race." (VII, 131) The social dimension of life becomes even more explicit in another later manuscript.⁹¹ "Life," he writes, "consists in the interchange between life unities (*Lebenseinheiten*)," where these "life unities" are individual human beings. More formally, he defines life as "the whole of the *interchanges* taking place between people, conceived apart from changing times and places, under conditions of the external world." (VII, 228) Life is not simply what each individual, taken separately, lives through and understands; nor is it simply what they all live through and understand when added together. Rather, life represents the irreducible whole of human experience as it has developed throughout history. Dilthey is explicit that life cannot be understood purely individualistically, as if the basic unit of life, an individual person, were intelligible on its own. History is not the product of separate individuals coming together to achieve common ends, he contends, because it determines the very identities of these individuals:

It would be mistaken if one wanted to limit history to the cooperation of human beings working toward common ends. The singular person in his individual existence is an historical being. He is determined by his place in the line of time, by his place in space, by his position in the confluence of cultural systems and communities. (VII, 135)

There is a profound paradox to Dilthey's concept of life: on the one hand, it is immediately present, what is within our experience, whatever we live through as social and historical beings; on the other hand, it is beyond our reach, mysterious and forever unfathomable. Although Dilthey would often stress the strictly immanent meaning of life, so that it amounts to only what is within our experience, he also would often argue that life is inherently incomprehensible. There are many passages where he would explicitly affirm "the irrational" dimension of life, and insist that, in its essence and individuality, it is ineffable and inexplicable.⁹² Hence life seemed to have not only an immanent but also a transcendent dimension. As the condition under which all experience takes place, it cannot be part of experience itself. Ironically,

Dilthey seems to restore the transcendental realm of the neo-Kantians, though now on a vitalistic rather than rational plane. Sometimes, in a manner reminiscent of Kant's Paralogisms, he would argue that any attempt to understand life fails because it would be circular, presupposing the very life it would understand. Since life is the basis under which we understand everything, it cannot be understood itself. Like the "I" of Kant's unity of apperception, life is the precondition for all thinking, and so cannot be an object of thinking itself. "The understanding cannot get behind life, whose function it is."⁹³ It was lines like these that seemed to support his critics' charge of irrationalism.

Dilthey's insistence on the incomprehensibility of life has to be balanced, however, by the importance he gives to the category of expression. Expression, which was one of the three fundamental categories of life, means that life embodies and reveals itself in specific activities and objects in the sensible world.⁹⁴ There is not simply a *causal* connection between the activity of life and its actions in the sensible world, such that the cause and effect are logically distinguishable events, one of which could occur without the other. Rather, there is an *essential* connection between them because one simply makes determinate, explicit and organized what is indeterminate, implicit and inchoate in the other. It was in virtue of the expressions of life that one person could understand another and that all the human sciences were possible at all. Balancing the Kantian strands of Dilthey's thinking, which placed life beyond experience, there were the Hegelian strands, which brought life right back into the realm of appearances.

Can we reconcile these strands of Dilthey's thinking? How can life have both a transcendental and immanent dimension? How can it both transcend appearances and reveal itself in them? We can combine all these themes provided that we keep in mind that what is ineffable and inexplicable is the *whole* and *unity* of life itself. Dilthey's general position is that, though we can understand much of life from its many partial expressions or manifestations, we still cannot comprehend it as a whole and in its unity. The idea of a complete understanding of life, where we understand it as a whole and in its unity, is for him, as any good Kantian, a regulative ideal that we can approach but never attain. Rather than championing irrationalism, then, Dilthey is only reaffirming an old Kantian theme: that the human intellect is discursive and analytical, because it has to begin from the parts and only gradually and fallibly reconstructs the whole; the divine intellect alone is intuitive and synthetic, having the power to begin from the idea of the whole and to explain all of its parts.

To assess Dilthey's *Lebensphilosophie* it is of the first importance to note his own reaction to the *Lebensphilosophie* of his day. Dilthey's critical attitude toward this *Lebensphilosophie* makes it clear that his philosophy cannot be simply lumped together with it. In a late lecture fragment, his 1898 "Die Kultur der Gegenwart und die Philosophie,"⁹⁵ he admonished his students about the growing influence and seductions of modern *Lebensphilosophie*. He referred explicitly to the philosophy of

Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, but he also mentioned Carlyle, Wagner, Tolstoy and Maeterlinck. He conceded the great strength and appeal of this philosophy: it addressed issues that came directly from life, and it attempted to provide general answers to them in an appealing artistic style. But anyone who squandered his university years reading these authors, he warned, would suffer from “a philosophical hangover.” The chief error of the *Lebensphilosophen* is that they spoke directly from their personal experience, following their own intuitions and feelings, as if they would give an infallible and absolute rule for life. They wanted to give absolute and unconditional answers, just like the old metaphysics. But in doing so they suffered from the same failings as that metaphysics: they failed to recognize the limitations of their own historical horizons, the extent to which their personal perspective was determined and directed by history.

The *Lebensphilosophen* had failed to learn the main lesson of modern history: that what appears eternal and unconditional from our present perspective is often only the product of a specific culture and epoch. This mistake is especially apparent, Dilthey believed, in Nietzsche, who thinks that we know our inner selves through introspection, by abstracting from the realms of society and history.

In vain did Nietzsche seek in lonely self-reflection his original nature, his a-historical essence. He peeled away one layer of skin after another. And what remained? Only something historically conditioned: the traits of the *Machtmenschen* of the Renaissance. What man is he knows only from his history.⁹⁶

It is surely significant that Dilthey criticized the *Lebensphilosophen* for their reliance upon intuition and introspection to make their claims to knowledge. They had rightly rejected the scholastic methodology of the metaphysical tradition, and the mechanical explanation of life characteristic of the natural sciences; but they had put nothing in their place to provide for a scientific knowledge of life. The *Lebensphilosophen* therefore fell into the dilemma of either positivism or irrationalism, mechanism or no explanation at all. Dilthey saw his own hermeneutics as a different kind of scientific methodology that would escape the horns of this dilemma. It is chiefly for this reason that it is misleading to place him in the irrationalist tradition of *Lebensphilosophie*.⁹⁷

8. The problem of relativism

One of the most controversial questions surrounding Dilthey's thought is its apparent relativism. “Relativism” here usually means, at the very least, the doctrine that there are no universal *values* in religion, morality and politics; but it is also sometimes extended to the more extreme doctrine that there are no universal *truths* in philosophy and the human sciences. Whether Dilthey was a relativist, in either or both senses, has

been a matter of dispute. For some scholars, Dilthey is the paradigmatic relativist (in either or both senses).⁹⁸ It has even been said that Dilthey not only expounded but even celebrated relativism.⁹⁹ For other scholars, however, it is a complete misconstrual of Dilthey's intentions and doctrines to attribute relativism to him.¹⁰⁰ Rather than championing relativism, Dilthey's chief aim, in their view, was to refute it. Supposedly, the fundamental goal of his critique of historical reason was to uphold the claims to universal validity in the human sciences in the face of the relativist threat of historicism.

The question of Dilthey's relativism admits different interpretations. If it is taken in a purely historical sense—i.e., “Did Dilthey as a matter of fact affirm relativism?”—then it is easily answered in the negative. For Dilthey never explicitly expounded or defended relativism; indeed, he bristled at the very suggestion that he supported it. When Husserl insinuated that Dilthey's historicism led to skepticism and relativism,¹⁰¹ Dilthey responded with disbelief how he could ever be associated with such a view.¹⁰² It had been his life's work, he protested, to explain the possibility of universal truth in the human sciences. Dilthey's theory of worldviews, which is often taken as his surrender to relativism, is misinterpreted if it is taken to be relativist in intention or meaning. Throughout his 1907 *Das Wesen der Philosophie*, his chief exposition of this theory, he always stressed how each worldview makes a claim to universal validity.¹⁰³ A worldview is not something purely personal, still less something cultural, but an interpretation of the meaning of life that claims to be valid for everyone alike (375). The point of the doctrine was indeed not to support but to rebut all relativism (406).

If, however, the question is construed in a purely logical sense—“Do Dilthey's fundamental principles imply relativism?”—the answer becomes more complicated. There are good reasons to think that, even though Dilthey did not himself affirm relativism, some of his central doctrines lead to it. He had argued that all thinking is a function of life, and that it is directed by our needs; but if needs change and differ according to circumstances, what room is left for an objective concept of truth? Dilthey also taught that philosophy is part of the system of ends of a specific culture, so that there should be as many philosophies as there are cultures. Finally, he had criticized Kant's “static and frozen” *a priori*, insisting that all principles, even the most basic ones,

are the product of lived experience and history. But then, given all the variations of history, does this not mean that there are no invariant universal principles?

Given the apparent relativistic implications of these doctrines, the crucial question is how Dilthey responded to them. That there is a danger of relativism to them was fully appreciated by Dilthey himself. In the last decade of his life, he would devote increasing attention to the problem of relativism and propose various solutions to it. The verdict of many scholars is that he failed to resolve it;¹⁰⁴ but whether this is so we can determine only from a close examination of his texts.

One of Dilthey's most concerted attempts to tackle the problem of relativism appears in the undated series of manuscripts entitled "Das geschichtliche Bewusstsein und die Weltanschauungen."¹⁰⁵ He begins by formulating the problem in terms of an "antinomy" between "historical consciousness" and "the claim to universal validity" (6). On the one hand, historical consciousness shows that the variability of human existence gives rise to variability in ways of thinking; it reveals that changes in culture brings corresponding changes in philosophy, religion and morality. On the other hand, however, each philosophy, morality and religion makes a claim to universal validity; it claims to be true not only for a specific culture and epoch but for all cultures and epochs. The problem is then how a philosophy's claim to universal validity can be reconciled with the limited historical conditions of its genesis. As Dilthey puts it: "What is conditioned in its historical relations should also be relative in its value or validity (*Wert*)."¹⁰⁶ (6) It appears we are bound to the depressing verdict: "World history as world judgment shows each metaphysical system to be relative, transitory, perishable."¹⁰⁶

How is it possible to escape this antinomy? Dilthey first proposes a comparative approach whereby we find the constants in all the changes of philosophy, religion and morality, and then show how each basic form of philosophy, religion and morality expresses life with respect to its specific conditions and concrete circumstances (8). Each basic form is true because it is a valid response of life to its specific conditions. The contradiction between these basic forms arises, he argues, only because of hypostasis (*Verselbständigung*), i.e., only because one form makes a claim to validity that transcends its specific conditions. It disappears, however, as soon as we see the main forms as different responses of life to different conditions. We should then see each basic form as true because it sees one side of the universe; it is one perspective upon it; but each is one-sided and has to be supplemented by others to get the whole truth.¹⁰⁷ We cannot, however, see the whole truth in which all these forms are reconciled, because we always know the truth from some partial perspective.

It is noteworthy that Dilthey's express strategy here, and in other manuscripts,¹⁰⁸ is to resolve the problem of relativism within the realm of history itself. If history causes the wound, he says, so it will heal it.¹⁰⁹ Rather than attempting to step outside history by appeal to some transcendental viewpoint, he advocates looking at the development of different worldviews in history and showing how they arise from different circumstances. He took this strategy not least because he believed the neo-Kantian transcendental strategy had failed. Windelband and Rickert had argued that no solution to the problem of relativism is possible within history, and that to avoid it we must get outside it and ascend to a transcendental viewpoint. They held that Dilthey, in arguing that whatever is conditioned in its historical origins is also relative in its validity, had committed a gross *non sequitur*, given that the validity of a worldview is independent of its origins. For Dilthey, however, the transcendental turn could not really resolve the problem of relativism. While he was happy to accept a distinction in principle between questions of origins and validity, he realized that this alone hardly cures the problem of relativism. The stubborn facts remain: that contradictory worldviews claim universal validity. Historicism could at least explain the origin of this contradiction by showing how contradictory worldviews arose from different cultural and historical conditions; the transcendental philosopher had to accept the contradiction as a given.

It is questionable, however, whether Dilthey's own historical strategy works. His resolution of the antinomy works only by forfeiting the claim to universal validity. Dilthey simply relativizes the validity of each worldview to its specific circumstances, showing it to be a valid response to life *under these conditions*. When he rejects the hypostasis of a worldview he intends to criticize the metaphysical tradition; but the critique goes too far, because it also applies to any claim to universal validity. The core of absolute truth throughout all these changes is meant to be the concept of life; but that concept is too general and abstract when it is separated from all specific circumstances; and it is difficult to see how it is really one and the same when connected with and embodied in such different circumstances. In any case, Dilthey's claim that all different worldviews are functions of a single enduring life would be small consolation for the philosopher who still clings to the claim of universal validity for his specific worldview.¹¹⁰

Dilthey discusses the problem of relativism from a different angle in his 1910 *Aufbau der geschichtlichen Welt in den Geisteswissenschaften*.¹¹¹ As he now formulates the problem, it arises not only for worldviews—the philosophies, religions and moralities of history—but also for the human sciences themselves. This by itself shows that he

realizes distinguishing between discourse about worldviews and worldviews themselves does not avoid the problem of relativism.¹¹² There is a conflict, as Dilthey now puts it, between the scientific goal of the human sciences and their application to contemporary events (137–8). The human sciences all aspire toward the ideal of universal and objective validity; but they also attempt to influence the direction of events, to intervene in the social and political affairs of their age. Historians, economists and politicians all want to make a difference to their age; and so they pass judgments on events, personalities and mass movements. But all such judgments are inevitably conditioned and limited in their validity to a specific time and place.

What is the solution to this dilemma? Dilthey first sketches a vague metaphoric solution: that though each culture has its center within itself, all cultures are structurally related to a whole in which each plays a necessary role (138). They are, as it were, circles within a wider circle. Although he does not elaborate, he was in effect saying that there is an Archimedean standpoint after all: the perspective of world history itself. We avoid the problem of relativism if we show how each culture plays a necessary role in world history. In the subsequent sections of *Aufbau* Dilthey proceeds to argue for the possibility of a philosophy of history. The task of the historian, he now writes, is to place values and goals in their broader contexts: to see them as epochs in world history (155). It was Hegel's great merit to attempt to find a logic to express the dynamics of social–historical life; but it was his great mistake to do so by breaking the law of contradiction. It is an error common to positivists and Hegelians alike, Dilthey argues, to think that all systematic thought about history has to be dialectical, i.e., it has to violate the law of contradiction. The task of a future philosophy of history will be to show how, without violating the laws of contradiction, there is still system and order in history. Dilthey now invokes the idea of “the meaning of history,” which will be those common patterns and structures behind world history (172, 185). Behind each epoch and culture, he now says, there lies a characteristic idea, its specific law of development (164, 185). The meaning of history, he implies, will be that idea behind world history as a whole.

For any careful student of Dilthey's philosophical development, his proposed solution to the problem of relativism in the *Aufbau* is nothing less than astonishing. For it is in blatant conflict with another cardinal theme of Dilthey's earlier thought: his firm rejection of philosophy of history. In the *Einleitung in die Geisteswissenschaften* he had argued vigorously against the very possibility of a philosophy of history.¹¹³ The attempt to find meaning in world history, he claimed, is as extravagant as the dreams of the alchemists (92). Just as there is no gold to be hidden in base metals, so there is no secret final formula for history. Flatly contrary to his later proposal, Dilthey bluntly dismissed the very idea that there could be a system behind history. In some passages he seemed to hold out hope at least for the possibility of world history; there is no problem with it

in principle, he implies at one point, because it is simply that the particular sciences have not progressed far enough to find some broader pattern or to confirm some greater generalization (94–5). But this passage is outweighed by other more forceful passages that undermine any possibility at all. Hence Dilthey declares that the general concepts of world history are nothing but one-sided and partial abstractions from the totality of life (96), that there is no sense in looking for the whole of history because all we can ever know about it comes from the analysis of its parts (94), and that philosophy of history has its source in religion, a motivation no longer suitable to the modern age (100). Amid this withering polemic there lies an objection whose implications completely undermine his later solution to the problem of relativism. Dilthey objects that all philosophy of history, while it pretends to be a universal perspective, is really only the illegitimately generalized standpoint of its own age (97). Nothing in Dilthey's later proposals offers a satisfactory response to this objection.

Since there is an irreconcilable contradiction between Dilthey's later hopes for the philosophy of history and his earlier more skeptical attitude, it is natural to interpret this as the result of a progression in his philosophical development. Interpretative charity demands that we see Dilthey's later hopes as a more mature standpoint that supersedes his earlier attitude. But there are two problems with this line of interpretation. First, the later hopes hardly amount to progress at all, given that they are still vulnerable to earlier objections. Second, they also conflict with other later doctrines. For in *Plan der Fortsetzung*, some later manuscripts that were to continue the *Aufbau*,¹¹⁴ Dilthey develops themes that undermine the philosophy of history entirely and fit hand-in-glove with his earlier skepticism. Hence he argues that all concepts of development in world history amount to a transcendent metaphysics, and that we can talk about a goal, meaning or sense of life only *within* the context of a particular experience, whereas to ask about the meaning or purpose of the experience itself illegitimately transcends its boundaries (232, 234).

Given the difficulties of Dilthey's proposals, it is necessary to agree with those who hold that he has no solution to the problem of relativism. On the whole, he remained true to his strategy of trying to solve the problem according to the historical standpoint;¹¹⁵ but the price of following that strategy to the end was a terrible dilemma: either abandoning the claim to universality or violating his own earlier strictures against the philosophy of history. Dilthey was right to see through the weaknesses of the Kantian transcendental turn; but his own historical standpoint did not provide a remedy either.

The shortcomings of his own position did not escape him. In his famous 1903 seventieth birthday address, he virtually admitted that he had not solved the problem,

and he imposed it as a task for the new generation. He wrote in a melancholy assessment of his whole career:

I undertook an investigation into the nature and conditions of historical consciousness—a critique of historical reason. In pursuing this task I ran into the most general of problems: an irresolvable contradiction arose when one follows historical consciousness to its final consequences. The final word of the historical worldview is the finitude of every historical phenomena—whether it is a religion, an ideal or a philosophical system—and hence the relativity of every kind of human view of the whole of things. On the other hand, there arises the need for universally valid cognition in thinking, and in the striving of philosophy. The historical worldview has been the liberator of the human mind from the last chains not broken by the natural sciences and philosophy. But where are the means of overcoming this anarchy of convictions that threatens to break in upon us? I have worked all my life on the resolution of the problems which connect with this one in a long chain. I see the goal. If I fall by the wayside, I hope that all my younger colleagues, my students, will follow it to the end.¹¹⁶

Notes:

(1) “Die dichterische und philosophische Bewegung in Deutschland 1770–1800,” in *Gesammelte Schriften*, eds. Karlfried Gründer and Frithjof Rodi (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1961f), V, 12–27. (Henceforth all references to this work will be designated GS).

(2) Wilhelm Dilthey, *Einleitung in die Geisteswissenschaften. Versuch einer Grundlegung für das Studium der Gesellschaft und der Geschichte*. (Leipzig: Duncker & Humblot, 1883). This work appears in volume I of GS, the edition cited in parentheses above.

(3) See also the statements in GS V, 9, 10–11, and VII, 191, 278.

(4) The critique of historical reason has been the guiding theme for several valuable studies. See Rudolf Makkreel, *Dilthey: Philosopher of the Human Studies* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975); Michael Ermath, *Wilhelm Dilthey: The Critique of Historical Reason* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978); Hans-Ulrich Lessing, *Die Idee einer Kritik der historischen Vernunft: Wilhelm Diltheys Grundlegung der Geisteswissenschaften* (Freiburg: Alber, 1984); Hans Ineichen, *Erkenntnistheorie und Geschichtlich-Gesellschaftliche Welt: Diltheys Logik der Geisteswissenschaften* (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1975); and Peter Krausser, *Kritik der endlichen Vernunft: Wilhelm Diltheys Revolution der allgemeinen Wissenschafts- und Handlungstheorie* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1968). In his *Historical Understanding in the Thought of Dilthey* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980), pp. 14–18, Theodore Plantinga argues that this entire approach is based on the misconception that Dilthey was “primarily an epistemologist of historical knowledge.” He rejects this interpretation for several reasons: (1) it is too narrow because Dilthey was also an aesthete and historian; (2) the unity of his thought is better understood under the rubric of the philosophy of life rather than epistemology; and (3) the theme of the critique of historical reason places too much stress on Dilthey's affinity with Kant. While Plantinga is perhaps correct that this approach is too narrow to understand Dilthey's thought as a whole, it still remains valid for the interpretation of his philosophy. And, provided it is properly explained, there is no reason to think that the critique of historical reason theme forces Dilthey into a Kantian straitjacket. Ultimately, the rationale for this interpretation is that Dilthey himself, in the first two passages cited at the beginning of this note, characterizes his own life's work in these terms. Dilthey's Kantian roots and differences with Kant are best served by structuring his philosophy around this theme.

(5) See chapter 7, section 1.

(6) Nietzsche's project for an “historical philosophy” does not emerge until *Menschliches, Allzumenschliches* (Chemnitz: Schmeitzner, 1878). The roots of Dilthey's project go back to the 1860s.

(7) See *Einleitung in die Geisteswissenschaften*, GS I, 92.

(8) In an early untitled fragment, GS XVIII, 1.

(9) *System der induktiven und deduktiven Logik, aus dem Englischen von J. Schiel* (Braunschweig: Vieweg, 1862–63). On the use of the term “*Geisteswissenschaften*” before Dilthey, see Erich Rothacker, *Logik und Systematik der Geisteswissenschaften* (Bonn: Bouvier, 1948), pp. 5–17. According to A. Diemer, however, there are several uses of the term before Schiele's translation of Mill. See his article “*Geisteswissenschaften*” in *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, ed. Joachim Ritter (Basel: Schwabe & Co., 1974), III, 211–15.

(10) Mill, *A System of Logic*, Book vi, chapter 1, §1, in *Collected Works* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1965–81), VIII, 833–4.

(11) See below, chapter 9, section 4.

(12) GS V, 242–58.

(13) GS VII, 70–5. The first and second drafts, which differ significantly from the third and each other, are in GS VII, 304–10, 310–17.

(14) The concept of *Erlebnis* is implicit in some of Dilthey's earliest manuscripts. See, for example, "Frühe Entwürfe zur Erkenntnistheorie," GS XIX, 17–25, where Dilthey criticizes the narrow intellectualist concept of experience of the empiricist and Kantian traditions. It was only in his later work, however, that Dilthey explicitly gave this concept a central role in distinguishing the human from natural sciences.

(15) See *Ideen über eine Beschreibende und Zergliedernde Psychologie* GS V, 215–16.

(16) GS VII, 229.

(17) *Ibid.*, VII, 72.

(18) GW V, 193.

(19) On the origins and development of the project, see Krausser, *Kritik der endlichen Vernunft*, pp. 35–6, and Lessing, *Idee*, pp. 35–102.

(20) See Dilthey's references to Brentano in GS XVIII, 139, 148–9, and GS XIX, 105, 113, 285, 416–17, and GS V, 55. On Dilthey's complex relationship to Brentano, see Helmut Johach's and Frithjof Rodi's "Vorbericht" to GS XIX, pp. xxiii, xxxiv, and their "Vorbericht" to GS XVIII, xi, xxvii–xxviii. See also Ermath, *Dilthey*, pp. 174, 369n21.

(21) GS V, 139–240. All numbers in parentheses refer to this text.

(22) Indeed, in the drafts for "Über das Studium des Menschen und der Geschichte," which date back to the 1860s, Dilthey complained that recent psychology could not explain mental content. See GS XVIII, 5, 6.

(23) GS VII, 139.

(24) See especially the "Viertes Buch" to "Ausarbeitungen zum Zweiten Band der Einleitung in die Geisteswissenschaften" GS XIX, 58–227.

(25) See, for example, *Einleitung in die Geisteswissenschaften*, GS I, 28–9, 36.

(26) "Beiträge zur Lösung der Frage vom Ursprung unseres Glaubens an die Realität der Aussenwelt und seinem Recht," GS V, 90.

(27) GS VIII 186.

(28) See, for example, V, 197–8.

(29) See Franz Brentano, *Psychologie vom empirischen Standpunkt*, ed. Oskar Kraus (Hamburg: Meiner, 1955), I, 14–15.

(30) See, for example, Ermath, *Dilthey*, pp. 209–16, 232–9; Plantinga, *Historical Understanding in the Thought of Dilthey*, pp. 50–1, 55, 63; Bernhard Groethuysen, "Vorbericht des Herausgebers," GS VII, pp. vi–ix.; and Howard Tuttle, *Wilhelm Dilthey: Philosophy of Historical Understanding* (London: Brill, 1969), pp. 21–2.

(31) Makkreel, *Dilthey*, pp. 294–9; and Charles Bambach, *Heidegger, Dilthey and the Crisis of Historicism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), pp. 127–85.

(32) As cited in Ermath, *Dilthey*, p. 209.

(33) Hermann Ebbinghaus, "Über erklärende und beschreibende Psychologie," *Zeitschrift für Psychologie und Physiologie der Sinnesorgane* IX (1896), 161–205.

(34) See, for example, GS V, 362; and GS VII, 10.

(35) GS VII, 14n.

(36) See Dilthey's argument in the "Erste Studie" of *Studien zur Grundlegung der Geisteswissenschaften*, GS VII, 11–12.

(37) Plantinga, *Historical Understanding*, p. 47; Tuttle, *Philosophy*, pp. 23–4, 25.

(38) GS XIX, 204–11. Even here, however, Dilthey questions the reliability of self-observation.

(39) See, for example, the "Erkenntnistheoretische Fragmente," GS XVIII, 188; and "Frühe Entwürfe zur Erkenntnistheorie und Logik der Geisteswissenschaften," GS XIX, 27, 30.

(40) Dilthey deals with the concept in his 1865/66 "Frühe Pläne und Entwürfe," GS XVIII, 5.

(41) Here I take issue with Bambach, *Crisis*, pp. 127–85; and Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode, Gesammelte Werke* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1990), pp. 240–3.

(42) On Lotze's critique of epistemology, see his *Metaphysik* (Leipzig: Weidmann, 1841), §58, pp. 279–80, and his *System der Philosophie: Drei Bücher der Metaphysik* (Leipzig: Hirzel, 1879), II, 15–17. On Trendelenburg's critique of foundationalism, see his *Logische Untersuchungen* (Leipzig: Hirzel, 1862), I, 4–14.

(43) See "Frühe Entwürfe zur Erkenntnistheorie und Logik der Geisteswissenschaften," GS XIX, 1–57. The critique of foundationalism appears throughout this text.

(44) GS V, 180.

(45) "Über das Studium der Geschichte der Wissenschaften vom Menschen, der Gesellschaft und dem Staat," GS V, 42–3. The knife metaphor came from Lotze, *System der Philosophie*, II, 15.

(46) See the preface to *Einleitung in die Geisteswissenschaften*, GS I, xv.

(47) He sketches the rudiments of his view in "Frühe Entwürfe zur erkenntnistheorie und Logik der Geisteswissenschaften," GS XIX, 19–20; he gave it a more formal exposition in the *Breslauer Ausarbeitungen* GS XIX, 174–95.

(48) GS V, 90–138.

(49) See "Frühe Pläne und Entwürfe," GS XVIII, 1–16.

(50) *Ibid.*, XVIII, 3.

(51) On *Völkerpsychologie*, see below, chapter 12, section 2.

(52) *Ibid.*, XVIII, 5. Cf. XVIII, 20.

(53) See "Einleitungen zu Untersuchungen über die Geschichte des Naturrechts," GS XVIII, 38–56.

(54) See "Fortsetzungen der Abhandlung von 1875," GS XVIII, 70–2.

(55) See "Einleitungen zu Untersuchungen über die Geschichte des Naturrechts," GS XVIII, 49.

(56) See "Fortsetzungen der Abhandlung von 1875," GS XVIII, 70.

(57) "Erkenntnistheoretische Fragmente," GS XVIII, 186. This fragment falsifies Gadamer's view, *Wahrheit und Methode*, p. 226, that Dilthey is not concerned with the problem of knowledge of the external world.

(58) *Ibid*, 187.

(59) "Frühe Entwürfe zur Erkenntnistheorie und Logik der Geisteswissenschaften," GS XIX, 1–57.

(60) *Ibid*, 19–21.

(61) See *Beiträge zum Studium der Individualität*, GS V, 249–50; and *Beiträge zur Lösung der Frage vom Ursprung unseres Glaubens an die Realität der Aussenwelt*, GS V, 110.

(62) The German word "*Verstehen*" is often kept in English secondary literature, though it is simply and accurately translatable by the English word "understanding". I have some sympathy for H.P. Rickman's view that retaining the German word fosters the impression that "we are dealing with a somewhat strange and mysterious concept rooted in uniquely Germanic ways of thinking." See his *Wilhelm Dilthey* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), pp. 74–5. However, because the German word is so established in scholarship, I have decided to adopt it. I use the German and the English words interchangeably.

(63) For the positivist critique of the concept of *Verstehen*, see Carl Hempel "The Function of General Laws in History," in *The Philosophy of History*, ed. Patrick Gardiner (Oxford: OUP, 1974), pp. 352–3; Theodore Abel, "The Operation called *Verstehen*," *The American Journal of Sociology* 54 (1948), 211–18; and Otto Neurath, "Sociology and Physicalism," in *Logical Positivism*, ed. A.J. Ayer (New York: Free Press, 1959), pp. 295, 298. See also Edgar Zilsel, "Physics and the Problem of Historico-Sociological Laws," in *Readings in the Philosophy of Science* eds. H. Feigl and M. Brodbeck (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1953), p. 721. Although Popper distanced himself from the positivists, he shares with them a similar account of *Verstehen*. See *The Poverty of Historicism* (London: Routledge, Kegan & Paul, 1957), p. 138. Similar objections to the method appear in the work of Ernest Nagel, who was a sympathizer with positivism. See his *The Structure of Science* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1961), pp. 480–5.

(64) Ermath, *Dilthey*, p. 242.

(65) See GS V, 318. Cf. V, 332; VII, 82, 309.

(66) See "Das hermeneutische System Schleiermachers in der Auseinandersetzung mit der älteren protestantischen Hermeneutik," GS XIV/2, 597–787.

(67) GS XIX, 277.

(68) GS V, 333.

(69) See especially "Das Verstehen anderer Personen und ihrer Lebensäußerungen," GS VII, 205–27.

(70) GS VII, 150–2.

(71) GS VII 139–40.

(72) *Ibid*, VII, 136.

(73) For positivist objections on these grounds, see the sources cited in note 61 above. For similar objections of non-positivists, see Alfred Schütz, *The Phenomenology of the Social World* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1967), p. 240; Gerhard Masur, *Prophets of Yesterday: Studies in European Culture 1890–1914* (New York: Macmillan, 1961), p. 166; and Georg Lukács, *Die Zerstörung der Vernunft* (Neuwied: Luchterhand, 1962), pp. 371–3.

(74) Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, Revised edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 172.

(75) GS V, 277; GS VII, 218.

(76) GS XIV/2, 650–8.

(77) GS VII, 214.

(78) GS VII, 220.

(79) GS VII, 332.

(80) Hence Lukács would cite just these lines to demonstrate Dilthey's irrationalism. See *Zerstörung der Vernunft*, p. 371.

(81) GS VII, 16, 26, 44.

(82) On Dilthey's later encounter with Husserl and its importance for his late methodological views, see Ermath, *Dilthey*, pp. 197–225.

(83) Already in the *Frühe Entwürfe zur Erkenntnistheorie*, which were written before the 1880s, Dilthey describes his position as *Philosophie des Lebens*. See GS XIX, 39, 41.

(84) See *Der Aufbau der geschichtlichen Welt in den Geisteswissenschaften*, GS VII, 131.

(85) See his *Philosophie des Lebens* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1920), pp. 27–8, 46–50.

(86) Lukács, *Die Zerstörung der Vernunft*, pp. 363–86.

(87) GS VIII, 78, 121.

(88) See *Einleitung in die Geisteswissenschaften*, GS I, 41; and “Entwürfe zur Kritik der historischen Vernunft,” GS VII, 197.

(89) See GS VII, 8.

(90) See GS VII, 232, 234.

(91) “Die Kategorien des Lebens,” VII, 228–45.

(92) See, for example, GS V, 271, 273, 310–15; VIII, 17; and XVIII, 68–9, 197.

(93) GS VIII, 22, 184.

(94) GS VII, 205–7.

(95) GS VIII, 194–203. See also GS VIII, 162–4.

(96) See the late fragment “Traum,” GS VIII, 224. Cf. GS VII, 250. Dilthey is referring to the early Nietzsche of the *Unzeitgemäße Betrachtungen*.

(97) For a similar viewpoint, see Ermath, *Dilthey*, p. 350.

(98) See, for example, Lukács, *Zerstörung der Vernunft*, p. 380; Wallace Ferguson, *Renaissance in Historical Thought* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1948), p. 217; William Kluback, *Wilhelm Dilthey's Philosophy of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1956), p. 106; and Gerhard Masur, “Wilhelm Dilthey and the History of Ideas,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* XIII (1952), 93–107, esp. 106.

(⁹⁹) Masur, *Prophets of Yesterday*, p. 167; Rickman, *Dilthey*, p. 48; and H.A. Hodges, *Wilhelm Dilthey: An Introduction* (New York: Fertig, 1969), p. 33.

(¹⁰⁰) See Ermath, *Dilthey*, pp. 334–8; Theodore Plantinga, *Historical Understanding*, pp. 122–148; Otto Friedrich Bollnow, *Dilthey. Eine Einführung in seine Philosophie* (Leipzig: Teubner, 1936), pp. 195–7; and Georg Misch, “Vorbericht des Herausgebers,” in GS V, cx–cxvii.

(¹⁰¹) Husserl, “Philosophie als strenge Wissenschaft,” *Logos* I (1911), 323.

(¹⁰²) See Dilthey to Husserl, June 29, 1911, in “Der Briefwechsel Dilthey-Husserl,” *Man and World* 1 (1968), p. 434.

(¹⁰³) GS V, 339–416.

(¹⁰⁴) See, for example, Iggers, *German Conception*, pp. 133–44; Bambach, *Crisis*, pp. 169–85; Hughes, *Consciousness and Society*, p. 199; and Franco Bianco, “Dilthey and das Problem des Relativismus,” in *Dilthey und die Philosophie des Gegenwart*, ed. Ernst Orth (Freiburg: Alber, 1985), pp. 211–29.

(¹⁰⁵) GS VIII, 3–71. Of special relevance are the first three sections, VIII, 3–42.

(¹⁰⁶) *Ibid*, VIII, 12.

(¹⁰⁷) *Ibid*, VIII, 8, 12, 222.

(¹⁰⁸) See “Traum,” GS VIII, 222; and “Der moderne Mensch und der Streit der Weltanschauungen,” GS VIII, 232.

(¹⁰⁹) *Ibid*, VIII, 10, 12, 222.

(¹¹⁰) There is another problem with this argument, pointed out by Bianco in his “Dilthey und das Problem des Relativismus,” p. 221. Namely, that Dilthey later argues that there cannot be a single coherent system that would unify all the contradictory oppositions of life. See GS VIII, 147.

(¹¹¹) See GS VII, 79–188.

(¹¹²) *Pace* Bambach, *Crisis*, p. 174; and Bianco, “Dilthey,” p. 223.

(¹¹³) GS I, 86–104.

(¹¹⁴) GS VII, 191–291.

(¹¹⁵) There were a few vacillations, however, where he seemed to concede to the neo-Kantians that these issues would have to be pursued by transcendental philosophy. See, for example, GS VII, 173 and V, 362.

(¹¹⁶) GS V, 9.

Wilhelm Windelband and the Forces of History

1. Historicism and neo-Kantianism

The 1880s begin an important new phase in the history of historicism. The movement to make history a science now intersects with, and becomes indistinguishable from, another powerful intellectual current of the late nineteenth century: neo-Kantianism. Henceforth discussion about the foundations of history will be conducted in essentially Kantian terms. The convergence of historicism with neo-Kantianism first proposed by Dilthey in 1867 will now become the dominant reality.

Two crucial writings appear in the 1883 that clearly mark this new direction in neo-Kantianism: Wilhelm Dilthey's *Einleitung in die Geisteswissenschaften* and Wilhelm Windelband's "Kritische oder genetische Methode?" Although these writings are in some respects antithetical—Windelband's article even makes an implicit critique of Dilthey's book—it is their affinities that are so striking from a broad historical perspective. Both writings examine the method and scientific status of history, and both discuss it using the conceptual machinery of Kant's philosophy. Though Dilthey and Windelband would continue to quarrel with one another throughout the 1880s and 1890s, they were still, broadly speaking, neo-Kantian philosophers whose intellectual roots and values were firmly in the Kantian tradition. This neo-Kantian epistemological direction persists until the end of historicism in the early twentieth century. Rickert, Lask, Simmel and Weber, the main historicists of the early twentieth century, continue to discuss the scientific status of history in essentially neo-Kantian terms.

From one perspective, the wedding of historicism with neo-Kantianism in the 1880s was perfectly natural and inevitable. It was a marriage of soul-mates. Both movements arose from the reaction against absolute idealism, which they condemned for its system-building, metaphysics and *a priori* constructions. Both were horrified by the prospect of materialism, which they feared could undermine morality and religion. And both were struggling to establish the autonomy of their own discipline: the neo-Kantians wanted philosophy to be an independent science as much as the historicists wanted history to be so. In their demand for autonomy both movements were allies in the struggle against positivism, which ascribed scientific status solely to those disciplines

following the methods of the natural sciences.¹ Ultimately, the affinities between these movements are not surprising, given that some of the major historicists of the early nineteenth century—Humboldt, Ranke and Droysen—had been greatly influenced by Kant.

From another perspective, however, the marriage of historicism with neo-Kantianism was paradoxical, even bizarre. It was a fragile, combustible union. For historicism was as much a foe as a friend of neo-Kantianism. True to its Enlightenment heritage, neo-Kantianism strived to maintain the authority of reason, which it saw as a source of universal and necessary principles in law, religion, morality and art. But the relativistic implications of historicism seemed to undermine these efforts. The historical school of law saw no use or place for such principles. Indeed, the implication of the historicist principle of individuality seemed to be that there are no such principles at all, that all morality, law, religion and art are specific to, and only valid for, a particular culture. For the neo-Kantians, this tension became fully explicit in their abhorrence of “historism” (*Historismus*), which they equated with relativism.

Given these affinities and tensions, it is not surprising that the neo-Kantian attitude toward historicism was highly ambivalent. On the one hand, they attempted to aid historicism, to provide history with a secure foundation. If they could establish the autonomy of history, they could curb the pretensions of positivism, their common enemy; and they could demonstrate the enduring value of the critical philosophy by its power to assist new developments in the sciences. On the other hand, however, the neo-Kantians viewed history as a threat which had to be contained. For history, like all disciplines, had a tendency toward not only autonomy but hegemony, i.e., the claim that it alone explains all reality. When history transgressed its proper limits, it became “historism” or relativism. And so the neo-Kantians faced a delicate dialectical task: securing yet limiting history.

Securing the scientific status of history was an especially formidable challenge to the neo-Kantians in the 1880s. The main obstacle to such an enterprise came, ironically enough, from the critical philosophy itself. Part of the problem lay with Kant's own paradigm of science, which seemed singularly suited for the natural sciences, and more specifically Newtonian physics. All the elaborate conceptual apparatus of the *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*—the Axioms of Intuition, Anticipations of Perception and Analogies of Experience—seemed designed to explain mathematical measurement and natural laws governing the interaction between physical bodies. Kant's famous claim in the preface to the *Metaphysische Anfangsgründe der Naturwissenschaften* that there is as much science in a discipline as there is mathematics in it seemed to show conclusively that his paradigm

of science was intended solely for the physical sciences.² So one problem facing the neo-Kantians, then, was how to develop a completely new paradigm of knowledge suitable for history, a paradigm somehow consistent with the most general principles and spirit of the critical philosophy.

Another part of the problem lay with Kant's notorious noumenal–phenomenal dualism. This dualism imposed the most severe restrictions upon historical explanation, so that it made it impossible to trace the historical causes of moral actions. According to Kant's solution to the Third Antinomy, noumena can act upon phenomena—the moral will can act in the empirical world—but phenomena cannot act upon noumena—the natural causality of the empirical world cannot determine acts of moral choice. Since Kant places history within the phenomenal world, it follows that the noumenal realm is ahistorical, that it stands above history, whose causal forces have no power to affect it. Since Kant also limits scientific explanation to the phenomenal world, it also follows that the noumenal realm will be mysterious for us, inexplicable according to science. Thus the origins of human rationality, the causes of moral decisions and actions, will be impenetrable to us. Kant himself virtually admitted as much by saying that the real morality of our actions remain hidden from us.³ Of course, despite this admission, Kant himself had sketched an interesting account of the origins of rationality in some of his essays on world history: the growth of human rationality is the product of unsocial sociability, the competition between human beings as self-interested agents.⁴ Still, the nagging question remains whether Kant's philosophy of history is really consistent with his general architectonic. What would be the mechanism by which phenomenal history has an effect upon our noumenal rationality? For the neo-Kantians, it was clear that Kant's dualism, in its strict orthodox form as a distinction between entities, is no longer tenable, because it had imposed disastrous artificial limits upon historical enquiry into the origins of rationality. They saw Kant's noumenal realm as obscurantist, as a noble attempt to rescue morality at the too steep price of limiting science. But it was also clear to them that eliminating the Kantian dualism restored the very problem Kant attempted to escape in the first place: the possibility of freedom. Another challenge facing the neo-Kantians, then, is how to preserve freedom without Kant's dualism, or how to allow freedom in a naturally and historically determined world.

In the long and checkered history of neo-Kantianism,⁵ one phase of this movement is conspicuous for its efforts to solve these problems and to explain history according to

Kantian principles. This is the so-called Southwestern or Baden school of neo-Kantianism, whose leading figures were Wilhelm Windelband, Heinrich Rickert and Emil Lask. While the focus of Marburg neo-Kantianism was on new developments in the natural sciences,⁶ the center of attention of the Southwestern school was on the social sciences, and especially on history, which was for them the paradigmatic social science. Our task in the following chapters will therefore be to examine the Southwestern contribution to the development of historicism. We will examine the work of Windelband, Rickert and Lask, who form (respectively) the beginning, middle and end of this movement.

2. A conflicted youth

There has never been any doubt that the founding father of Southwestern Neo-Kantianism was Wilhelm Windelband (1848–1915). It was Windelband who saw the challenge of history for the critical philosophy, and who sketched the basic strategy for dealing with it that was later followed by Rickert and Lask. We should begin, then, with Windelband's contribution to the development of historicism.⁷

Any expositor of Windelband's philosophy faces special difficulties. Not the least of these is Windelband's frequent changes in position. His thinking was intentionally experimental, leading him to propose and explore ideas which he would later abandon or retract. Furthermore, Windelband did not write systematic philosophy, even though he believed firmly in its value. There is no single work, therefore, that can serve as a general exposition of his philosophy. The work closest to that is his *Einleitung in die Philosophie*,⁸ which gives his views about a wide range of issues; but it has no systematic structure, and its introductory purpose forbade deep investigation. Most of Windelband's work consists in articles, most of which were originally given in the form of lectures. His most important work is his collection of short essays, *Präludien*, which he conceived as “preludes” to the never written systematic work.⁹

Windelband's mature philosophy grew out of his struggle to reconcile two competing influences upon him: neo-Kantianism and historicism.¹⁰ This struggle goes back to the very beginnings of his intellectual development. During his early university years in the late 1860s, Windelband was exposed to both influences. But they pushed him in opposing directions. Historicism lured him in the direction of the history of philosophy, which would show him how each philosophy is the product of its culture and age. Neo-Kantianism, however, taught him that there is a normative dimension of thinking that transcends its psychological or historical genesis. If the price of historicism was relativism, that of neo-Kantianism was hypostasis, i.e., placing rationality in a self-sufficient noumenal realm above the phenomenal world of history. Hence Windelband's agenda: to secure the normative dimension of thinking without hypostasis, the historical dimension of philosophy without relativism.

Much of the neo-Kantian influence on Windelband came from his teacher in Göttingen, Hermann Lotze (1817–81). Lotze was Windelband's *Doktorvater*, under whom he completed his dissertation in 1870. Though hardly a neo-Kantian in any strict sense, Lotze has been credited, with some justice, with being one of the most important predecessors of the neo-Kantian movement.¹¹ His 1841 *Metaphysik* was skeptical of Hegelian rationalism and defended some of the fundamental principles of Kant's epistemology.¹² Like Kant before him, Lotze stressed the limits of conceptual thought, the distinction between sensibility and understanding, and the necessity of experience as the basis of knowledge. More significantly, Lotze laid the foundation for the later philosophy of value of the whole Southwestern school. In his *Logik* he made a simple but seminal distinction between the realms of existence and truth.¹³ Whether or not a proposition is true or false, he argued, is completely independent of whether it corresponds to something that exists. This discovery of a realm of validity or truth independent of existence—“the most wonderful fact in the world,” Lotze called it—proved intoxicating for a later generation, not least for the young Wilhelm Windelband.¹⁴

Another important source of Windelband's neo-Kantianism was his professor at Jena, Kuno Fischer (1824–1906). Fischer was one of the most eminent historians of philosophy of his age. His chief claim to fame rests on his *Geschichte der neuern Philosophie*, which is a ten-volume history of modern philosophy from Descartes to Schopenhauer. Volumes IV and V of this history, *Immanuel Kant und seine Lehre*, which first appeared in 1882, were a systematic study of the genesis and structure of Kant's philosophy. They were based on an earlier set of lectures which Fischer gave in Jena in 1860.¹⁵ These lectures were a milestone in the history of neo-Kantianism. They were a sympathetic and systematic reconstruction of Kant, which attempted to show Kant's abiding relevance to his age. They were a crucial influence on the young Windelband who saw them as the beginning of neo-Kantianism.¹⁶

The historicist influence on Windelband also came from Fischer. Although a sympathetic expositor of Kant, Fischer was no Kantian himself; the greatest philosophical influence upon him came from Hegel. At Leipzig, Fischer attended the lectures of Christian Weisse, a Hegelian; and at Halle, he studied under two other Hegelians, Johann Eduard Erdmann and Julius Schaller. Though no close follower of Hegel, Fischer did uphold some key Hegelian doctrines. Not the least of these was the Hegelian doctrine of the rationality of the actual, the progressive realization of spirit in history. This doctrine was the inspiration for his own work in the history of philosophy.¹⁷ Thus Fischer saw the history of philosophy in terms of the growing self-awareness of spirit. Each philosophy was a necessary stepping stone toward this self-awareness; but its contribution was one-sided and had to be complemented by other competing philosophies. The truth emerged not from any single philosophy but from the history of philosophy as a whole, which was the gradual revelation of a *philosophia perennis*.

Fischer inspired Windelband to become an historian of philosophy, and it is in this role that Windelband is best known today. He wrote three major historical works: *Geschichte der alten Philosophie* (1894), *Die Geschichte der neueren Philosophie* (1878) and his compendium *Lehrbuch der Geschichte der Philosophie* (1892), all of which were translated into English and went through many editions. Although Windelband was even less a Hegelian than Fischer, he still retained aspects of Fischer's Hegelian methodology, more specifically, the idea that there is progress in the history of philosophy as each system builds on the work of its predecessors and carries its insights forward. Windelband

went beyond Fischer, however, in attempting to know how each philosophy grew out of its specific historical context, especially the state of the sciences in its day and the values of its culture.¹⁸

All his life Windelband remained indebted to historicism. His 1908 lecture “Über das Wesen und Wert der Tradition in Kulturleben,”¹⁹ is essentially a defense of historicism against Nietzsche's critique in *Unzeitgemäße Betrachtungen*. The history of philosophy was for Windelband always a crucial instrument of philosophy itself. While it was an axiom of his philosophy of value that the validity of a proposition is ahistorical, he stressed that knowledge of the basic principles of reason came only through history, and more specifically, the history of philosophy. Late in his life he worked out a Hegelian philosophy of history, according to which history is the self-consciousness of freedom and rationality.²⁰

Windelband's doctoral dissertation, *Die Lehren vom Zufall*, already shows his early sympathy with neo-Kantianism.²¹ This piece is an academic exercise, a rather dry and perfunctory analysis of the various senses of contingency in ordinary discourse. But it is still of interest for its adumbration of future themes. Windelband's general conclusion is that the concept of contingency has no strict objective meaning, and that something is contingent only with respect to our knowledge of it, i.e., to say that something is contingent means only that we lack sufficient knowledge of its causes (68–9). He rejects the concept of *absolute* contingency, i.e., an event having no cause at all, on the grounds that it violates the principle of sufficient reason. He accepts, however, the concept of *relative* contingency, which is basically the idea of coincidence, i.e., two facts or series of events having no *apparent* connection and that happen at the same time; but he insists that even here the contingency is also the result of our ignorance, because if we knew the whole system in which both facts or series of events occur we would recognize their happening at the same time to be necessary too. In giving a strictly subjective status to contingency, Windelband seems to come close to a complete naturalism or Spinozism, which makes everything the product of necessity. But it is in the restrictions that Windelband places on naturalism that he reveals his budding neo-Kantianism. Just as Friedrich Lange had once used the critical philosophy as a weapon to curb the pretensions of materialism,²² so the young Windelband does the same with regard to naturalism. Windelband accepts naturalism for all particular events *within* the general system of nature, but contends that it is not necessarily true for the system of nature as a whole. Even though we banish final causes for the explanation of

particular events (54–6), it is still possible that nature as a whole has been created for some end. Windelband makes a similar point about freedom. Although every human action is an event within nature and as such obeys the principle of sufficient reason, there is no contradiction in assuming the existence of uncaused causes outside the system of nature. In this context Windelband explicitly defends Kant's concept of transcendental freedom. He argues that, although each event within nature is determined by external causes, it is still possible that there is some uncaused cause outside nature (16–17). In this early work Windelband is content to point out the possibility of freedom and theism; but he does not attempt to demonstrate their reality or necessity. All that he wants to show is that they are compatible with naturalism, and that we can have a scientific worldview without abandoning faith in unconditioned causes. This latter point was the central thesis of Lotze's philosophy, which the young *Doktorand* was very eager to support.

Windelband's neo-Kantianism is even more developed in his *Habilitationsschrift*, his 1873 *Über die Gewißheit der Erkenntnis*.²³ Here Windelband attempts to defend Kant's transcendental idealism from its apparent vulnerability to skepticism. The critical philosophy had often been attacked by skeptics in the past, of course, but Windelband is now worried about a new threat: the latest developments in the natural sciences that seem to vindicate this skepticism. All the recent work in empirical psychology, and more specifically the psychophysics of Helmholtz, Windelband argues, has apparently confirmed one central thesis of the critical philosophy: the intellectualization of perception (19). Through careful measurement, experimentation and induction, this psychology has shown that the object of perception is really the product of our own perceptual activity, and that it is never simply given to us, as if we only passively record it. But if this is so, the skeptic seems vindicated: all that we know, the content of our representations, is the product of our perceptual activity, so that we cannot have objective knowledge of reality itself. All the critical philosophy allows is knowledge of appearances, which are our own creations, but never knowledge of reality in itself. Windelband's response to this skeptical challenge is perfectly Kantian: that the certainty of our knowledge does not rest upon the correspondence of representations with things-in-themselves, as the skeptic expects, but with the necessity among our representations themselves (118). While the skeptic is correct that we can never get outside our representations themselves to see if they correspond to a reality independent of them, the objectivity of knowledge requires no such correspondence. It involves nothing more than the necessary order among representations themselves, their conformity to the intersubjective forms of space, time and causality (102–3, 114). This order is necessary and universal—everyone must perceive things in these ways—and that is sufficient to prevent the arbitrariness that constitutes the subjectivity of our

knowledge. Such, very crudely, is Windelband's defense of transcendental idealism. The merits of the work lie not in the general conclusion, which was scarcely original, but in the careful analysis of the concepts of certainty and knowledge that led to it.

Though clearly foreshadowing his later work, there is one respect in which Windelband's *Habilitationsschrift* differs from it. The young Windelband shows no belief in a characteristic philosophical method and teaches instead that philosophy must be oriented toward the natural sciences (18). "The wax on the wings of the new Icarus has melted," Windelband says, referring to the speculative methods of German idealism. The lesson to be learned from that is that philosophy must stick to the world of experience, and that it must wait upon the results of the sciences before it develops theories of its own. We are a decade away from Windelband's "Über kritische und genetische Methode," where he will outline a distinctive method of philosophy based on a sharp distinction between normative and factual discourse. The *Habilitationsschrift* already presupposes such a distinction, and it already expounds the normative conception of logic characteristic of Windelband's later work (82–5). However, Windelband has still not seen developed that distinction to support a new conception of philosophical method. Windelband's conception of epistemology in the 1870s was still very much along the lines of Eduard Zeller, who had understood epistemology essentially as a form of psychology. We shall soon see how Windelband broke with Zeller's interpretation to found an original conception of philosophy in the 1880s. It was only with that new conception of philosophy that Windelband was finally in a position to reconcile the conflict between philosophy and history that had marked his early years.

3. The crisis of philosophy

Windelband's neo-Kantianism grew out of a severe crisis facing philosophy in the second half of the nineteenth century. After Kant's critique of metaphysics and the rapid rise of the new natural sciences (viz., biology, psychology, chemistry), philosophy suffered an acute identity crisis. It had to rethink its purpose and its very identity in relation to other sciences. It was one of the legacies of Kant's critique that philosophy could not be metaphysics in the traditional sense, i.e., rational or demonstrative knowledge of the unconditioned or absolute. Philosophy could no longer provide answers to the fundamental questions of life, viz., the existence of God, providence and immortality. In the early 1800s Schelling and Hegel attempted to resurrect metaphysics with their absolute idealism; but, as if to prove the power of Kant's legacy, their efforts were completely discredited by the 1850s. Their speculative *Naturphilosophie*, and their *a priori* philosophy of history, fell foul of the new positivistic mentality. Philosophy also could not reclaim the old title of *philosophia prima*, as if its task were to lay down the first principles of all the sciences. For the new sciences demanded first and foremost autonomy, freedom from the apron strings of philosophy, the right to approach their fields on a completely empirical basis. This was the case even for psychology, which

had hitherto such close connections with philosophy.²⁴ But if it were not metaphysics or *philosophia prima* what could philosophy be? And so philosophy faced the grim prospect of obsolescence.

One new and popular response to this crisis was to abandon philosophy's claim to be a science yet to uphold its value as "a worldview."²⁵ The new slogan ran: "*Weltanschauung statt Wissenschaft*." A worldview or *Weltanschauung* is a general perspective on life, a view of the world and existence determined by personal or cultural values rather than rational methods. A worldview had at least *apractical* justification. It helped people to get through life. It gave them faith, hope, strength; it sustained their way of life, characteristic values and identity. But, bowing to Kantian criticism, a worldview made no claim to truth; it dropped any attempt at *theoretical* justification.

It was in this context that Windelband began to form his own conception of philosophy in the early 1880s. In his essay "Was ist Philosophie?," first published in 1882, Windelband sketched his strategy for resolving the identity crisis of philosophy.²⁶ The decline of traditional metaphysics, combined with the rise of history and the natural sciences, he wrote, seem to leave the philosopher bereft. "Philosophy is like King Lear, who has bequeathed all his goods to his children, and who must now resign himself to be thrown into the street like a beggar." (19) How could philosophy avoid such a dire fate? Windelband rejected the idea that philosophy should be a *Weltanschauung*, for going down that path would end only in relativism.²⁷ Somehow, then, he had to sustain philosophy's claim to be a *Wissenschaft*. The only way of doing so, he insisted, was to return to Kant. Philosophy could retain its identity as a distinct discipline, and it could still be a science, if it only became what Kant had originally conceived it to be: namely, a *critical* philosophy. A critical philosophy is an investigation into the conditions and limits of the first principles of knowledge. All the special sciences, morality and the arts, have first principles that make universal and necessary claims to truth; and the defining task of philosophy should be to investigate the possibility of such claims. If philosophy only limits itself to this task, it can still be a science; but it will be a specific kind of science: namely, a *second-order* science whose

special business is to investigate the logic of the first-order sciences. The apparent danger of obsolescence arises only because people continue to see philosophy as some kind of *first-order* discipline that studies the most general features of man and the world. But all first-order investigation should be the task of the special sciences; the specific task of philosophy is strictly second-order: to determine the logic of such first-order investigations.

Ostensibly, there was not much new in Windelband's "Was ist Philosophie?" His argument seemed to invoke the standard neo-Kantian conception of philosophy as epistemology, which had already been outlined by Eduard Zeller in his famous 1862 lecture "Ueber Bedeutung und Aufgabe der Philosophie."²⁸ However, although it is not explicit, much of Windelband's "Was ist Philosophie?" was a polemic against Zeller. There was something new and original to Windelband's conception of epistemology, something which set it apart radically from Zeller's conception and even from the earlier view of his *Habilitationsschrift*.²⁹ Zeller insisted that the method of philosophy should be the same as the methods of the empirical sciences.³⁰ He argued that the philosopher could not reliably establish anything about reality from a *a priori* construction, by beginning from general principles and attempting to derive particular conclusions; so, instead, the philosopher, like the psychologist, has to proceed inductively, beginning from particular observations and ascending to general principles. The philosopher's starting point is self-consciousness, just as Kant had taught, but self-consciousness comes from introspection and observation, from reflection on inner experience and the analysis of "the facts of consciousness." Accordingly, Zeller saw epistemology in essentially psychological terms, as the investigation into the origins and genesis of our representations. The laws of sensibility, understanding and reason are for him essentially "psychological necessities" about how people happen to think.³¹ But if Zeller were right, Windelband now argued, philosophy would be doomed to obsolescence after all. It would be just another branch of empirical psychology. To be a science in its own right, he insisted, philosophy must follow a specific method, one differing *toto caelo* from that of the empirical sciences.

What is that method? Windelband explains by making a clear and sharp distinction between two methods: the *genetic* method of psychology and history, and the *critical*

method of epistemology or philosophy. The task of the genetic method is to investigate the *causes* of knowledge, how it originates from experience and the innate activity of the mind; the task of the critical method is to determine the *reasons* for knowledge, the evidence for its validity. The main question behind the genetic method is *quid facti?*, i.e., which facts explain the origin of my representations; but the chief question behind the critical method is *quid juris?*, i.e., what right do I have for my belief. This distinction goes right back to Kant, of course, and Windelband stressed that it was nothing less than Kant's *Grundgedanke* (I, 24, 29). If philosophy is to be a distinctive science, Windelband now insisted, it must follow the critical method alone. It must limit itself to determining the reasons or justifications for our fundamental principles, and it must forgo any attempt to determine their natural or historical causes, which is the proper task of psychology or history.

The general conception of philosophy that emerges from "Was ist Philosophie?" is that philosophy is *anormative* or *evaluative* enterprise. Philosophy differs from the sciences precisely because its chief concerns are to determine the fundamental norms governing our beliefs and to assess whether our beliefs conform to them. Its task is not to know what *is* the case, like the other sciences, but to judge what *ought* to be the case according to norms, where a norm is essentially a "rule of judgment."³² Hence Windelband defined philosophy as "the science of the necessary and universally valid determinations of value" (*Wertbestimmungen*) (26), or as the "critical science of universally valid values" (29). There are three domains in which philosophy assesses such values: cognition, volition and taste. In all these realms people make universal and necessary claims, and so it is the task of philosophy to investigate them. Philosophy is therefore divided into logic, ethics and aesthetics, corresponding to Kant's three *Kritiken* (40).

Such, in a nutshell, was the conception of philosophy with which Windelband resolved the identity crisis of philosophy in the 1880s. By and large, Windelband remained true to this conception for the rest of his career. But, beginning in the 1900s, it underwent an important modification. As much as Windelband wanted philosophy to be a *Wissenschaft*, an exact second-order science, he feared that it could become an irrelevant scholastic discipline, failing to answer the basic questions that motivated people to do philosophy in the first place. Determined that the critical philosophy be a vital force in German culture in the dawning twentieth century, and fearful that the new *Lebensphilosophie* of Nietzsche and Schopenhauer was corrupting the youth, Windelband began to sell the critical philosophy as a *Weltanschauung*.³³ In a brilliant series of lectures explaining this shift, his 1909 *Die Philosophie im deutschen Geistesleben des XIX Jahrhunderts*, Windelband explained that the critical philosophy faced new challenges in the 1900s that it did not confront in the 1860s when the neo-Kantian

revival began.³⁴ In the 1860s the critical philosophy was rehabilitated chiefly as the handmaiden of the rapidly expanding natural sciences. Its task was to justify the logic of scientific discourse, and to curb the pretensions of metaphysics, whether they were the extravagancies of Schelling's and Hegel's *Naturphilosophie* or the crudities of Büchner's and Moleschott's materialism. Hermann von Helmholtz, Eduard Zeller and Friedrich Lange—the first generation of neo-Kantians—saw the critical philosophy as little more than an epistemology of the natural sciences, and their interest in it scarcely extended beyond the first *Kritik*. At the beginning of the twentieth century, however, the German cultural climate had changed greatly. There was a *Hunger nach Weltanschauung*, as Windelband put it, a demand that philosophy once again address the fundamental questions of life. Interpreted solely as an epistemology of the natural sciences, the critical philosophy would have little to say to this new age, and so it would be in danger of disappearing into the mists of the past, remaining only one more chapter in an historical compendium. Windelband was convinced, however, that the critical philosophy could satisfy this hunger. It was much more than an epistemology of the natural sciences; its task was also to investigate the fundamental principles of ethics and aesthetics. It was indeed an entire *Weltanschauung*, whose purpose was to answer the fundamental questions of life. The early neo-Kantians had indeed failed to appreciate Kant's motive in writing the critical philosophy in the first place: to deny knowledge to make room for faith. If the critical philosophy were only accurately interpreted according to Kant's original intention, Windelband firmly believed, it could answer all the fundamental questions of life—"What can I know?," "What should I do?," "What can I hope?"—without lapsing into the errors of traditional metaphysics or the relativism of historicism.

4. Clash with Dilthey

Given Windelband's conception of philosophy, it stands to reason that he could not have smiled upon Dilthey's project for a critique of historical reason. Dilthey seemed intent on blurring the very distinctions that he had so carefully laid down in "Was ist Philosophie?" For Windelband, to historicize reason is to relativize reason, to undermine the universal and necessary validity of its fundamental principles. There would have to be some reckoning with Dilthey's project, then, which endangered everything that he had been fighting for.

Sure enough, in 1883, the very year in which Dilthey's *Einleitung in die Geisteswissenschaften* appeared, Windelband delivered a lecture, "Kritische oder genetische Methode,"³⁵ where he made an unmistakable critical allusion to Dilthey's project. "A critique of historical reason," he warned, "is a very praiseworthy undertaking; only

it must be a critique and as such it needs a criterion.”³⁶ Such a criterion must be a universal norm, Windelband believed, whose validity stands above the realm of history. Windelband did more than make a simple critical aside against Dilthey. For the entire thrust of his lecture was directed against a project like Dilthey's. Windelband's central claim is that it is necessary to make a sharp distinction between a *critical* method, whose main task is to assess the validity of claims to knowledge, and a *genetic* method, whose chief business is to determine the causes or origins of knowledge. Windelband implied that Dilthey's project made the fundamental mistake of confusing these methods. Even if we were to locate the origins of the Kantian critical project within a definite historical context—say the German Enlightenment at the end of the eighteenth century—this would scarcely limit its validity to such a context. To complain about a rigid *a priori*, as Dilthey had, was for Windelband to open the door to relativism.³⁷

What was Dilthey's response to such criticism? Shortly after Windelband's lecture appeared in the first edition of his *Präludien* (1883), Dilthey wrote a brief notice about it in *Westermanns Monatshefte*.³⁸ He had no space for a detailed review, but he questioned Windelband's sharp distinction between the critical and genetic methods. Against it he cited the neo-Kantians highest authority: Kant himself. “It must necessarily appear questionable,” he wrote, “whether this conception of the task of the critical method can legitimately invoke Kant, who throughout his development did not separate the validity of these norms from the problem of their genesis.” Strictly as a matter of Kant scholarship, Dilthey had a point. While Kant does distinguish between the *quid juris?* and *quid facti?*, it is questionable that this was ever intended to separate epistemological from causal questions. In the first *Kritik* Kant links these questions in at least two ways: he thinks that we can justify *empirical* concepts by tracing their origin; and he thinks that we can justify synthetic *a priori* concepts by determining that they have some other origin than experience, viz., the activity of the transcendental subject. The neo-Kantian separation between these questions has great difficulty in accounting for Kant's transcendental psychology, which plays a central role throughout Kant's critical philosophy. Without transcendental psychology it is indeed impossible to understand Kant's transcendental idealism, which assumes that the activity of the transcendental subject *creates* the structure of experience. The very concept of an appearance—the world as it appears according to the *a priori* conditions of sensibility and understanding—implies that the transcendental subject plays an active role in making what we know.

But much more was at stake, of course, than Kant scholarship. No one knew this better than Dilthey himself, who took up the issues again in later works. Referring

explicitly to the neo-Kantian view in his *Ideen über eine Beschreibende und Zergliedernde Psychologie* (1894), Dilthey insisted that the neo-Kantian distinction between questions of fact and validity, if generalized and applied strictly, is in principle mistaken. The mental facts of epistemology cannot be understood without knowledge of the context in which they take place. “No magical art of a transcendental method can make this impossibility into a possibility. No magical word from the Kantian school can help here.”³⁹ The many Kantian distinctions regarding cognition—intuitions and concepts, form and matter, imagination and understanding, understanding and reason—are only artificial abstractions from the unity of the mind. Without explaining this point in any detail, Dilthey concludes that we cannot separate epistemology from psychology. While he grants to the neo-Kantians that it would be absurd to base epistemology on psychology alone, he denies that one can have epistemology without any psychology.

While Dilthey limited himself to this very general point in the *Ideen*, he took up the issue again in a slightly later work, his *Beiträge zum Studium der Individualität* (1895/96).⁴⁰ Here he does not mention the neo-Kantians explicitly, but he does target any general distinction between questions of fact and value. The problem with this distinction, Dilthey now argues, is that our experience of life is determined by our values. What we perceive depends on what we hope, fear, expect and want, which are the result of the norms and moral principles by which we live. “What is essential in the phenomena of life is the expression of the living system of values in them, and it expresses itself in the ideals and norms, which regulate the expression of life from within.” (267) Values and norms are not, therefore, separable from experience, existing in some transcendental realm, but they enter into its very content. A complete separation of the normative from the factual, the practical from the theoretical, makes it impossible to justify norms. We can derive values and norms from the facts of life and history for the simple reason that these facts are themselves constituted by values.

Flatly contrary to the neo-Kantian distinctions, then, Dilthey's critique of historical reason was committed to breaking down the barrier between norms and facts, between critical and genetic enquiry. To criticize the ahistorical pretensions of reason—its claims to eternity, universality and necessity—is to investigate the origins of reason. In making their sharp separation between the critical and genetic, the normative and the historical, the neo-Kantians had failed to heed the fundamental lesson of the historical school: *that what appears to be given and eternal to us now is the result of history*. No less than the old natural-law theorists, the neo-Kantians were guilty of hypostasis—the fundamental fallacy of pure reason—because they had placed norms in a transcendental realm that stands above and beyond the realm of history.⁴¹ Dilthey was not questioning the neo-Kantian point that the evaluation of the validity of a belief is a

distinct activity from determining its causes; but he believed that the neo-Kantians had taken that point too far when they went on to construct an ahistorical normative realm. In doing so they were either ignoring the question of the origins of their principles or they were presupposing a genetic account all their own. In either case, they were guilty of an unpardonable dogmatism by refusing to answer questions or by failing to examine their own assumptions.

For all Dilthey's criticisms of the neo-Kantians, there was still much common ground between them. Dilthey praised the neo-Kantian critique of psychologism, and he indeed insisted that epistemology sometimes must determine questions of validity apart from fact.⁴² His chief complaint was directed against a wholesale separation of epistemology from psychology. While Dilthey defends the rights of psychology against the Kantians, the psychology he champions is not the experimental psychology of the natural sciences but a descriptive psychology that portrays the content of mental life. Once we recognize that contents and not causes are fundamental to Dilthey's psychology, the distance between him and the neo-Kantians shrinks. Dilthey and the neo-Kantians agree that the causal methods of experimental psychology do not determine questions of value or validity; and the neo-Kantians could accept a descriptive psychology whose main task is to analyze, appraise mental content. This was after all the main concern of Kant's own transcendental psychology.

5. The logic of history

One of the defining moments in the development of historicism in the late nineteenth century was Windelband's celebrated 1894 "Rektoratsrede" in Straßburg, "Geschichte und Naturwissenschaft."⁴³ Windelband's lecture addressed one of the most popular topics of late-nineteenth-century philosophy: the distinction between natural science and history. Its central thesis is that history should have a scientific status equal to and independent of the natural sciences. Windelband's lecture is therefore both a critique of positivism, which subsumes history under the methods of the natural sciences, and of traditional Kantianism, which refuses to grant history the status of a science at all. Windelband's lecture was as influential as it was controversial. It was the starting point for Rickert's, Lask's and Weber's discussion of the logic of the cultural or social sciences; but it was also a magnet for criticism, a target for Dilthey and the positivists. For decades, discussion of the distinction between the human and natural sciences began with, or revolved around, Windelband's speech. Although it was hardly the first self-conscious effort to make individuality the defining principle of historical discourse—we have already found that such efforts go back to Chladenius—Windelband's contemporaries and successors still treated it as if it were news from nowhere.

Windelband began his lecture by discussing the classification of the sciences. This apparently dry topic was of great importance in the late nineteenth century because the rapid progress of the sciences was creating new disciplines and blurring the border lines between old ones. The republic of learning had no clear chart or map. Responding to this problem, Windelband pointed out the need to develop a more meaningful classification than that prevalent since the seventeenth century. The older classification, which was based on the Cartesian mental-physical dualism, made a fundamental distinction between the sciences of nature and mind, *Natur-* and *Geisteswissenschaften*. It assumed that for each kind of entity there is a distinct means of knowing it: we know the mind from internal sense or introspection, whereas we know nature from the external senses or observation. But this distinction has now become problematic, Windelband contended, because psychology no longer uses a method of introspection, and it applies the same methods of observation and experiment as those of the natural sciences (142–3).⁴⁴ The old assumption that each kind of entity has its distinctive way of knowing has proven false. Now that the old distinction had broken down, Windelband proposed classifying the sciences according to critical principles. Since these principles give priority to *how* we know rather than *what* we know, the distinction between the sciences should be based on method rather than subject matter. To base it on subject matter alone does not work, he pointed out, because the same subject matter can be treated according to different sciences using distinct methods.

Following these neo-Kantian guidelines, Windelband made two important distinctions to bring order and system into the republic of learning. The first distinction is that between the *rational* and *empirical* sciences. The rational sciences, which are philosophy and mathematics, use a strictly *a priori* methodology and presuppose no given object; the empirical sciences, which are history, psychology and physics, employ an experimental method and presuppose an object given to the senses. The second distinction is between two forms of empirical science, more specifically the natural and historical sciences. The natural sciences are “*nomothetic*” since they are concerned with discovering universal laws, whereas the historical sciences are “*idiographic*” because they are interested in determining individual facts (145). While the natural sciences attempt to universalize and explain as many facts as possible under a single law, the historical sciences aim to individuate and to account for the differences between things (150).

Since Windelband's distinctions are often misunderstood, it is important to note their original purpose and context. The distinction between natural and historical science is not meant to be a general distinction between the two kinds of science. It is intended to be a distinction only between the two kinds of *empirical* science. Windelband also did not think that the distinction between the natural and *historical* sciences

was also co-extensive with that between the natural and *humansciences*.⁴⁵ He did not intend to commit himself to the implausible thesis that all the human sciences are somehow historical. Indeed, he was even critical of the attempt to make a sharp distinction between the human and natural sciences. This was indeed the point behind his remarks about psychology: since it is a human science in subject matter but a natural science in methodology, the fundamental distinction in the empirical sciences is not between their human or natural subject matter.

Windelband's distinction between the nomothetic and idiographic is indeed misleading, however, because it proves to be less formal or methodological than he originally intended it to be. He wanted it to be strictly a distinction in methodology, in the different ways in which these sciences know things. But such a purely formal distinction is subject to a compelling objection: that the natural sciences are often interested in particular facts to confirm laws, and that history is often concerned with general laws to explain particular actions. Windelband fully recognized the point behind the objection (146, 156–7). It is in his response to it that we see the real meaning of his distinction between the nomothetic and idiographic. His distinction was meant to be first and foremost *pragmatic*, i.e., a distinction between different *goals* or *ends* of enquiry. About this, Windelband could not be more explicit: “The principle of division is the formal character of the *goals of knowledge*. One seeks universal laws, the other particular historical facts” (144; my italics). Although each science could use both methods, that did not affect the crucial question: What *use* or *interest* did it have in applying the method? Was its chief goal to know the universal law or the particular event? We could use different methods for the same goal.

There were other reasons for thinking that Windelband's distinction is not entirely methodological. Though it claims to be entirely critical, Windelband argues for a *metaphysical* distinction all his own: that between particulars and universals. He seems to think that this metaphysical distinction is the ultimate basis for the formal one. For if particulars were reducible to universals, i.e., if they were nothing more than the conjunction of their properties, there could be no ultimate distinction between the idiographic and nomological; the former would be simply another more complicated version of the latter. And so, toward the end of his article, Windelband sketches arguments to the effect that there is such a metaphysical dualism (157–9). Thus Windelband's classification of the sciences simply traded one metaphysical distinction (mind–body) for another (particular–universal).

Windelband's central thesis in “Geschichte und Naturwissenschaft” is that history deserves equal status with the natural sciences. But if we raise the question exactly why

he thinks that they are equal, it is difficult to get a clear answer. Windelband implies that individuation and generalization are two distinct but equally valid logical operations, so that, measured in purely cognitive or logical terms, the sciences are equal. But this answer assumes the distinction between the sciences is purely formal, and we have just seen there are reasons to doubt that. Fortunately, Windelband raises the question in more pragmatic terms. He asks: Which science is more valuable for the general ends of knowledge? (152) Yet he declines to answer this question because it would take him too far afield, and because it is too difficult, demanding a general account of the ends of knowledge. Still, he does provide something of a preliminary answer. If we consider simply the *utility* of these different sciences we find each of them to be useful, though in very different ways. The nomothetic sciences are necessary for us to gain control over nature; but the idiographic sciences are no less important in the business of daily life (153). So what gives parity to the sciences, it turns out, are not their distinct and equal logical *forms* but their distinct and equal *purposes*. This again brings out the pragmatic basis of Windelband's distinction.

In giving history a status on par with the natural sciences, Windelband was attempting to correct what he saw as the traditional bias in favor of nomothetic knowledge (147). He sees the source of that bias in Plato and the Greeks, who saw the eternal forms as the true object of knowledge and the fleeting world of the senses as the object of opinion (154–5). He also mentions Schopenhauer, whose arguments against the scientific status of history in *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* were notorious.⁴⁶ But, remarkably, Windelband does not mention the philosopher whom he has foremost in mind: Kant. That Windelband was silently taking issue with Kant there cannot be any doubt. For, in a later lecture, Windelband singled out Kant for criticism for having a too narrow conception of science.⁴⁷ He complained that Kant's paradigm of science was entirely nomothetic, and appropriate solely for Newtonian physics. Kant's low opinion of history was perfectly understandable, Windelband thinks, because in his age history was scarcely a science but more one of the *belles lettres*. But the advances of history since then show unquestionably that history is a science on par with physics and chemistry. The achievements of Ranke and Niebuhr are no less than those of Helmholtz and Liebig.⁴⁸ Though Kant failed to take account of the scientific status of history, Windelband is convinced that his philosophy can be still revised and expanded to accommodate it. A critical philosophy could examine the logic of history no less than the logic of the natural sciences.

There was another unmentioned philosopher with whom Windelband was taking issue in “Geschichte und Naturwissenschaft”: Dilthey. Windelband's use of the terms

Natur- and *Geisteswissenschaften* was an unmistakable allusion to Dilthey's famous distinction in *Einleitung in die Geisteswissenschaften*, which had appeared only a year earlier. Windelband disliked Dilthey's distinction not only because it seemed to him to rely on the old dualism between mind and body, but also because it made a distinction between the sciences based on subject matter rather than method. Such a distinction, he objected, was not fully in accord with Kant's critical principles. Since an object had only as much logic and structure as the mind reads into it, the proper logical distinction between the sciences should be in terms of not objects themselves but the manner or method of treating them (145). This criticism of Dilthey was a mistake because, as we have already seen,⁴⁹ Dilthey's distinction is not ontological but phenomenological, i.e., it is based upon different kinds of experience (inner and outer) rather than different kinds of things. However, even interpreted in phenomenological terms, Windelband disputed Dilthey's distinction on the grounds that the notion of inner experience seemed to sanction introspection, a method rejected by modern psychology. Windelband's also questioned Dilthey's attempt to make psychology into the master science of the human or social sciences. Since psychology used the same methods of observation and experiment as the natural sciences, there was reason to doubt whether it was a human science at all.

Because his distinction aroused so much discussion and controversy, Windelband returned to it time and again in his later writings, revising and refining it.⁵⁰ These revisions were not so felicitous, however, because they created more problems than they solved. The most problematic of these revisions is that, under the influence of Rickert, Windelband generalized his distinction, claiming that it was co-extensive with that between the natural and cultural sciences after all.⁵¹ The simple distinction between two kinds of empirical science was now put to work to serve as a distinction between natural and human sciences. While reflecting on the general distinction between the natural and human sciences, Windelband also proposed that it was based on different kinds of universality.⁵² While the natural sciences subsumed events under general laws or abstract universals, the human sciences regarded them as parts of wholes or concrete universals. While such a Hegelian proposal is perhaps correct, it had little to do with his original distinction between the idiographic and nomothetic. In proposing it Windelband was virtually conceding that his original distinction really could not do all the extra work he demanded of it.

6. Resisting historicism

Although Windelband made great efforts to secure the scientific status of history, he also feared that he could be creating a monster. All the new sciences, he noted, had a feeble conception of their own limits; they are not satisfied with autonomy; they want hegemony. They make a claim to absolute status, as if they were the only way of explaining all reality. History was not immune to such self-aggrandizement. It too claimed to be the key to unlock all of reality. When history made such absolute claims, it became what Windelband called “historicism”.⁵³ Historicism was the doctrine that all laws, values and truth are subject to change, that they are valid only in a specific time and place. Hence the great danger of historicism was relativism.

If Windelband was committed to making history a science, he was no less resolved to do battle against historicism. Much was at stake in this struggle. If historicism were true, there would be no point or value to philosophy at all. Windelband endorsed the classical view of philosophy as critical reflection on the values and beliefs of one's own age. But such reflection presupposes, in his view, some higher universal standpoint to appraise these values and beliefs, some eternal standard of reason to evaluate them. It is significant that Windelband saw Socrates—the classical symbol of all philosophy—as the defender of a universal reason against the relativism of his age.⁵⁴ Historicism, however, would be a vindication of the sophists. The unexamined life would be worth living after all! For there would be no higher standpoint of reflection, no eternal standard of reason. What is right or wrong, true or false, beautiful or ugly, would have to be determined by the standards of one's own culture. Rather than thinking about the ultimate questions of life, rather than questioning our most basic values and beliefs, the philosopher would have no choice but to endorse the values and beliefs of his own age.

Convinced that historicism was the modern version of sophistry, Windelband cast himself in the role of Socrates to do battle against it. His mission was to defend the standpoint of universal reason against this potent modern form of relativism. In his campaign against the forces of historicism, Windelband employed one basic strategy: redefining Kant's distinction between the transcendental and empirical. Following his normative conception of philosophy, Windelband insisted upon making this distinction entirely logical rather than ontological, so that it is a distinction between kinds of discourse—the normative and natural—rather than between kinds of entity—noumena and phenomena. While the transcendental consists strictly in normative discourse—in rules that prescribe how we ought to know, act and feel—the natural refers to scientific laws, which have the power to explain everything that exists, whether mental or physical. Such a distinction is very strategic for two reasons. First, it avoids

the danger of relativism by insulating the fundamental normative principles from the empirical realm of history. It would be logically absurd to extend scientific laws into the normative realm, which does not contain anything that exists, whether mental or physical. Second, it upholds scientific naturalism, because *everything that exists* is explicable, at least in principle, according to natural laws.⁵⁵ Such a reformulation of Kant's distinction between the transcendental and empirical means that there is no eternal noumenal realm that is in principle inexplicable according to natural laws or that is immune to historical change. Hence Dilthey's charges of hypostasis against Kant are unfounded; they arise in the first place only because one confuses kinds of discourse (the transcendental and empirical) with kinds of entity (noumena and phenomena).

Windelband's reformulation of the distinction between the transcendental and empirical perhaps does not accord with the letter of Kant's doctrine; but, at least arguably, it does accord with its spirit. For such a reformulation has a clear Kantian precedent; it was the very heart of Kant's teaching in the Transcendental Dialectic that constitutive principles, which appear to refer to entities, should be reformulated in regulative terms, so that they become norms or goals of enquiry. Windelband took this teaching to heart and applied it rigorously throughout the critical philosophy, so that it holds for not only the ideas of reason of the Transcendental Dialectic but also the principles of understanding of the Transcendental Analytic. Hence he reads even Kant's transcendental unity of apperception as a normative ideal.⁵⁶ The concept of a thing-in-itself also becomes not something beyond appearances but the ideal of a complete knowledge of appearances.⁵⁷ Pushing this doctrine to its limits also means, however, the elimination of the entire noumenal realm, at least when it is understood as consisting in a specific kind of entity. This is the point where Windelband's reinterpretation seems to bump against Kant's original historical intentions, for it seems to eliminate the transcendental freedom that Kant was so eager to protect. In this latter respect, however, Windelband frankly admitted that he was revising Kant and not only interpreting him. "To understand Kant," he wrote in some famous lines, "means to go beyond him."⁵⁸

Windelband's new normative interpretation of Kant first appeared in his 1882 essay "Was ist Philosophie?" But, over the years, Windelband made many efforts at trying to

refine his distinction between the normative and natural. There are many formulations of that all-important distinction. (1) The most basic is that between two forms of necessity: natural necessity, which is about what *must* be the case, and normative necessity, which is about what *ought* to be the case.⁵⁹ (2) Another formulation is between two kinds of principles or laws: those that *explain* facts and those that *evaluate* them. There are laws that determine causal regularities, and laws that judge performances. Norms are essentially rules of judgment (*Regeln der Beurteilung*).⁶⁰ (3) Yet another formulation is between two forms of consciousness: empirical consciousness of a specific individual and consciousness in general, which stands for the ideal for all individuals.⁶¹ (4) Finally, two distinct methods of justification of fundamental axioms: the *factual* method, which shows how they are actually involved in how we know, value and taste; and the *teleological* method, which shows how they are necessary means to achieve the end of a discipline.⁶² Normative justification is teleological for Windelband in the sense that it shows how assuming an axiom is a necessary means to achieve an end, where this end is nothing more than the increase of knowledge.⁶³ It does not hypostasize this end, as if it were something actually existing in nature or history, but treats it solely as a rule that prescribes what we ought to do.⁶⁴

Armed with these distinctions, Windelband was confident that he had all the tools he needed to keep historicism at bay. The source of its relativism was its failure to make these kinds of distinction, its conflation of the normative with the factual. Since the historicist confounds the conditions of validity of a belief with its causal or genetic conditions, he assumes that a principle is valid only under the conditions under which it arose. But this is a *non sequitur*: simply because a belief arose only under certain circumstances does not mean that it is valid only under them.⁶⁵ Hence historicists were guilty of what later philosophers called “the genetic fallacy.”

Windelband was also convinced that his distinctions could blunt the historicist objection that Kant's philosophy postulates the existence of a mysterious noumenal realm. Such was the thrust of his 1882 essay “Normen und Naturgesetze,”⁶⁶ whose main thesis is that the critical philosophy can uphold the reality of freedom without having to postulate a noumenal–phenomenal dualism. The major premise of

Windelband's argument is his *methodological* distinction between the normative and natural. In other words, this distinction does not refer to distinct kinds of entity, as if norms held for noumena and natural laws for phenomena; rather, it concerns only different kinds of perspective (*Betrachtungsweisen*) on one and the same thing. With norms we *appraise* an activity, approving or disapproving it according to some ideal of what it ought to be; and with natural laws we *explain* the same activity, determining the causes why it occurs (66–7). If we interpret the distinction in this manner, we have no reason to limit natural explanation; we can explain *every* event, including a person's most complex moral reasoning and innermost intentions, according to natural laws. Hence freedom can be seen as “the ripest product of natural necessity” (88). By the same token, Windelband could now accept the historicist's point that rationality is the result of history, and that it is the necessary product of an individual's education into a cultural tradition. The critical philosopher could happily accept the historicist's point without violating or rendering redundant his own normative standpoint. What the historicist did was the result of the genetic method; what the critical philosopher did was the result of the critical method; and both methods could equally apply to the same object.

Although Windelband thinks that his distinction between the normative and natural, the critical and genetic, is crucial to the structure of Kant's philosophy, he admits that Kant himself did not fully grasp its implications. It was a mistake, he concedes, for Kant to have postulated a noumenal supernatural world as a guarantee for the reality of freedom (62, 89, 97). The problem with such a postulate is that it makes freedom and moral action mysterious, so that it imposes a limit upon natural enquiry. The realm of morality too should fall within the historical and naturalistic worldview. Admitting this, however, does not mean that we make morality redundant; for morality is a normative activity and as such very different in kind from the explanatory activity of natural science.

However strategic, Windelband's distinction could not do all the work he wanted it to do. As he fully realized, the problem of freedom is much more complicated. Morality cannot be fully explained by the normative alone because moral norms have to be actualized in the real world, i.e., people have to act on them. The problem of freedom arises regarding the *interconnection* between the normative and the natural, because the issue is whether we *can* do what we *ought* to do. Morality claims that we are responsible, such that we could have done otherwise; and natural laws show that our actions are necessary, such that we could not have done otherwise. Attempting to respond to this problem, Windelband acknowledges that we have to explain not only the difference but also the connection between the normative and natural (68). Norms prescribe one form of possible action; they select one determinate form from many different possibilities. They are, therefore, specific forms of the realization of natural laws (72). He defines norms more precisely as “those forms of the realization of natural laws, which ought to be approved under the assumption of the end of universal validity” (74). Norms can indeed be “determining grounds” (*Bestimmungsgründe*) for our actions, i.e., reasons that are also causes (85). We have an awareness of them and feel a constraint to follow them. The awareness of the norm, and the feeling of

constraint, makes the norm part of the process of mechanical necessity by which we act in the real world (87). What, though, about responsibility, the feelings of conscience that we could have done otherwise? To say that a person could have done otherwise, Windelband explains, really means that he could have done differently *if* he were different, having another character; it does not mean that he could have acted countercausally (93). The assumption that we would have acted countercausally is the product of a wrong metaphysics, and it is not necessary to moral responsibility, which requires only that the person's character is the cause of the action (89). In the end, then, Windelband's rejection of the Kantian dualism forces him to advocate a kind of compatibilism: "The realm of freedom in the realm of nature is that province in which norms are valid; our task and salvation is to cultivate this province." (98)

It is noteworthy, however, that Windelband did not sustain the radical revisionist reading of Kant of "Normen und Naturgesetze." In a later series of lectures, *Über Willensfreiheit*,⁶⁷ he rethought the issue of freedom in ways that departed from his earlier purely methodological distinction between the noumenal and phenomenal. Windelband continued to criticize the metaphysical aspects of Kant's doctrine of freedom, especially its *Zweiweltentheorie*, and he persisted in arguing that the distinction between entities should be replaced with a distinction between two ways of treating one and the same action.⁶⁸ However, he now postulated a new ontological distinction all his own. He maintained that we attribute responsibility only to those causes that are not the effect of other causes (122), and that we therefore must assume moral character acts without a cause. Since everything that happens in nature has a cause, moral character must stand above and beyond the natural world. Although all *particular actions* of a person have prior causes according to the causality of nature, the person's *general character* is not reducible to its particular actions. We must attribute unity, coherence and continuity to a person's character, which is more than the sum of all particular actions in the phenomenal world. However much these particular actions are caused by other events, the personality itself stands above them, and we should attribute to it nothing less than "causeless self-creation" (*ursachloser Selbsterzeugung*) (158). The personality has a self-sufficient ontological status, and we should attribute to it, Windelband says, what the scholastics called "aseity," i.e., being in itself. While everything in the natural world has its being in relation to other things, personality has an independent being. Hence Windelband replaces the Kantian dualism between the noumenal and phenomenal with a new ontological distinction all his own: that between the independent or self-causing and the dependent or caused. He admits that, understood in this sense, the will is incompatible with a monistic metaphysics (167), and completely unintelligible; and he even cites approvingly Malebranche: "*La liberté c'est un mystère*" (169). So, in the end, in the face of the dilemma between an intelligible

monism and a mysterious dualism, Windelband choose the latter option. It was a retreat from the more optimistic and radical earlier position of “Normen und Naturgesetze,” and, ironically enough, a return to the ideas of his doctoral dissertation.

7. Accommodating historicism

Windelband's encounter with historicism was not limited to his attempt to define the logic of history, still less his efforts to resist its relativism. In his later years he began to give ground to historicism, to accommodate a hostile force he realized he could never conquer. His attempt to accommodate historicism meant redefining Kant's philosophy in more historical terms. While in his earlier encounters he kept history outside the confines of the critical system, in his later ones he brings it inside its central core. He had broadened the critical conception of knowledge to accommodate history in “Geschichte und Naturwissenschaft”; but then he had still left history on its own, a new but unintegrated member of the critical household. Beginning in the 1900s, however, Windelband makes history a vital part of the systematic structure of the critical philosophy, so that it is central to its fundamental purpose and conception.

Windelband's new concessions to historicism first appear in his 1904 address “Nach hundert Jahre.” Here history becomes nothing less than the connecting link between the realms of normativity and nature. Windelband comes to this conclusion by pondering again the question he first posed in “Normen und Naturgesetzen”: namely, “What is the relation between the normative and the natural?” “In what sense are norms realized in the natural world?” That, of course, was Kant's problem in the third *Kritik*, and Windelband duly develops one of Kant's ideas for connecting them. What joins together the realm of nature and value, he maintains, is the concept of development (162–3). But, unlike Kant, Windelband has in mind not the concept of *natural* or *organic* development but that of *historical* development. Windelband now sees the historical as equivalent to “the values of spiritual life,” and indeed as “the ultimate content of all reality” (166). Remarkably, he then contends that the concept of teleology should be revived not only for the historical sciences but also for the natural sciences themselves. Just when the natural sciences believed that they had banished the concept of teleology for good, there now seems to be a purpose to it after all, for it connects the realm of nature with those of values (164–5). Ironically, Windelband now sees the point of Schelling's and Hegel's *Naturphilosophie*, which the early neo-Kantians were so keen to banish.

Another important concession to historicism appears in Windelband's 1907 lecture “Über die gegenwärtige Lage und Aufgabe der Philosophie.”⁶⁹ Now Windelband proposes making history into nothing less than the *organon* of the critical philosophy, i.e., the means by which it discovers the fundamental rational values of life. He came to

this conclusion by reflecting on the question how we know the basic principles of reason. We cannot know these principles by sheer *a priori* cogitation, as Kant had assumed, but only by seeing how people develop them through solving concrete problems in the sciences.⁷⁰ We become self-conscious of rationality, Windelband argues, not by introspection and abstraction but by reflecting on our own attempts to solve problems. Reflection on these attempts is nothing less than history. Taking his cue from Fichte's philosophy of history,⁷¹ Windelband claimed that the task of history should be to develop an account of "the progressive realization of rational values"; it should show how, from the many contingencies and particularities of history, universal values come to self-consciousness (20). In such a role history will be nothing less than the organon of philosophy, Windelband said, the means by which it knows the fundamental rational values of mankind (21). Though Windelband went out of his way to say that the organon of the critical philosophy should be history rather than psychology, his reasons for this preference, apart from a general abhorrence of psychologism, are obscure (21).⁷² His main point seems to be that rational values are not something given to us but something that we create and achieve, and that the process by which we create and achieve them is history. History recognizes the *regulative* status of values; it sees that they are ideals or goals of action, which we realize only through time. Psychology, however, mistakenly believes in the *constitutive* status of values, treating them as if they were givens somehow existing within the mind.

The culmination of Windelband's concession to historicism is his 1910 essay "Kulturphilosophie und transzendentaler Idealismus."⁷³ He now redefined the whole critical philosophy in historical terms by conceiving it as a philosophy of culture. In choosing the phrase "philosophy of culture" Windelband was following the usage of his old student and now colleague, Heinrich Rickert, who had used the term *Kulturwissenschaften* to refer to all the non-natural sciences.⁷⁴ Rickert's distinction was very congenial to Windelband because it was based on his own earlier distinction between the nomothetic and idiographic sciences. To conceive the critical philosophy as a philosophy of culture was a bold step, both historically and polemically: historically, because this took the critical philosophy's center of gravity away from the natural sciences and directed it firmly toward the social or human sciences; and polemically, because Windelband was taking over the domain that Dilthey, his chief rival, had

declared his own. He duly divided culture into three main areas—knowing, willing and feeling—corresponding to the domain of Kant's three *Kritiken*.⁷⁵ The critical philosophy would not become the anthropology or history of any specific culture, but it would lay down the fundamental principles for the study of all cultures. Understood as such a philosophy of culture, the critical philosophy would be fundamentally a philosophy of the *historical* sciences, given that Windelband now understood history as the general form of all human or social sciences.

One of the most striking results of Windelband's accommodation of historicism is his rapprochement with a thinker whom neo-Kantians once foreswore: Hegel.⁷⁶ With Windelband, neo-Kantianism comes full circle: the thinker whom it once most scorned it now admires. In an interesting article he wrote in 1910 on the recent revival of Hegelianism, "Die Erneuerung des Hegelianismus,"⁷⁷ Windelband admits the irony to all this. Was not Hegel the thinker who tried to create what Kant destroyed (metaphysics) and to try to destroy what Kant created (a critical method)? (277) Rather than seeing Hegel as an adversary of the critical philosophy, however, Windelband now embraces him as an ally. It was Hegel who rightly saw that history is where mankind becomes self-conscious of its rationality, and who developed the idea of history as the mediating link between nature and value. Windelband also praises Hegel for never surrendering to the relativism so prevalent in contemporary historicism. Although Hegel insisted that mankind discovers its rationality only through history, he never held that the validity of reason depends on history; he made the all important Kantian distinction between the *quid facti?* and *quid juris?* As long as the Hegelian revival resists relativism, Windelband declares, it will have nothing to fear from neo-Kantianism (281, 284). Windelband's debts to Hegel went even further. One of his late preoccupations was to develop a philosophy of history, and here it is striking how much he owes to Hegel. His fundamental thesis is pure Hegel: that history is the progressive self-awareness of freedom.⁷⁸

Windelband would continue working on his new Hegelian philosophy of history until his death in 1916.⁷⁹ It was a testament to his energy and creativity but also his willingness to contradict himself in struggling with deep philosophical issues. But inconsistency was a small price to pay for the many formative and fruitful ideas he bequeathed upon the Southwestern neo-Kantian movement. We now need to consider how his legacy was developed by his two most talented students, Rickert and Lask.

Notes:

- (1) The neo-Kantian struggle against positivism begins only in the 1880s; before then, some major neo-Kantians—Hermann Helmholtz, Friedrich Paulsen, Alois Riehl, Eduard Zeller—allied their movement with positivism, stressing that philosophy should be allied with the sciences and should avoid ethical and religious questions. On the shift away from positivism and toward more traditional questions within neo-Kantianism, see Klaus Christian Köhnke, *Entstehung und Aufstieg des Neukantianismus* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1986), pp. 388–404.
- (2) Kant, “Vorrede,” *Metaphysische Anfangsgründe der Naturwissenschaften*, in *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Prussian Akademie of Sciences (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1902) IV, 470.
- (3) Kant, KrV, B 579n.
- (4) See especially “Idee zu einer allgemeinen Geschichte in weltbürgerlichen Absicht,” in *Schriften* VIII, 15–32.
- (5) On the broader history of neo-Kantianism, see Köhnke, as in note 1; Thomas Willey, *Back to Kant* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1978); Hans-Ludwig Ollig, *Der Neukantianismus* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1979); *Back to Kant: Neo-Kantianism and its Relevance Today*, eds. Andrew Chignell, Terence Irwin and Thomas Teufel, *The Philosophical Forum* 39 (2008); and *Neo-Kantianism in Contemporary Philosophy*, eds. Rudolf Makkreel and Sebastian Luft (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2010).
- (6) This broad generalization is true until the 1920s when Cassirer begins to develop his philosophy of culture. That philosophy marks the end of the Marburg school's narrow focus upon the problem of the natural sciences. That focus had its origins in Cohen's acceptance of the Kantian mathematical paradigm of knowledge. See *Kants Theorie der Erfahrung*, Zweite Auflage (Berlin: Dümmler, 1885), pp. 19, 25. Because of his acceptance of that paradigm, Cohen had no concern with the possibility of history as a science.
- (7) For other treatments of this topic, see Georg Iggers, *The German Conception of History* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1968), pp. 147–52; Charles Bambach, *Heidegger, Dilthey and the Crisis of Historicism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995), pp. 57–82; Herbert Schnädelbach, *Geschichtsphilosophie nach Hegel* (Freiburg: Alber, 1974), pp. 137–59; Friedrich Jäger and Jörn Rüsen, *Geschichte des Historismus* (Munich: Beck, 1992), pp. 151–6.
- (8) *Einleitung in die Philosophie*. (Tübingen: Mohr, 1920). Zweite Auflage.
- (9) *Präludien: Aufsätze und Reden zur Philosophie und ihrer Geschichte* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1924). All references to this work will be to this edition, the ninth. Roman numerals indicate volume numbers, Arabic numerals page numbers. This work was first published in 1883 in a single volume; it proved very successful, and Windelband kept adding new material to later editions, so that by the fourth edition it had already become a two-volume work.
- (10) This view of Windelband's intellectual development was first suggested by Heinrich Rickert, *Wilhelm Windelband* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1929), pp. 1–3.
- (11) See, for example, Willey, *Back to Kant*, pp. 40, 47, 48, 57; G.S. Hall, *Founders of Modern Psychology* (New York, NY: Appleton, 1912), pp. 68–9; and Max Wentscher, *Hermann Lotze: Leben und Werke* (Heidelberg: Winter 1913), p. 56.
- (12) See Hermann Lotze, *Metaphysik* (Leipzig: Weidmann, 1841), “Einleitung,” §§1–6, pp. 1–17; §§58–60, pp. 279–97.
- (13) See Hermann Lotze, *System der Philosophie: Erster Theil: Drei Bücher der Logik* (Leipzig: Hirzel, 1874), I, 465–97. See especially Book III, chapters 2–4. Though this is the *locus classicus* of Lotze's distinction, he had made earlier versions of it, enough for Windelband to have learned about it before 1870. See, for example, his *Medicinische Psychologie* (Leipzig: Weidmann, 1852), §§53–60; pp. 66–75.

(14) The importance of this distinctions, and Lotze's role in its development, was widely recognized in the early twentieth century. Emil Lask wrote in 1911: "*Lotzes Herausarbeitung der Geltungssphäre hat der philosophischen Forschung der Gegenwart den Weg vorgezeichnet.*" See his *Logik der Philosophie und die Kategorienlehre*, in *Gesammelte Schriften* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1923), II, 15. Among later works to stress Lotze's importance, see Bruno Bauch, *Wahrheit, Wert und Wirklichkeit* (Leipzig: Meiner, 1923), pp. 3, 36; Arthur Liebert, *Das Problem der Geltung*, Zweite Auflage (Leipzig: Meiner, 1920), pp. 4, 173–79, 204–8; and Fritz Bamberger, *Untersuchungen zur Entstehung des Wertproblems in der Philosophie des 19. Jahrhunderts.I. Lotze* (Halle: Niemeyer, 1924), pp. 40–91.

(15) *Kants Leben und die Grundlagen seiner Lehre: drei Vorträge* (Mannheim: Bassermann, 1860).

(16) See his assessment in *Kuno Fischer und sein Kant* (Halle: Ehrhardt Karras, 1897), pp. 10–11, and in *Kuno Fischer: Gedächtnisrede* (Heidelberg: Winter, 1907), pp. 24–5.

(17) Windelband explained Fischer's teaching in these terms. See his *Gedächtnisrede*, pp. 29–30.

(18) See "Aus dem Vorwort zur ersten Auflage," *Die Geschichte der neueren Philosophie* (Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1919), p. iv.

(19) *Präludien* II, 244–69.

(20) See *Geschichtsphilosophie. Eine Kriegsvorlesung. Fragment aus dem Nachlass, Kant-Studien Ergänzungsheft 38* (1916).

(21) See *Die Lehren vom Zufall* (Berlin: Henschel, 1870).

(22) See Lange, *Geschichte des Materialismus* (Iserlohn: Baedeker, 1866). On Lange's significance for neo-Kantianism, see Köhnke, *Entstehung und Aufstieg*, pp. 233–57; and Willey, *Back to Kant*, pp. 83–101.

(23) *Über die Gewißheit der Erkenntnis: Eine psychologisch-erkenntnistheoretische Studie* (Berlin: Henschel, 1873). This work has been recently republished by Adlibris Verlag, Hamburg, 2005. All references are to this more recent and accessible edition.

(24) In tune with this development, Windelband himself, in his early lecture *Über den gegenwärtigen Stand der psychologischen Forschung* (Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1876), stressed the importance of separating psychology from philosophy.

(25) The origin of this view of philosophy is complex and murky. It is usually associated with Dilthey, who certainly provided it with its most systematic and sophisticated exposition in his *Das Wesen der Philosophie* (1907). Though Dilthey began to develop his views in the early 1880s, that was probably too late for Windelband, who already published his "Was ist Philosophie?" in 1882. The idea was certainly "in the air" in the 1870s. The concept can be traced back to Schopenhauer, "Über Philosophie und ihre Methode," §19, in *Parerga und Paralipomena* (Berlin: Hayn, 1851); and Lotze, *Geschichte der Aesthetik in Deutschland* (Munich: Cotta, 1868), pp. 396–405. On the origins of this conception of philosophy, see Erik Kreiter, *Philosophy as Weltanschauung in Trendelenburg, Dilthey and Windelband* (Amsterdam: Vrije Universiteit, 2007).

(26) *Präludien* I, 1–54. Also important for the development of Windelband's views at this time is his "Immanuel Kant," *Präludien* I, 112–46, a lecture he delivered in 1881 on the centenary of the publication of the first *Kritik*.

(27) See "Immanuel Kant," *Präludien* I, 140.

(28) *Vorträge und Abhandlungen, Zweite Sammlung* (Leipzig: Fues, 1887), II, 479–96.

(29) Windelband made his differences with the earlier neo-Kantian conception clear only much later in his *Philosophie im deutschen Geistesleben des 19. Jahrhunderts*, Zweite Auflage (Tübingen: Mohr, 1909), pp. 80–7. The differences between Windelband and earlier neo-Kantian views are sometimes ignored. See, for example, Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), pp. 131–9.

(30) See Zeller, “Ueber die Aufgabe der Philosophie und ihre Stellung zu den übrigen Wissenschaften.” *Vorträge und Abhandlungen* II, 464. Cf. “Ueber die gegenwärtige Stellung und Aufgabe der deutschen Philosophie,” *Vorträge und Abhandlungen* II, 474: “Unsere Philosophie soll sich, soweit es die Natur ihrer Gegenstände erlaubt, das genaue Verfahren der Naturwissenschaften zum Muster nehmen.”

(31) See the “Zusatz” to “Ueber Bedeutung und Aufgabe der Philosophie,” *Vorträge und Abhandlungen* II, 502.

(32) See “Normen und Naturgesetze,” *Präludien* II, 67.

(33) The shift is made in Windelband's 1904 lecture “Nach hundert Jahre,” which was given on the centenary of Kant's death. See *Präludien* I, 147–67, esp. 149–50.

(34) *Die Philosophie im deutschen Geistesleben des 19. Jahrhunderts*, pp. 72–95.

(35) Wilhelm Windelband, *Präludien*, II, 99–135.

(36) *Ibid.*, II, 120–1.

(37) Windelband refers to the dangers of relativism in connection with pragmatism and positivism, *Präludien* II, 116–17. The point behind his reference to Dilthey was to warn him of similar dangers.

(38) *Westermans Monatshefte* 57 (1884), 290–1. GS XVII, 469–70.

(39) GS V, 149–50.

(40) GS V, 267–8.

(41) For Windelband's reply to this objection, see section 6 below.

(42) See GS VII, 7–8. See also the *Nachlass* notes cited by Ermath, *Dilthey*, pp. 196–7.

(43) *Präludien* II, 136–60.

(44) Though Windelband does not mention it, he probably has in mind the work of Gustav Theodor Fechner, which he praises in *Philosophie im deutschen Geistesleben*, pp. 90–91. See Fechner, *Elemente der Psychophysik* (Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1860), 2 vols.

(45) Dilthey misunderstood Windelband's distinction for just this reason. See his *Beiträge zum Studium der Individualität*, GS V, 256–8. He complained that a distinction in methodology could not be useful as a distinction between the natural and human sciences, given that so many human sciences used a nomothetic method. Dilthey's criticism was valid, however, against Windelband's later attempt to generalize his distinction.

(46) Schopenhauer, *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*, Drittes Buch, Kap. 38, “Über Geschichte,” in *Sämtliche Werke* (Frankfurt: Insel, 1968), II, 563–73.

(47) “Nach hundert Jahren. Zu Kantshundertjährigen Todestage,” *Präludien* I, 147–67, esp. 153–4.

(48) Windelband made this comparison in his “Über die gegenwärtige Lage und Aufgabe der Philosophie,” *Präludien* II, 13.

(49) See chapter 8, section 2.

(50) See *Einleitung in die Philosophie*, pp. 239–44; *Geschichtsphilosophie*, pp. 34–52; and *Die Prinzipien der Logik* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1913), pp. 42–5.

(51) See Windelband, *Die Prinzipien der Logik*, p. 42; and *Einleitung in die Philosophie*, p. 241.

(52) *Geschichtsphilosophie*, p. 48; *Die Prinzipien der Logik*, p. 45.

(53) On Windelband's use of the term “*Historismus*,” see “Die Erneuerung des Hegelianismus,” *Präludien I*, 284 and “Kritische oder Genetische Methode?,” *Präludien II*, 132.

(54) See his essay “Über Sokrates,” *Präludien I*, 55–87, esp. 66–8.

(55) It is important to stress that the Windelband's distinction between value and fact was not meant to exclude naturalistic explanation; rather, the very opposite is the case: the entire realm of fact was to be explained naturalistically without interference or supervision by any evaluative standpoint. Klaus Christian Köhnke, *Entstehung und Aufstieg*, pp. 361–2, has maintained that Windelband's mature conception of philosophy involves a fundamental break with his earlier attempts to provide genetic explanations of logic, and ascribes this to Windelband's reaction to socialism in the end of the 1870s, pp. 416–27. But there is no reason to assume a break in the first place. In his early and later years Windelband not only permitted but encouraged naturalistic and genetic explanations of logic and morality. I will leave aside here the question of Windelband's political motivations, which are not relevant to the logic of the case.

(56) See “Kulturphilosophie und transzendentaler Idealismus,” *Präludien II*, 283; and “Was ist Philosophie?,” *Präludien I*, 47. Cf. *Einleitung in die Philosophie*, p. 255.

(57) See *Prinzipien der Logik*, pp. 58–60.

(58) *Präludien I*, iv. These lines are from the forward to the first edition, 1883.

(59) See “Was ist Philosophie?,” *Präludien I*, 42.

(60) See “Normen und Naturgesetze,” *Präludien II*, 67.

(61) See “Was ist Philosophie?,” *Präludien I*, 44 and “Kulturphilosophie und transzendentaler Idealismus,” *Präludien II*, 282–3.

(62) See “Kritische oder Genetische Methode?,” *Präludien II*, 109–10.

(63) Windelband was highly critical of pragmatism. He believed that the ends of enquiry should be ends in themselves, and that truth is a value independent of utility. See his critique of pragmatism in *Einleitung in die Philosophie*, pp. 202–3, and his 1909 lecture *Der Wille zur Wahrheit* (Heidelberg: Winter, 1909). In the lecture Windelband explicitly mentions Royce (p. 6), who had visited Heidelberg. Though he does not mention James by name, he refers to his work (p. 16).

(64) See “Kritische oder genetische Methode?,” *Präludien II*, 109–10.

(65) As Windelband put it in his *Einleitung*: “So muß man sich deutlich machen, daß die Art der Entstehung kein Kriterium für die Wahrheit der Vorstellung ist.” (p. 210).

(66) “Normen und Naturgesetze,” *Präludien II*, 59–98.

(67) *Über Willensfreiheit* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1905). In the foreword Windelband states that he gave these lectures twice in Straßburg, though he does not give specific dates.

(68) See the eleventh lecture, pp. 176–202.

(69) *Präludien* II, 1–23.

(70) Windelband had already made a point to this effect in “Geschichte und Naturwissenschaft,” *Präludien* II, 138. He drew the proper historical conclusions from it, however, only in his later 1907 lecture. The later lecture's argument should be understood in the light of the earlier lecture.

(71) This theme could also be regarded as Kantian, Schillerian or Hegelian; but Windelband saw Fichte specifically as “*der Begründer der Geschichtsphilosophie für die neuere Zeit.*” See “Fichtes Geschichtsphilosophie,” *Präludien* I, 260.

(72) Cf. “Die Erneuerung des Hegelianismus,” *Präludien* I, 283; and “Kritische oder Genetische Methode?,” *Präludien* II, 132.

(73) *Präludien* I, 279–94.

(74) See Heinrich Rickert, *Kulturwissenschaft und Naturwissenschaft*, Vierte und Fünfte Auflage (Tübingen: Mohr, 1921), pp. 12–30. Rickert's book was based on some lectures he gave in Heidelberg in 1898.

(75) In an earlier essay, “Das Heilige” (1902), he argued that the philosophy of religion is irreducible to the other three forms of philosophy, i.e., logic, ethics and aesthetics. See *Präludien* II, 297–8.

(76) As late as 1897, in his *Kuno Fischer und sein Kant*, p. 14, Windelband declared that Hegel's philosophy, unlike Kant's, could never be revived because of its “conceptual form and terminological apparatus.”

(77) *Präludien* I, 273–89.

(78) See his *Einleitung in die Philosophie*, p. 352.

(79) His final lectures were edited and published by his son. See *Geschichtsphilosophie. Eine Kriegsvorlesung. Fragment aus dem Nachlass*, *Kant-Studien Ergänzungsheft* 38 (1916).

Rickert and the Philosophy of Value

1. Reputation and influence

Windelband's chief legacy for the neo-Kantian movement lay with his questions about history. How is history a science? What are its limits? What are its implications for philosophy? Windelband had a great talent for raising questions and for suggesting answers to them. But his answers were really clues, proposals, hints, whose full meaning and implications were never worked out in any detail. By profession and confession, Windelband was no systematic thinker. For his preludes, he wrote no symphonies.

The task of writing symphonies fell to his most gifted student, *Heinrich Rickert* (1863–1936). Rickert first studied philosophy in Berlin with Friedrich Paulsen, and then in Zurich with Richard Avenarius. But in the late 1880s he went to Strasburg and worked with Windelband, who eventually became his *Doktorvater*. Windelband was decisive in shaping Rickert's interests and direction in philosophy. His questions about history were the central concern of three of his early writings, *Die Grenzen der naturwissenschaftlichen Begriffsbildung* (1896), *Kulturwissenschaft und Naturwissenschaft* (1899) and *Die Probleme der Geschichtsphilosophie* (1905). Deeply influenced by Windelband's doctrine of normativity, Rickert developed it into a systematic philosophy of value in two fundamental works, *Der Gegenstand der Erkenntnis* (1892) and *System der Philosophie* (1921). It was Windelband too who provided Rickert with the guiding theme for his interpretation of Kant. Thanks to Windelband, Rickert saw Kant's philosophy primarily as “a critical doctrine of norms.”¹

Despite his great debts to Windelband, Rickert was no disciple or assistant. There was a deep difference in their philosophical temperaments: Windelband found Rickert too positivistic, while Rickert thought Windelband too metaphysical.² Rickert could also be severely critical of his former teacher, whom he charged with basic inconsistencies.³ Thus he complained that his conception of value was too metaphysical, even though Windelband had warned against hypostasizing value. He also pointed out that, though Windelband wanted to separate philosophy from psychology, he continued to distinguish between the parts of philosophy according to psychological

faculties. Finally, he noted that Windelband stressed the normativity of cognition only to distinguish between questions of knowledge and values, as if knowledge had nothing to do with values. So far was Rickert from Windelband's disciple that, as the years progressed, the relationship between them reversed: the former teacher now became the student. In his later writings, Windelband acknowledged and adopted many of Rickert's strategies for dealing with the problems he had once raised.⁴

Rickert quickly moved from under Windelband's shadow. By the beginning of the century he had established himself as one of the most prominent thinkers in Germany. In 1896 he became Professor Ordinarius in Freiburg; and in 1915 he received a chair at Heidelberg, one of the most prestigious posts in the German philosophical world. Almost all Rickert's works were widely read, going through several editions. A school formed around him, and among his students was no less than the young Martin Heidegger.⁵ After his death in 1936, however, Rickert was quickly forgotten, eclipsed by the rise of existentialism, pragmatism and Marxism, movements he had staunchly resisted.

Now, however, with the benefit of historical hindsight, it is obvious that Rickert's obsolescence is undeserved. Of all the thinkers who discussed the issues raised by historicism, Rickert was easily the most subtle, systematic and sophisticated.⁶ *Die Grenzen der naturwissenschaftlichen Begriffsbildung* still stands as the greatest attempt to formulate a non-naturalistic foundation for the study of history. Rickert's philosophy of value also has a remarkable contemporary resonance. The central theme behind it is a concept at the center of contemporary philosophical discussion: normativity. It is fair to say that Rickert examined and explored many of the issues raised by normativity long before his contemporary counterparts.⁷ Of no less historical significance is Rickert's interpretation of Kant. It is the unacknowledged predecessor of all those contemporary Kant interpretations which attempt to explain Kant in normative, anti-metaphysical and anti-psychological terms. The *locus classicus* of these interpretations is the once famous but now nearly forgotten *Der Gegenstand der Erkenntnis*.⁸ Last but not least, one measure of Rickert's importance is his influence upon two central figures

of modern philosophy: Max Weber and Martin Heidegger. Neither can be fully understood without coming to terms with Rickert.

The following chapter is an attempt to provide an introduction and survey of Rickert's philosophy, one especially focused upon the issues raised by historicism. After a brief account of Rickert's context and agenda, we will consider his reflections on the possibility of history as a science in his early writings (sections 3–5); we will then treat his later attempt to formulate a general philosophy of value and to resolve the problem of the relationship between norms and facts (sections 6–8). Finally, we will examine Rickert's attempt to rescue the authority of reason from the dangers of historicism and voluntarism (9–12).

2. Problem and agenda

All his life, whether as a young man or an old sage, Rickert was deeply troubled by historicism. He feared that it would lead to relativism, undermining the claims of philosophy to provide universal and necessary truth. If historicism were true, each philosophy would be only the self-awareness of its own age, an epitome of the beliefs and values of a specific culture. But the ultimate result of historicism, Rickert warned, is nothing less than nihilism, loss of belief in any ultimate values.⁹ Against such a grave danger, Rickert could only declare unremitting and merciless warfare: “As a worldview historicism makes principlelessness into a principle, and consequently it is to be fought against decisively in the philosophy of history and in philosophy in general.”¹⁰

Rickert's fear of historicism was not simply academic but grew out of his personal experience. He tells us how in his early days, before he studied under Windelband, he was drawn to “the English positivism of the eighteenth century,” and how this led him to skepticism and relativism.¹¹ The young Rickert became something of a nihilist, because he believed that personal will alone is the source of value, and that all thinking leads to “nothingness”. Since he was convinced that all attempts at systematic philosophy are futile, he resolved to study the history of philosophy, whose facts at least gave him some solid footing. It was hearing Windelband's lectures on the history of philosophy, he informs us, that cured him of his skepticism and relativism.¹² Windelband taught him that, despite its apparent chaos and confusion, the history of philosophy reveals coherence, unity and development, indeed a single *philosophia perennis*. From Windelband's lectures he learned an important lesson: that it is only

from history that we learn how to rid ourselves of history.¹³ This was not, of course, the lesson his teacher wanted him to learn.

Having lived through the horrors of nihilism, Rickert resolved to combat its ultimate source: historicism. The challenge of historicism for him appears most sharply in the introduction to his best known work, *Die Grenzen der naturwissenschaftlichen Begriffsbildung*.¹⁴ The aim of this work is twofold: to secure the status of history as a science; and to show the limits of history. To achieve the first aim, Rickert had to counter naturalism, which held that the methodology of the natural sciences is the sole model for all science. But to attain the second aim, he had to battle historicism, which applies the methods of history to philosophy itself. Of these two threats, Rickert admitted that he was more bothered by historicism than naturalism. While naturalism at least leaves the ideal of science intact, historicism undermines science itself. If universalized and taken to an extreme, the principles of historicism show all thought to be historically conditioned and limited, so that there can be no claim to universal and necessary truth.

To combat the twin dangers of naturalism and historicism, Rickert follows Windelband's basic strategy: he separates the realms of value and fact, normativity and existence. He too distinguishes between the *quid facti?* and *quid juris?*, questions of fact and questions of right or validity. Normative questions are not about what *is* or exists but about what *ought* to be, and as such they cannot be solved by any amount of historical or natural knowledge. Such a distinction performs a twofold task for Rickert. On the one hand, it ensures the autonomy of history and natural science, each of which holds without exception in the realm of fact or existence. This entire realm is thus conceded to naturalism and historicism, so that whatever happens in nature is subject to universal laws, and so that whatever happens in history changes and is relative to culture and context. On the other hand, however, both naturalism and historicism are kept within their limits because they hold *only* within the realm of fact or existence; they have no validity for the realm of value, which transcends the spheres of nature and history altogether.

But, from Windelband, Rickert inherited problems as well as strategies. While the inspiration for his system was Windelband's distinction between value and fact, that

distinction, as we have seen above,¹⁵ also created difficulties all its own. For it raises the crucial question of the relation between values and facts, norm and existence. We talk about the actualization of values in the world, of actions that realize ends. But how is this possible if values and existence are so distinct? This was analogous to Kant's notorious problem of uniting the noumenal and phenomenal worlds. We have already seen how Windelband struggled with this problem in the 1890s, and how he proposed different solutions to it. Where Windelband left off, Rickert began, approaching the same problem from a more systematic perspective. One central task of his system of philosophy, which we will consider in sections 6–8, is to show how values and facts are interconnected and form a single coherent conception of the world. We shall soon see, however, that this problem was fateful for Rickert, just as it was for Windelband.

If we were to describe in a single phrase the intent behind Rickert's philosophy, we might say that it is to defend the autonomy of reason. By “the autonomy of reason” here we mean the power of reason to know the truth in a disinterested and universal way, strictly according to the degree of evidence for it, independent of moral, religious or political motives. Although Rickert himself does not use this phrase, it is an apt expression for his own ideal of science, which he expounds in several of his late essays.¹⁶ His ideal of science involves several presuppositions. First, that reason has the power to investigate the truth for its own sake, independent of practical ends. Second, that reason has the power to acquire a universal perspective on life and the world, independent of the values and beliefs of one's own culture. Third, that reason has the power to know eternal truths, i.e., propositions whose validity transcends time and place. In his early years Rickert believed that all these assumptions were threatened by historicism; in his later years, however, he began to focus more on another threat to them: voluntarism, the thesis that all values, including even intellectual ones, are created by the will. He saw voluntarism surface in pragmatism and the popular *Lebensphilosophie* of his day. Accordingly, much of his literary effort in his later years was devoted to attacking *Lebensphilosophie*.¹⁷ In his final years he found himself defending his ideal of science against a new and formidable adversary: his old student, Martin Heidegger.¹⁸

As much as Rickert was concerned to defend the ideal of science or the rights of *theoretical* reason, he had no such interests with regard to the ideal of morality or *practical* reason. Rickert was indeed critical of Kant's famous doctrine of the primacy of practical reason, which granted reason rights in the ethical sphere that it did not have in the

theoretical sphere.¹⁹ He rejected Kant's attempt to justify ethical values on the basis of practical reason, as if there could be some logical demonstration for atheoretical values. For Rickert, such a project failed to recognize the *sui generis* status of ethical values: "A value that is made valid through a proof is no longer an ethical value but a logical one."²⁰ It is important to note this point if only because one of the most common interpretations of Rickert's thought assumes that he radically extended Kant's doctrine of the primacy of practical reason, making it the very foundation of his philosophy.²¹ It is easy to understand the source of this mistake: since Rickert's theory of values sees even judgment as based on value, it seems as if he extends the realm of the practical to judgment itself. But this is to commit two mistakes Rickert expressly warned against: it confuses practical and theoretical values, and it equates values with the realm of the practical in general. Rickert's foremost concern was to defend the autonomy and integrity of theoretical reason from interference from all practical values, and as such he was opposed to the very spirit of Kant's philosophy: the primacy of the practical over the theoretical.²²

Rickert's rejection of the claims of practical reason show that it would be a mistake to describe him as an unqualified "rationalist" or to place him within the tradition of the Enlightenment. It is surely significant that Rickert refused to classify himself in these terms. He made a sharp distinction between his ideal of science and what he called "intellectualism."²³ While his ideal of science makes reason the sovereign standard of truth in the realm of theory, intellectualism claimed that reason is the sovereign standard of value for every aspect of culture, for ethics, politics, aesthetics and religion as well as science. Intellectualism also makes the life of contemplation the highest good, implying that other human activities have a lesser value. Though Rickert passionately defended the ideal of science, he was vigorously opposed to intellectualism. He believed that contemplation alone was too narrow as a life ideal, and he disputed—surprisingly for a neo-Kantian—the sovereignty of reason not only in ethics but also in politics, aesthetics and religion. Contrary to classical rationalism, he maintained that the standard of value in ethics and politics is the will, and in aesthetics and religion it is feeling; in these cultural spheres he held that reason cannot determine ends but only means, where the ends themselves are set by will and feeling. Though it had been upheld by the Enlightenment and pre-Kantian rationalism, Rickert believed that intellectualism was a bankrupt legacy of Greek culture no longer applicable to the modern world. Despite his opposition to pragmatism and *Lebensphilosophie*, Rickert

conceded that they had made valid criticisms of the intellectualism of the Enlightenment.²⁴ The only problem is that they threw the baby of science out with the bathwater of intellectualism.

So in the bitter culture wars of his day, in the classic struggle between rationalism and irrationalism, Rickert attempted to steer a middle course. While he held that reason is sovereign in the domain of science, or that truth is the dominating *sui generis* value in the realm of theory, he also insisted on recognizing the irrational powers of the will and feeling in the spheres of politics, art and religion. It is necessary to assume, he argued, “a third standpoint” between the extreme irrationalist, who questions the autonomy of reason in the realm of theory, and the extreme rationalist, who thinks that reason is the sovereign authority in all domains of culture.²⁵ This third standpoint is a *via media* that pays homage to both Apollo and Dionysus. It happily recognizes a plurality of values, the distinctive, irreducible worth of both the theoretical and atheoretical, the rational and irrational.

3. Cultural and natural science

The central concern of Rickert's early writings—*Die Grenzen der naturwissenschaftlichen Begriffsbildung* (1896), *Kulturwissenschaft und Naturwissenschaft* (1899) and *Die Probleme der Geschichtsphilosophie* (1905)—was the possibility of history as a science. Their chief task is to investigate the conditions and limits of historical knowledge. Like Windelband, Rickert faced the dilemma of both securing and limiting history as a science. At stake was nothing less than the authority of reason itself. If history could not be secured as a science, the powers of reason would be severely limited, because it could not provide knowledge of human action. The realm of history would then be accessible to only aesthetic insight or common sense intuition. If, however, history could not be limited, reason would lose its autonomy, indeed its claim to universal validity, because all its principles would show themselves to be the product of a specific historical culture. All Rickert's early writings are devoted to surmounting this dilemma; their general aim is to show that history can be a science yet still pose no threat to reason.

Rickert's reflections on this problem, like those of Windelband and Dilthey, take place in the context of the nineteenth-century discussion about the classification of the sciences. The point behind Rickert's classification was to gerrymander: to draw boundaries so that history could be both secured and limited. The starting point for his reflections was Windelband's famous Straßburg Inaugural Address, “Geschichte und Naturwissenschaft.”²⁶ Rickert agreed with Windelband that the fundamental distinction between the sciences should be formal rather than material, based on their methods rather than subject matters, and he too opposed on these grounds

Dilthey's concept of *Geisteswissenschaften*. Rickert also accepted Windelband's basic way of distinguishing between methods: that the historical sciences are "idiographic," devoted to describing the individual, whereas the natural sciences are "nomothetic," concerned with finding general laws. He complained, however, that Windelband had not provided a sufficient foundation for his own distinction, and that he had even undermined the scientific status of history by likening the historian to an artist who "intuits" the "shapes" or "forms" (*Gestalten*) of individual things.²⁷ While Windelband, like Ranke, stressed the affinity between art and history, Rickert, like Droysen, wanted to separate them to uphold the strictly scientific status of history.

Rickert's simplest and clearest account of his distinction between the sciences appears in his *Die Probleme der Geschichtsphilosophie*.²⁸ From the outset his account is more explicitly pragmatic than Windelband's. He begins his exposition by distinguishing between two very different epistemic interests or goals (PG 30, 38, 39). One interest is to know *what different things have in common*, their universal or general properties; another interest is to know *what distinguishes one thing from another*, its individuality and uniqueness. Answering to these different interests, we have two very different kinds of method. One method is *generalizing*: it attempts to find the universal in the particular; it treats the particular only as an instance of the general. The other method is *individuating*: it attempts to find the particular in the universal, to see what makes each particular unique and distinctive.

Rickert claims that this basic difference in epistemic interests should determine the distinction between the historical and natural sciences. The generalizing interest is characteristic of the natural sciences, whereas the individualizing interest is characteristic of the historical sciences. While the goal of the natural sciences is to determine general laws that hold for all particulars, the aim of the historical sciences is to know something unique, irrepeatable and individual. Whatever we attempt to know in the historical sciences is something individual, whether it is a particular personality (Napoleon, Charlemagne), a particular event (the battle of Waterloo), or a particular epoch (the Renaissance or Reformation). All these are individual in the sense that they are unique, irrepeatable and singular. Whether there are other personalities, events and epochs like them is irrelevant; in history we want to know just *this* personality, *this* event and *this* epoch, the one that happened at one moment in time and that will never recur.

Following Windelband, Rickert would often describe his basic distinction as *logical* or *formal* rather than *material* or *substantial*, i.e., he thinks that it is based on different methods rather than different objects. He leaves us in no doubt about the primacy of formal over material distinctions: "We look for the science not in the concept of its object, but conversely the concept of the object from the concept of the science that

deals with it.” (GB 225). There is one and the same reality, he wrote, but we look at it differently depending upon our methods. Reality is *nature* insofar as we treat it by universalizing methods; and reality is *history* insofar as we deal with it by individualizing methods (KN 63). This insistence on the primacy of formal distinctions was ultimately inspired by Kant, of course, specifically by the Transcendental Dialectic of the first *Kritik*. It was the upshot of Kant's teaching in the Dialectic that what makes objects valuable, interesting or significant is not something given to us but something created by us; we must be careful, therefore, not to reify what we read into objects, as if they have qualities in themselves that are really produced only by us. To avoid hypostasis, *constitutive* principles, which appear to describe something that exists, need to be reformulated into *regulative* ones, which prescribe something as a task. In that spirit, formal distinctions take precedence over material ones.

However faithful to Kant, a purely formal distinction, Rickert realizes, does not entirely work. The distinction between methods does not neatly divide the historical and natural sciences. It is not as if the natural sciences only use generalizing methods, or as if the historical sciences only use individualizing ones. The individualizing method is often used in the natural sciences, the universalizing method is frequently employed in the historical sciences. Perfectly aware of this point, Rickert sometimes concedes that his purely logical distinction is an idealization or simplification; he recognizes that it defines two extremes, and that all actual sciences will in some way lie between them (KN, 18–19, 118–32; GB 118–19, 123–4). In the face of this problem, he, like Windelband, falls back on the pragmatic point that the main difference between these sciences lies in their different goals or interests. If the individualizing method is more characteristic of the historical sciences, that is because it is usually the most direct and effective means to its goal: to know the unique and individual; and if the generalizing method is more characteristic of the natural sciences, that is because it is normally the most direct and effective means to its end: to know general laws.

Since he advocates an essentially formal distinction between the sciences, Rickert is very critical of attempts to give a material distinction between them, as if their differences were only in subject matter. For this reason, he is especially opposed to Dilthey's distinction between the *Geisteswissenschaften* and *Naturwissenschaften*, which was the chief competitor to his own formal distinction.²⁹ Rickert concedes that the term *Geisteswissenschaften* is not entirely inaccurate; it is indeed the case that the historical sciences primarily treat mental rather than physical phenomena (KN 14–15; PG 15). Nevertheless, he insists that the distinction between the spiritual and natural, the mental and physical, does not fully capture the fundamental differences between these sciences. One problem with this distinction, he argues with Windelband, is that the mental realm is now the object of psychology, which uses the same generalizing methods as the other natural sciences (KN 15, 72–3; GB 152–6; PG 15–16). If

psychology is a natural science, then the distinction between the natural and human sciences cannot be between the mental and physical.

Another problem with Dilthey's distinction, Rickert maintains, is that it rests upon an old dualistic metaphysics. Dilthey thinks that the mind is the special province of the *Geisteswissenschaften* because he assumes that its characteristic qualities—freedom and intentionality—stand above the realm of nature. But in making this assumption Dilthey not only imposes arbitrary limits on the natural sciences, he also tacitly admits naturalism, i.e., the doctrine that the natural sciences alone possess a legitimate methodology (KN, 59; GB 176–77; 183–4). For we postulate something outside nature only if we assume that the natural sciences have the only methods of explaining everything within nature. If, however, we stress a formal difference between the sciences, the advance of the natural sciences is not threatening to the special status of history. For even if historical phenomena are explicable by naturalistic methods, they also will be explicable according to historical methods logically distinct from them. There are then different but equally legitimate perspectives on the same phenomena.

Although he was always opposed to Dilthey's distinction between *Geisteswissenschaften* and *Naturwissenschaften*, Rickert later realized that there are other ways of reformulating it that are more plausible and not so prone to difficulties. In the third 1924 edition of his *Die Probleme der Geschichtsphilosophie* he added a chapter taking into account some of these reformulations.³⁰ The most important reformulation is that which defines the realm of *Geist* in terms of sense (*Bedeutung*) or structures of meaning (*Sinngebilde*). Rather than understanding *Geist* in terms of the psychic as opposed to the physical, this formulation interprets it in terms of the intelligible, as structures of meaning. The realm of the spiritual or mental now consists in not psychic acts or events so much as the entire realm of intentionality. This interpretation cuts across the traditional distinction between the mental and physical as kinds of things. It distinguishes between empirically perceptible *realities*, which are partly physical and partly mental, and intellectually comprehensible *idealities*, which are neither physical nor psychical. While the realm of the empirically perceptible belongs to the natural sciences, that of the intellectually comprehensible pertains to the social and historical sciences. In formulating the distinction along these lines, Rickert most probably had in mind the late Dilthey, though he does not mention him explicitly. He conceded that this kind of distinction is much more promising than that between the mental and physical. The social and historical sciences surely do concern themselves with the realm of meaning; and such a distinction could also recognize the status of psychology as a natural science. Nevertheless, Rickert believed that even this kind of distinction would not work as a basis to distinguish between the sciences. The chief difficulty, he argued, is that history does not concern itself exclusively or entirely with the ideal structures of meaning; it also deals with actual events. The material of history is not simply some

realm of intelligible objects but also the empirically perceptible realm of psychophysical reality (PG 24). The material of history is indeed so multifarious—it includes the psychic, the physical, and the ideal or intentional—that no material distinction alone can distinguish it from the natural sciences.

Despite his opposition to a material distinction between the sciences, it is noteworthy that Rickert advocates a material distinction all his own. In *Kulturwissenschaft und Naturwissenschaft*,³¹ he proposes a new “material” distinction between the historical and natural sciences that replaces the term “*Geisteswissenschaften*” with “*Kulturwissenschaften*” (KN 16–17). The fundamental distinction between the sciences should then be formulated as that between *Kulturwissenschaften* and *Naturwissenschaften* rather than that between *Geisteswissenschaften* and *Naturwissenschaften*. Rickert defines the realm of culture in terms of value (*Wert*) (21). An object belongs to the realm of culture if it has some value, whereas an object belongs to nature if it has no value at all. A cultural value is not simply something that one person wants or desires, Rickert insists, but it consists in a norm that is recognized as universally valid for a society (22–3). Hence he formally defines the realm of culture as follows: “the totality of real objects to which universally recognized values are attached, and which are cared for with respect to these values” (28). Since values exist only for some mind, Rickert concedes that the realm of culture falls under that of the mind; nevertheless, he still insists that this does not justify Dilthey's attempt to define the cultural sciences as *Geisteswissenschaften*. He argues that Dilthey's concept will still not work for two reasons: first, the realm of values is not co-extensive with the mental, which is a broader concept; and, second, it is possible to separate values from the psychic acts that create or contemplate them (28).

It is arguable that Rickert's “material” distinction is really no such distinction at all, because it is not really a distinction between kinds of entity. For he does not think that values and natural objects fall into distinct ontological domains, like that between the mental and physical or the ideal and real; rather, he locates values in the *irreal* realm of meaning and intentionality, and stresses that they are not kinds of entity at all; one cannot say of values that they are real but only that they are valid (KN 22). So we can speak of a “material distinction” only in the sense that value and nature are different objects of speech or subjects of discourse. But, even in this attenuated sense, Rickert gives his material distinction a significance that is utterly surprising given his earlier insistence on a strictly formal one. For it turns out that only this material distinction defines the realm of individuality that is the characteristic subject matter of the historical method (KN 89–93; PG 54–68; GB 300–33). Without the values characteristic of the realm of culture, Rickert argues, the whole method of individualization would be impossible in the historical sciences. Why is this? Rickert explains that the historical world, as it is simply given to us, consists in a vast manifold of objects, each of which has an infinite complexity. In both its extensive magnitude (the number of

objects) and intensive magnitude (the complexity of each object) the historical manifold, just like the natural manifold, is infinite (*unübersehbar*). The historian therefore needs some principle of selection that determines why he focuses on just this object, and indeed on just this aspect of it. The principle of selection, which distinguishes between the essential and inessential in the manifold, is determined by the historian's interests, which are ultimately determined by his values. The very concept of the individual, the unique and singular, is therefore determined by our interests and values. Speaking purely ontologically, the particulars of nature are as unique and individual as any particular in the world of culture. A lump of coal is just as determinate, unique and individual as the Kohinoor diamond. What gives the Kohinoor diamond its uniqueness and individuality is that some culture gives it a worth or value. Hence Rickert comes to the conclusion: "Through the values that attach to a culture, and through the relation to them, the concept of a presentable historical individual is first *constituted*." (KN 93).

In the final analysis, then, Rickert makes the fundamental dividing line between the sciences depend less on their methods than on the presence or absence of values. While the realm of nature is indifferent to value, the realm of culture is constituted by values. It is the values behind the realm of culture that ultimately dictate the method, the individualizing procedures, of the historical sciences. Without values, we would not know what to look for in the vast domain of history. Yet as it stands such an argument is vulnerable to an obvious objection. How, one might ask, is such value-dependency limited to the cultural sciences? The natural scientist too needs a principle of selection for his manifold, which is no less infinite extensively and intensively than the historical manifold. Why, then, are the natural sciences anymore value-free than the cultural sciences? In *Die Grenzen der naturwissenschaftlichen Begriffsbildung* Rickert sometimes admits that the natural sciences are indeed just as dependent on values as the cultural sciences (561, 588–9). Here he points out, just as we would expect, that the natural scientist needs a principle of selection to distinguish between the essential and inessential; and he stresses that natural science is no more possible without values than the cultural sciences. He further explains that the natural sciences too are a phenomenon within history, and as such they are subject to all the forces of history itself (595–6). Such concessions seem to obliterate, however, the distinction between the cultural and natural sciences.

Rickert's most explicit attempt to deal with this difficulty appears in his *Die Probleme der Geschichtsphilosophie* (56–7). After conceding the value-dependency of the natural sciences, he still insists that there is much greater value-dependency in the cultural rather than natural sciences. Why? It is because in the cultural sciences, unlike the natural sciences, the *objects themselves* are defined by their values. While the objects of the natural sciences exist independent of values, those of the cultural sciences are defined by them. A natural thing exists regardless of human values, but a social and historical thing exists only through its place in a social and historical whole. Of course, we could identify Napoleon or Bismarck as *physical* entities without knowing anything about their place in history; but we could not identify them as *historical* figures unless

we knew what they meant to people and the significant role they played for the people of their age. So, although both the natural and cultural sciences are directed by values in selecting and defining their subject matter, the very subject matter of the cultural sciences is identifiable only by values whereas that of the natural sciences is value-free. Whatever its merits, this line of argument was Rickert's final defense.

4. The limits of naturalism

Crucial to Rickert's distinction between the sciences was his position on naturalism. If naturalism were true, all sciences would be only so many forms of natural science, applying in one form or another the nomothetic method. There could be no distinction in kind between the natural and historical sciences. Along with historicism, then, naturalism was a major target of Rickert's early works on historical method. Naturalism was an early foe, which assumed less importance for Rickert in later years. When he first started thinking about scientific method in the late 1880s, Rickert informs us, much of the debate surrounding naturalism had lost its urgency.³² The combined efforts of Droysen, Dilthey and Windelband had done much to put naturalism in its place and to legitimate the *sui generis* methods of the human sciences. However, with the *Lamprechtstreit* of the late 1890s, naturalism seemed to enjoy a new lease on life.³³ Rickert's *Die Grenzen der naturwissenschaftlichen Begriffsbildung* partly grew out of this dispute and the need to take a stand against a renewed naturalism.

Like Droysen and Windelband, Rickert identified naturalism with the positivistic doctrine that the methods of the natural sciences are the sole methods of science. The naturalist holds that everything in the universe should be explained according to universal laws, and that there is no other form of explanation. If the human sciences are to be scientific, they too have to explain things according to universal laws. For Rickert, the problem posed by naturalism is very different from that of historicism and voluntarism. While historicism and voluntarism involve the danger of relativism, naturalism undermines human freedom and moral responsibility. It indeed undercuts intellectual autonomy, which presupposes that we have the power to think strictly according to the norms of reason alone, independent of subconscious forces and cultural interests.³⁴ Worst of all, naturalism gives no place to values. While historicism and voluntarism still leave room for values in the world, even if relative ones, naturalism represents a completely value-free universe.

It is important to understand the precise form of Rickert's opposition to naturalism, at least as he sometimes formulates it in his early writings. Rickert contested the naturalist thesis that the methods of natural science are the *sole* scientific ones, and he argued against it for the equal legitimacy of a *sui generis* historical method. However, he did not question the naturalistic thesis that the methods of the natural science are, at least in principle, applicable to the social and historical world. Indeed, he would often endorse this latter thesis. Everything in the social and historical world, he argued, could be legitimately viewed as part of nature, and it could be explained according to natural laws (GB 183–4, 226, 256, 260). There was nothing about the *subject matter* of social and historical reality, he further explained, that prevents the application of natural laws to them (GB 120, 176–7, 184–5). So, on this formulation, the problem with naturalism lies not so much with the *limits* of its perspective—that it could apply to some objects but not others—but with its claim to be the *sole* perspective. There are other methods for studying social and historical reality, Rickert maintained, that are as scientifically legitimate as those of natural science. Hence the ultimate source of Rickert's objection against naturalism is what he called its “monism,” i.e., its attempt to monopolize scientific methodology (GB 533).

Although Rickert often formulates his objection to naturalism along these lines, it is also important to note that it is somewhat misleading and not a completely accurate picture of his position. Rickert's formulation implies that the different methods are fully applicable to the same reality, as if each method were a completely adequate but distinctive perspective on it. There are good reasons for thinking, however, that Rickert does not want to make such a great concession to naturalism. For if the methods of the natural sciences are completely applicable to historical phenomena, there will be a determinism in the cultural world no less binding than that in the natural world. Such a determinism, Rickert is clear, would undermine not only *moral* autonomy—the power *to act* according to norms—but also *intellectual* autonomy—the power *to think* according to them. Transcendental freedom is for Rickert the necessary condition not only of moral action but also of thought and knowledge itself.³⁵ Sure enough, perfectly in accord with such thinking, Rickert makes other arguments whose unmistakable purport is that the methods of the natural sciences are inadequate to historical reality. It turns out, in other words, that there is something about the subject matter of the historical world that thwarts the methods of the natural sciences after all.

What aspects of historical reality are incomprehensible to natural scientific methods? It is a central thesis of Rickert's *Die Grenzen der naturwissenschaftlichen Begriffsbildung* that the limits of natural scientific method are set by nothing less than empirical reality itself, i.e., concrete reality as it is given to our senses (GB 197). What is given to our senses, he reminds us, is a vast qualitative and heterogeneous manifold, immeasurable in both its extensive (the number of things) and intensive (the aspects of each thing) magnitude.

Our sense experience reveals many different kinds of qualities, none of which is entirely expressible in quantitative terms; and it consists in many particular things, each of which is unique and determinate, none of which is reducible to any set of universals that apply to them. It is precisely this qualitative and heterogeneous world, Rickert argues, from which the natural sciences abstract in their attempt to formulate universal laws.³⁶ Since the laws of the natural sciences are universal, they hold for each particular only insofar as it is an instance of a general kind; they do not attempt to know the particular as particular. And since these laws are quantitative, they measure the world according to precise uniform units; they construct their own *homogeneous* and *quantitative* mathematical manifold, which stands in sharp contrast to the *heterogeneous* and *qualitative* manifold of the sensual world. Hence the entire sensible world in all its variety and particularity falls through the conceptual web of the natural sciences. In drawing this conclusion Rickert does not mean to deny that natural laws are applicable to particular events; he even accepts the theory of du Bois-Raymond that natural science has the power, through a system of differential equations, to predict precisely any motion taking place in the empirical world (GB 204–5, 396–8).³⁷ He is quick to point out, however, that such predictions do not grasp the *qualitative* dimension of individuality. All that they determine with such accuracy and precision is the *quantitative* aspects of a thing, viz., its motion or precise location in space and time. The spatial and temporal aspects of an object, Rickert maintains, do not exhaust the *principium individuationis*, which also involves the intrinsic qualitative properties of a thing (GB 210, 216). Here, then, Rickert upholds Windelband's fundamental dualism between particular and universal.

Rickert gives another powerful formulation of the same argument in his *Kulturwissenschaft und Naturwissenschaft* (34–7).³⁸ Here he discusses two different respects in which reality is “irrational”, escaping the conceptualization of the natural sciences. One respect is that reality is *continuous*, i.e., it changes gradually by infinitesimal degrees. The other respect is that reality is *heterogeneous*, i.e., it consists in unique and particular things, none of which is ever exactly the same as another. Wherever we look in reality, he notes, we see the indissoluble unity of these two factors: a continuous heterogeneity, a heterogeneous continuity (35). In both respects, however, reality escapes the conceptual thinking of the natural sciences. Such thinking consists in universalizing, so that it abstracts from the heterogeneity of things; and it is also analytical, making precise distinctions between things, so that it never grasps continuity (36). Hence the methods of the sciences give an inverted picture of reality: they make the different alike through abstraction; and, through analysis of the continuous into discrete parts, they make the

like different. In sum: while reality is a heterogeneous continuum, the sciences turn it into a homogeneous discretum (36). *Prima facie* Rickert's arguments are too strong, because they seem not only to limit but even to invalidate the methods of the natural sciences. After all, on his account the natural sciences give an *inverted* picture of reality: they make the similar dissimilar, the dissimilar similar. They deal with the common, universal and quantitative whereas reality is the unique, particular and qualitative. It was with arguments like these that *Lebensphilosophen* like Bergson and Nietzsche would limit the realm of reason and affirm the reality of the irrational. There are indeed passages in Rickert where he seems to endorse views just like theirs: "Only with immediate life, never with the natural sciences, do we come close to the rich content of reality." (GB 196). He also affirms that reality is irrational in the sense that the finite human intellect will never be able to analyze it completely (GB 37). It is important to see, however, that from this Rickert never draws Bergson's and Nietzsche's conclusions. Skepticism about the natural sciences, he argues, is based upon a false standard of knowledge. It assumes that knowledge consists in a picture of reality, as if it were somehow meant to be a copy of things that resembles them. Such a standard is mistaken, however, because all knowledge *transforms* reality by making it conform to the conditions of our understanding it. We have to measure natural scientific knowledge not in terms of its correspondence to reality, Rickert argues, but in terms of its validity, i.e., whether it is the most effective and coherent means of understanding and controlling things. Measured by such a standard of truth, there could be no doubt about the validity of the natural sciences.

While Rickert's arguments do not imply a complete skepticism about the natural sciences, they do impose a clear limit upon their power to explain the historical world. For the subject matter of history consists in precisely that realm of the heterogeneous and qualitative from which the natural sciences abstract. Whereas the natural scientist treats the particular simply as an instance of the universal, the historian examines the particular as particular, focusing upon what makes it unique and distinctive. Rickert is clear that the historian too has to simplify his manifold, just like the natural scientist (GB 289–92). Like the natural scientist, the historian also has to transform reality, and he does not simply report on what is given to him. Nevertheless, Rickert often stresses that the historian's individualizing methods bring him closer to empirical reality than the natural scientist's universalizing methods. He reasons that since reality is particular, and since the historian treats the particular for its own sake, the historian has more direct contact with reality than the natural scientist. For this reason he rather pointedly calls history "the science of reality" (*Wirklichkeitswissenschaft*) (GB 223–4). And so, after a close comparison of history's claim to objectivity with that of the natural sciences, Rickert comes down firmly on the side of history: "History is the proper *science of experience*, not only because its individual concepts stand closer to the individual experience of immediate reality, but also because its directing viewpoint is much more easily derived from experience." (GB 564; cf. GB 223–4) The historian's greater

proximity to empirical reality becomes especially evident, Rickert argues, when we consider that the main interest of the historian is tied to *existence* (events, personalities, etc.), whereas the chief concern of the natural scientist is to formulate laws that have *ahypothetical* or *conditional* validity (GB 292–3). It does not matter to the natural scientist whether the events described in his laws actually occur, but only that *if* they do so, they will give rise to, or occur in relation to, other events. And so Rickert's initial ambition of proving the equal validity of historical methods ends by proving their superiority over natural scientific ones.³⁹

Rickert's belief that the specific subject matter of history poses inherent limits to the natural sciences also becomes apparent from his attitude toward historical laws. He flatly rejects the possibility of such laws, finding them a *contradictio in adjecto*. When one writes about laws of history, he argues in *Die Probleme der Geschichtsphilosophie*, one means a *natural* law, i.e., a universal proposition that concerns the causal connection between two different *types* of event (89–90). But the mere fact that these laws intend to be universal, holding for all events of specific kinds, means that they abstract from the uniqueness and individuality of historical life. Rickert insists that he has no objection to sociology, which for him means the attempt to establish natural laws for the social and historical world. There is no intrinsic problem with such laws, he claims, though they are not in the proper sense *historical* (PG 93; GB 227, 455–8). They treat human beings as instances of general laws and *ipso facto* fail to consider them in their uniqueness and individuality. A sociological law concerning the development of culture would hold for *all* cultures, and for just this reason would not tell us anything about the development of Greek, German or French culture (GB 458).

Rickert had other reasons for limiting the natural sciences with respect to the subject matter of history. In his view, it is not only the particularity and uniqueness of historical phenomena that restrict naturalistic explanation: it is also their relations to values (*Wertbezogenheit*). Rickert limits the methods of the natural sciences not only because they imperil moral and intellectual autonomy, but also because they cannot recognize the values that are constitutive of the very subject matter of history. This is another motivation for his *material* distinction between the cultural and natural sciences. According to that distinction, the subject matter of the natural sciences is nature, which exists independent of human values, while the subject matter of history or the cultural sciences are people or events insofar as they have meaning or value (GB 508–9; KN 21–2). We identify events and personalities in history insofar as they play a significant role in a social and historical whole, and insofar as they illustrate or express certain structures of meaning (GB 515). But both these wholes and structures of

meaning, Rickert contends, fall outside the purview of the natural sciences. These wholes are not abstract concepts, the stock-in-trade of the natural sciences, but individual unities. There is a very big difference between an abstract concept and a universal whole: the content of an abstract universal *decreases* with its extension, whereas the content of an individual whole *increases* with its extension (PG 45; GB 356). These structures consist in the meaning of words and the content of judgments; and as such they are not something physical or psychological, the range of subjects of natural science; rather, they belong to a “a third realm” that does not exist in any straightforward sense (GB 515–16). Soon enough, we will find occasion to explore this magical realm.

5. Historical objectivity

It was one of the characteristic doctrines of Rickert's early writings that all the sciences are directed by values. Both the cultural and natural sciences depend upon values to define their subject matter, to motivate their enquiries and to determine their standards of validity. Such a teaching put Rickert at odds with some powerful intellectual currents of his day, especially with Ranke's historicism and Comte's positivism, which had stressed the importance of factual knowledge and value-free enquiry.

Why did Rickert put forward this doctrine? Its chief inspiration is nothing less than the guiding principle behind Kant's Copernican Revolution: that truth is not an object that is given but an ideal that we create. For Rickert, such an ideal serves as a norm or goal of enquiry, and as such it is a value. Often in his account of concept formation in the natural and cultural sciences Rickert would appeal to this principle. He argued that Ranke's historicism and Comte's positivism were infected with pre-Kantian epistemology because they still clung to the old conception of truth as the correspondence of a representation with a thing in itself.

As important as this principle was for Rickert, it also raised a very serious problem for him. Namely, if the sciences depend on values, how can they achieve objectivity? The very nature of science demands that it should be objective and impartial; but dependency upon values invites the danger of subjectivity and partiality. In stressing the dependence of knowledge on values, Rickert appeared to come close to skepticism and relativism, for, given the notorious variability of values, there is only a short slippery step from value-dependency to value-relativity. The relativity of values seems to imply the relativity of knowledge itself. For this very reason Rickert has been charged with supporting “a radically subjective conception of historical knowledge.”⁴⁰ How could Rickert avoid such an objection? How could he have it both ways? How could he uphold the objectivity of scientific truth and maintain the value-dependency of scientific enquiry?

One of Rickert's most systematic treatments of this problem appears in the penultimate chapter of the second edition of *Die Grenzen der naturwissenschaftlichen Begriffsbildung*.⁴¹ Here Rickert argued for both the value-dependence of the sciences and the possibility of objectivity. He sees, however, no real tension between these doctrines because he assumes that the values determining knowledge are primarily theoretical rather than practical (602, 604). A theoretical value is one directed toward the truth alone, one that prizes knowledge solely for the sake of knowledge. He admitted that the very possibility of value involves the concept of the will to realize or achieve it; but he also stressed that there is such a thing as "the will to truth," i.e., a will to know the truth for its own sake, regardless of the consequences (604). It should be plain, however, that this argument really only begs the question. For the question remains whether any such will really exists.

Fortunately, Rickert did not leave matters with this weak argument. Another one of his strategies to prevent the slide from value-dependency to truth-relativity is to stress the universality and necessity of certain values. Although all truth depends on values, this does not result in relativism, he argues, for the simple reason that these values are universal and necessary. The universality and necessity of some values could be established, Rickert argued, by showing them to be necessary presuppositions of all discourse (GB 592–3). It would be necessary to demonstrate, in other words, that the very denial of these values would be self-defeating because to deny them would be to presuppose them. For example, the skeptic cannot doubt the value of knowledge without also assuming it. In a similar fashion in *Kulturwissenschaft und Naturwissenschaft* Rickert affirmed that there are certain universal and necessary values that provide the necessary conditions under which people from all cultures and epochs hold values (130, 168). These values are purely formal in the sense that they do not prescribe specific ends but lay down the conditions under which anyone has ends. Rickert took steps toward outlining such a system of universal values in his 1913 article "Vom System der Werte."⁴² The main idea here was to construct what Rickert called "an open system," i.e., a system whose form or general principles would be universal, determining the necessary conditions of having values at all, but whose content would vary and change with history. Although the content would be historical, the principles themselves would be "superhistorical" because they determine the necessary conditions of all values.

Clearly, Rickert's project for a system of values was very ambitious, and it is not surprising that he never got beyond the crude sketch of his 1913 article.⁴³ But even assuming he could work out such a system in detail, and even assuming he could

demonstrate that there are such universal principles,⁴⁴ the question remains whether such a system would be sufficient to guarantee historical objectivity. The problem is that such principles tend to be so general that they cannot prohibit relativism on the more specific level of historical enquiry. Rickert does not tell us what these principles would be; but because they must be very universal, they will be compatible with all kinds of specific values; and as such they do not rule out differences, even conflicts, between them. This leaves it open for historians to conduct their enquiries according to different, even opposing, ends and interests and for them still to meet the requirements of the general principles. Which ends or interests should they have? The principles are too general to help us. The problem here is a classic one of Kantian epistemology: bridging the gap between transcendental principles and the concrete content of experience.⁴⁵

It is noteworthy that Rickert himself realized that his system could not provide much of a field guide to questions of practice. At the close of "Vom System der Werte" he concedes that the purely formal principles of his system will not suffice to decide which values are central or most important (322). In the end, he admits that philosophy cannot do more than sketch the alternative worldviews, leaving it for the individual to decide for himself (323). And with that, Rickert threw in the towel to the voluntarist whom he so loved to hate.

Fortunately, though, Rickert's systematic project was not his only or ultimate strategy to deal with relativism. His favorite ploy was to appeal to a simple distinction, one which Weber will later love to deploy, and one akin to the logician's distinction between use and mention. We can maintain both the objectivity and value-dependency of the cultural sciences, he argued, provided that we distinguish between two distinct acts: *valuing* (*Wertung*) and *relating or referring to values* (*Wertbeziehen*) (KN 101–2; GB 326–9). When we value something we approve or disapprove it, praise or blame it; but when we relate something to values we simply note that it is important or essential for the historical agents themselves (KN 101; GB 329). While valuing involves actually making value judgments, relating to values demands nothing more than recognizing such judgments without agreeing or disagreeing with them. This means that when the historian selects his subject matter, he should be guided not by *his* values but by those of the historical agents themselves. He determines whether something is essential not according to his interests but those of his subject matter (KN 100–1). The historian who studies the French Revolution, for example, might disapprove of its basic principles; nevertheless, he continues to study it because he recognizes that it was such an important event for contemporaries themselves. In Rickert's terminology, such a historian is not valuing but simply relating to values. Since he does not make value

judgments himself but simply notes the values held by others in history, he does not impair his ideal of objectivity; but at the same time he does full justice to the constitutive role of values in history.

Armed with this simple distinction, Rickert believed that he could sort out all the controversial issues surrounding Ranke's demand for historical objectivity, i.e., the demand that the historian should simply tell the truth "how it really is."⁴⁶ On the one hand, Rickert believed that Ranke was simply naive in thinking that the historian could avoid all values and simply tell the truth as it appeared before him. He had failed to see the crucial role of values in defining the historian's subject matter (KN 96). Yet, on the other hand, Ranke was right after all to insist upon historical objectivity and the need for the historian to refrain from moral judgments in studying his subject matter. It is not the business of the historian, he claims, to determine the value of his subject matter, i.e., whether it is right or wrong, useful or harmful (KN 99–100). Ranke's demand for objectivity was fully justified, Rickert argued, insofar as it was directed against (a) falsifying the documents of the past according to political or religious interests, and (b) praising or blaming actions and personalities of the past (KN 95). In both these respects Ranke was to be praised for taking steps toward the objectivity, and scientific status, of history. It is possible to see the limits and merits of Ranke's position, Rickert argued, provided that we make the crucial distinction between valuing and relating to values, which had been confused by both Ranke and his opponents. History depends on values only in the sense that it is *value-relating*, but it is value-free in the sense that it does not engage in *valuing*.

Although his distinction is strategic, it is still questionable that it can do everything Rickert expects. The problem is that, in defining his subject matter, the historian cannot simply rely on the values held by historical agents in the past; he cannot assume that *their* values are the deciding forces of history, or that they alone determine the significance of his subject matter. In other words, the historian cannot determine significance simply by what the agents themselves regard as significant; he has to decide what is significant for himself. The problem here is simple but weighty: that agents themselves are not always the best judges of historical significance; they are not the ultimate arbiters of historical significance, even for their own epoch, because they are not fully aware of the total consequences of their actions, and because they are not cognizant of the complete panorama of which their actions are only a part. Having the benefit of hindsight, only the historian knows these consequences and the whole panorama; and so *he* must determine what is significant or essential. Rickert's distinction demands that the historian forfeit his own judgment, undermining the very theoretical autonomy he wants to protect. But once we recognize the indispensable role of the historian himself in deciding the significance of his subject matter, the problem of objectivity arises all over again, because the historians' decision about

significance will be determined by his own personal interests and cultural perspective. In his own reaffirmation of the ideal of objectivity, Rickert seemed to ignore the fundamental role of the historian's own personality and culture in motivating his enquiry and defining his subject matter.⁴⁷

To be fair, Rickert sometimes seems to recognize this deeper problem and that his simple distinction between valuing and value-relating will not suffice. In the final chapter of *Kulturwissenschaft und Naturwissenschaft*, he argues explicitly that there is a problem of objectivity in history because of the role of the *historian's* values in determining what is essential or important (KN 156–7; GB 351–2). Since the historian's values determine significance and selection of subject matter, and since these values differ from one culture to the next, it seems there will be as many historical truths as there are different cultural circles (KN 157). The only way around this difficulty, Rickert argues, is for the historian to establish that, despite the enormous diversity of cultures, there are universal values in history itself, so that a history is valid not only for this or that culture but for *world* history as a whole (157). The universality of values cannot be established by an *empirical* history, however, because experience only shows us constant change and diversity in history (158). The only way to establish such universality is to go beyond the realm of empirical history and to proceed to a philosophy of history (163), whose task is to demonstrate the “the value presuppositions of culture in general” (168). Only through the transcendental discourse of a philosophy of history is it possible to determine the universal and necessary values that should be the guiding principles of all history. Hence Rickert makes the possibility of objectivity in history ultimately hinge upon the possibility of a philosophy of history itself. The philosophy of history, which Humboldt, Ranke and Droysen had spurned, thus became the only viable strategy to deal with the problem of relativism.

6. The theory of value

It is clear from Rickert's early writings how important the concept of value had become for him. It had played a central role in his classification of the sciences and in his critique of naturalism. What constitutes the realm of history, and what separates it from the natural world, he had argued, is value. The concept of value was Rickert's formulation for Windelband's concept of the normative; and just as Windelband had made philosophy a doctrine of norms, so Rickert now made it a theory of value. Still, though it played such a vital role in his thinking, Rickert had left the concept of value largely unexamined and unexplored in his early writings. It was to his great credit, though, that he saw this deficiency and labored to rectify it. Starting in the early 1900s, Rickert began to examine systematically the concept of value. It became an important

theme in his writings after 1900, especially the second edition of his *Der Gegenstand der Erkenntnis* (1904), *Zwei Wege der Erkenntnistheorie* (1909) and his *System der Philosophie* (1921).

What, for Rickert, is a value?⁴⁸ He warns us that there is no simple answer to this question. Because it is one of our most basic concepts, value cannot be defined in any strict sense. Nevertheless, Rickert thinks that its meaning can be at least circumscribed and made more comprehensible. Values comprise whatever *ought to be* rather than *what is*; they lay down standards to which our thoughts, actions and feelings should conform. They appear in the form of norms, rules, obligations, imperatives, goals and ends. It is important to see, however, that value is not reducible to any one of these forms in particular, or indeed to all of them in general, because it is that which gives each of them their validity or worth. Rickert stresses this point especially with regard to goals or ends. They are not pure value concepts, he says, because, though we talk about realizing goals or ends, we cannot do that for values as such (SP 113). When we talk about “realizing” values, all that we mean is creating some good in which values inhere; we do not literally mean that we make the value itself come into existence. For the value is not what exists but what makes the goal or end valuable.

Rickert carefully distinguishes value from two things with which it is often confused. One is the *object* having a value; the other is the *act* of valuing. Value is related to both, but it is not identical to either. It is not reducible to the object having the value, because we could provide an exhaustive list of the object's properties and never include value as one of them. If, for example, we enumerate all the properties of an art work, no single one, nor any combination of them, will be its aesthetic merit. Neither is value reducible to acts of valuing, because something can have a value even if no one values it. For example, a proposition can be true even if everyone thinks it is false; an action can be good even if everyone condemns it; and a painting can be beautiful even if no one appreciates it. Such is the distinction between value, the thing valued and act of valuing, Rickert argues, that we must not even think of them as connected (SP 113). Of course, the value can *exist* only if it inheres in some object, or only if someone values it; but the point is that it retains its validity even if it does not exist, i.e., even if it is never realized in some thing, or even if no one recognizes it.

So value enjoys an extraordinary ontological status in Rickert's system. It does not exist in any objective or subjective, ideal or real, form. Since value is not the same as objects having value, it does not exist in an *objective* form; and since it is not the same as acts of valuing, it also does not exist in a *subjective* form. But since the objective and subjective are the only possible forms of existence, values do not belong to the realm of existence at all. Hence Rickert attributes to them an “irreal” rather than real status. We can talk about them as “something” through a figure of speech; but we

must not assume that this something exists, whether in subjective or objective, ideal or real, form.⁴⁹

Rickert often connects the odd ontological status of value with that of sense or meaning (*Sinn oder Bedeutung*). To explain the irreal status of values he refers to the similar but equally strange ontological status of meaning. We can see clearly from the case of meaning, Rickert argues, that there is more to the world than existence.⁵⁰ Meaning has the same irreal status as value. Just as value is not reducible to acts of valuing or things having value, so meaning is not reducible to acts of understanding it or the utterances of particular sentences. The meaning of a sentence is not the same as the acts of understanding it, because it remains the same for many different people who understand it on different occasions. Unlike psychic acts, which differ for each person, meaning is public and common to everyone alike. The meaning is also not reducible to the utterances of it in particular sentences because it is expressible on any occasion in any language. So Rickert concludes that philosophers who want to deny the irreal status of values will have difficulties in accounting for the irreal status of meaning itself.

Rickert has often been accused of hypostasizing and mystifying values, as if he consigns them to a special realm of being. No one, however, wanted to hypostasize or mystify values less. The whole point about giving values an “irreal” status is precisely to avoid any form of hypostasis. Rickert does not think that they exist in any sense at all, and denies that they have some special ontological status like Plato's forms or Spinoza's substance (SP 236–7). If he often talks about a “realm” (*Reich*) of value, it is necessary to recognize that this is only a figure of speech, a metaphor for something that does not exist in a literal or strict sense.

On the basis of his analysis of value, Rickert concludes that it is necessary to distinguish between the realms of value and existence. The question whether something has a value or meaning is completely distinct from the question whether it exists. “Values as values are never actual.”⁵¹ Value is a matter of *validity* or *worth*, i.e., whether a norm, rule or obligation is something to which we *ought to* conform. When we ask whether a proposition is true, or an action is good, or a design is beautiful, it is completely irrelevant whether someone stated the proposition, whether someone did the action, or whether someone executed the design; all that matters is whether the proposition, action or painting has a worth. And so Rickert insists on sharply separating the domains of value and existence:

Everything that merely exists has something in common [i.e., existence] in comparison with that which possesses the character of value; hence the world organizes itself into two sharply separated spheres, which have to be strictly conceptually separated from one another, whatever the relations and connections between them...These unreal values stand as a realm for themselves in contrast to all actual objects, which likewise form a realm of their own. (SP 114)

But such a clear separation between these realms inevitably poses the question of their connection or interrelation. Despite so sharply parting them, Rickert also insists on connecting them and warns against placing values in a heavenly realm where they stand beyond all connection with life.⁵² Values, he insists, are the objects of lived experience. We also talk about “realizing” values, about acting according to them. But how can this be if values and facts are so different? There is a deep paradox in attempting to connect them. For as soon as we live by or realize a value, we bring it into existence; but *ex hypothesi* value is not something that exists, a determinate property that we can point to and describe. Supposedly, value as such is not actual at all; it is what ought to be, not what is. So how is it possible to connect value with existence at all?

This problem began to loom so large in Rickert's thinking that he soon made it into the central problem of philosophy. Such is the *leitmotif* of a remarkable article that Rickert wrote in 1911 for the first issue of *Logos*, “Vom Begriff der Philosophie.”⁵³ This article set much of Rickert's later agenda, providing the ground plan for his later *System der Philosophie*. Ambitious in its scope and far-reaching in its implications, this article radically reconceives the main problem of philosophy. Rickert begins by stating a very traditional conception of philosophy: that it should be knowledge of the world as a whole or the entire universe. According to this conception, philosophy attempts to provide a more comprehensive knowledge of reality than any of the special sciences, which each know only one part of the world. This is, of course, the traditional conception of philosophy as ontology characteristic of Wolff and the rationalist tradition. Although Rickert endorses this traditional definition, he gives it a completely new twist. He thinks that traditional philosophy has conceived its task in much too narrow terms. It has understood the world or universe to be only the realm of *reality* or *existence*, as if philosophy could completely discharge its task by explaining everything that is real or exists. Starting from this premise, philosophers tried to provide a complete knowledge of the world in either of two ways: either they began from an objective standpoint and attempted to explain everything as falling under causal laws; or they began from a subjective standpoint and attempted to interpret everything as an appearance of consciousness. They assumed, correctly, that there are only two forms of existence or reality—the subjective or objective, the mental and physical—and so they attempted to explain the unity of the world by one or the other. But both strategies share a false premise, Rickert argues, because they assume that the universe is exhausted by the realm of existence or reality. It is necessary to reject this premise,

however, because there is another dimension to the universe that is neither subjective nor objective, and that falls entirely outside existence or reality. This is the dimension of value: the realm of truth, goodness and beauty. Value is distinct from the realm of reality or existence because it consists in norms or rules, which determine not what *is* but what *ought to be*. Value is neither subjective nor objective—the sole possibilities for the realm of existence—because it is that which validates the subjective or objective. Once we recognize the *sui generis* status of value, Rickert argues, it becomes necessary to reconceive the basic problem of philosophy. That problem is not how the subjective and objective relate to one another within the realm of existence but how the entire realm of existence relates to the realm of values. What is the relation between value and being, the realm of norms and the realm of existence? That, for Rickert, is now the basic question of philosophy.

7. Strategies against dualism

Rickert's first attempt to solve this problem appears in an article he published in 1909 in *Kant-Studien, Zwei Wege der Erkenntnistheorie*.⁵⁴ The problem arose for him not in an ethical but in an epistemological context. In this article Rickert advances the thesis that the concept of an object of knowledge is essentially normative, so that truth itself turns out to be a value. The problem of the relationship between value and fact then becomes the more specific problem of the relationship between truth and the attempt to know it.

The original inspiration for Rickert's theory of value was, of course, Kant, and more specifically Kant's normative conception of knowledge. When Kant famously stated in the first edition of the *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* that the understanding is a faculty of rules,⁵⁵ he anticipated the heart of Rickert's own epistemology. Rickert himself acknowledged this genealogy of his doctrine.⁵⁶ For him, Kant was indeed “the proper founder of the philosophy of value” (SP 319). The only problem with Kant, Rickert believed, is that he did not fully justify or develop his normative conception of knowledge; had he done so, he would have realized that transcendental philosophy is essentially *Wertlehre*.

In *Der Gegenstand der Erkenntnis* Rickert develops Kant's insight into a full-blown normative epistemology. Following Kant, he insists that we break with the traditional concept of knowledge as the correspondence of a representation with an object existing independently of it, and he argues instead that we should regard knowledge

as the conformity of a judgment with norms. Properly understood, the object of knowledge is a norm having universal and necessary validity; as such it is the *demand* that we affirm a certain judgment to be true or false. We must be careful, Rickert warns, not to hypostatize or reify the norm, as if it were a kind of entity in its own right; the norm is essentially a demand, an imperative, and as such does not belong to the realm of being at all. So the object of knowledge is not an entity in addition to this norm; it is nothing more than the norm itself. The chief problem with past theories of knowledge, Rickert argues, is that they hypostatize the norm, as if it were some kind of entity to which our representations correspond. If we make this mistake the inevitable result is skepticism, and for two reasons: either we cannot get outside our representations to compare them with a thing in itself, or we cannot provide a representation that accurately resembles every detail of what is given in experience.

How do we demonstrate that the object of knowledge is a norm? Rickert's most detailed argument for his thesis appears in chapter III of *Der Gegenstand der Erkenntnis*.⁵⁷ His argument contains two basic steps. First, the identification of cognition with true judgment. Rickert argues that cognition consists in more than simply having representations; it also essentially involves judgment, i.e., the acts of affirming or denying that representations are true. For, if cognition were just having representations, we could have knowledge merely by posing a question, given that a question can have the same representational content as the judgment that answers it; a question, however, is not knowledge but only the *request* for knowledge. Second, the claim that affirming and denying are activities governed by norms. Affirming and denying are performances, and like all performances they are governed by rules. Since they involve assent or dissent, they are indeed voluntary acts; but there are rules that govern all voluntary acts, assent and dissent among them. What would such a rule be? Nothing less than the object of knowledge. It serves as the standard to govern our activities of affirming and denying something to be true. Truth is when our actual judgments conform to this standard.

After the second edition of *Der Gegenstand der Erkenntnis* appeared in 1904, Rickert realized, probably under the combined influence of Husserl, Lask and Münsterberg,⁵⁸ that there is another more direct approach to the problem of objectivity. In his 1909 *Zwei Wege der Erkenntnistheorie* he argues that epistemology can proceed in two complementary ways. We can derive the object of knowledge either from an analysis of the act of cognition, the *transcendental-psychological* approach, or from an analysis of the meaning of a proposition itself, the *transcendental-logical* approach. Rickert's earlier argument took the transcendental psychological path. In *Zwei Wege* he reaffirms this approach by repeating his earlier argument in a simpler form; but he also puts forward a

new argument for the transcendental–logical approach. The new argument takes the following form (201–3). The meaning of a proposition, insofar as it is true or false, is its sense (*Sinn*). We cannot reduce the sense of a proposition down to anything that exists. It is not an *empirical* being, such as the act of understanding it, because this act changes and occurs in time, whereas the sense remains the same. It is also not an *ideal* being, such as a universal, because it is that which is *about* such a being. The sense of a proposition about a triangle, for example, is not the triangle itself. No matter what kind of being or existence the proposition is about, its sense must precede it. What is sense, though, if it does not belong to the realm of reality? The only other possibility for Rickert is that it belongs to the realm of irreality, which he equates with the realm of values or norms.

Which way should we go? Rickert realizes that each approach on its own has serious shortcomings. The transcendental psychological approach by itself is problematic, because acts of judgment are simply psychological events having no normative status; we can therefore derive norms from them only by already giving them such status, an essentially circular argument. However, the transcendental logical approach alone is no less troublesome. It treats values as if they have no relation whatsoever to actual acts of cognition; it examines the object of knowledge for its own sake regardless of any actual attempt to know it. But Rickert finds this an arbitrary and artificial abstraction: “I cannot know *what* the object of knowledge is if I do not also know *how* I know this object. The concept of the object of knowledge loses all sense without the concept of the knowledge of this object.” (217). Ultimately, both approaches suffer from a similar problem: straddling the divide between value and being, between what ought to be and what is.

How, then, is it possible to surmount this divide? The only way to do so, Rickert argues, is to combine both approaches. The problem of the transcendental psychological approach can be rectified through the transcendental logical approach, which demonstrates transcendent values and so justifies reading them into psychological acts of judgment. The hypostasis of the transcendental–logical approach can be cured if only, following the transcendental–psychological approach, one understands values and meanings as norms or rules that regulate acts of judging. Although Rickert thinks that the two methods are complementary, the thrust of his argument is that the transcendental–logical approach, which is characteristic of Husserl and Lask, has to be complemented by the transcendental–psychological approach. On its own the prevalent transcendental–logical approach is an extreme that leads to the hypostasis of value, and fails to see that values have their point only with respect to the attempts of knowers to realize them. Transcendental psychology still has much to offer, Rickert contends, because it shows us how the realm of values applies to actual knowers; the realm of values should not be seen as utterly self-sufficient and transcendent because it has to serve as norms or standards for actual attempts to know. Against Husserl's almost fanatical anti-psychologism he warns: “...without respect to actual knowledge transcendental logic will be in part quite empty” (226). Rickert's defense of transcendental

psychology is notable because Husserl and Lask had banished it for its psychologism.⁵⁹ Rickert too warned about the danger of psychologism in transcendental psychology, but he also believed that it had a real place in epistemology because it could show the close connection between the normative and the psychological. It alone would provide a remedy for the chief sin of the transcendental–logical approach: Platonism, the hypostasis of values.

The difficulties of both the transcendental–logical and transcendental–psychological approaches illustrate Rickert's account of the basic problem of philosophy. Both methods find it hard to explain the connection between the realm of values and the realm of facts. The transcendental–logical approach left values in a transcendent realm apparently having no application to actual human thinking, whereas the transcendental–psychological approach could not explain how one derived norms from psychic acts taken strictly as facts. There seems to be, Rickert acknowledged, nothing less than “an unbridgeable chasm” between the realms of value and fact, between what ought to be and what really is. What could be the bridge between such apparently heterogeneous realms? In *Zwei Wege* and “Vom Begriff der Philosophie” Rickert stressed how our intentional states or epistemic attitudes connect the psychological and the normative. When we judge something to be true or false, the psychological act of judging takes place in time but it also does so according to transcendent standards. When we prove a geometric theorem we are thinking in time about an eternal structure. As objects of intentional states and attitudes these norms or standards are—somehow—immanent within our consciousness. The realm of pure norms enters into the realm of existence through our thinking about them.

Nevertheless, in *Zwei Wege* Rickert admitted that there was something remarkable and strange about epistemic attitudes and intentional states in their power to straddle two ontological realms. Here, he conceded, we stood before a mystery. The unity of norm and fact in the act of cognition is a fact; but there could be no concept or explanation for it. It is impossible to explain how something eternal, impersonal and unreal appears in the temporal consciousness of a real person, Rickert argued, because explanation only works *within* the realm of being, which is only one of the realms that is to be connected (219). It is also impossible to conceive the unity of these realms, he noted, because all conceptual thinking involves distinction and analysis (224). Since it is the basis of all conception and explanation, the unity of value and fact cannot be conceived or explained itself. Before such a mystery Rickert could advise only silence: “It suffices to say that it [i.e., the unity] is inconceivable, not because it is what is beyond all concepts (*das Überbegriffliche*) but because it is prior to them (*Das Vorbegriffliche*).” (224). Altogether not a promising conclusion for philosophy whose chief aim is to explain the connection between values and facts. Unfortunately, as we shall soon see, Rickert could not improve on it.

8. The third realm

Rickert's most sustained attempt to answer the question about the relationship between value and fact appears in his 1921 *System der Philosophie*. Rickert now engages in the construction of a third realm (*das dritte Reich*) to mediate between the realms of value and fact. Despite the sophistication and subtlety of Rickert's argument, its ultimate purport is startling and disturbing. It turns out that the answer to his question is that there cannot be one. We are somewhat prepared for this shock from the doubts of *Zwei Wege der Erkenntnistheorie*. But Rickert does not attempt to resolve these doubts; he only gives further reasons for them. That there is a third realm, an indivisible unity of value and fact, Rickert does not doubt. He assures us that this unity is right under our noses, staring us in the face; it is indeed a basic fact, a brute datum, of our ordinary experience. Nevertheless, Rickert stresses that philosophy cannot conceive, explain or demonstrate this fact. All that it can do, he thinks, is resort to fictions and analogies. A remarkable concession for a philosopher who devoted his intellectual career to defending the powers of theoretical reason!

How does Rickert come to such a surprising conclusion? He begins by denying that we should seek the unity of fact and value in some transcendent world beyond this life (236–8, 290–3). In the history of philosophy there were several notable attempts to unite value and fact by postulating some special realm of being above the empirical world, viz., Plato's theory of ideas, Spinoza's theory of substance, Hegel's theory of absolute spirit. But these theories do not work, Rickert argues, because they really only hypostasize values, treating them as if they were an odd kind of thing when they do not exist in any sense whatsoever. He concedes that the aim of these theories is admirable: to guarantee some place for value in the world; and he admits that they began from a correct premise: that values do not exist in the ordinary empirical world. Nevertheless, their good intentions are futile, Rickert thinks. The problem is that values are logically detachable from *any kind* of being, be it empirical or superempirical, natural or supernatural. What ought to be remains logically distinct from what is, whatever "is" might mean. Rickert charges these theories with another basic fallacy. The special kind of entity is supposed to have some kind of middle status between fact and value; it is supposed to be neither one nor the other. However, this does not mean that the entity *unites* fact and value, that it is somehow *both fact and value*; this would be to confuse, as Rickert puts it, a "neither-nor" with an "as well as" (SP 237). Apart from these logical problems, Rickert rejects these theories because they do not help philosophy in its central task of formulating a worldview. Placing values in another world takes them away from what they are to give value to: our lives in this world.

So given that the unity of fact and value does not lie in another world, Rickert thinks that we need to seek it in this world, and indeed in ordinary experience. To find it, we only have to look:

It is above all necessary that we keep our eyes open for the 'other' world of sense and of value, that we do not place it in a mysterious beyond but recognize that it is very near to us. We live unreal values just as immediately as real existing objects; indeed, the unreal plays a decisive role in our waking life. (120)

In our ordinary lived experience, Rickert explains, values and realities are inextricably interwoven. We never experience the world on its own apart from values, as if it were a mere realm of facts; rather, values are constitutive of our experience, so that we see facts through values. Conversely, we are never aware of values on their own, but always in connection with realities, either with things that we value or in acts of valuing. The whole distinction between fact and value is an artificial product of the intellect, Rickert emphasizes, which divides whatever is indissolubly one in our experience. This pure unity of fact and value has to be felt, lived or intuited, Rickert insists, and as such it cannot be conceived, explained or demonstrated.

Rickert advances several arguments—all of them familiar from the idealist tradition—for why the unity of value and fact transcends conceptual formulation. First, this unity is prior to all conceiving, explaining or demonstrating, because it is a necessary condition for these activities; for just this reason, though, it eludes conception, explanation and demonstration, because any attempt to conceive, explain or demonstrate it would presuppose it. Second, our intellect is essentially analytical, understanding things by taking them apart into independent terms; it therefore grasps the indivisible only by dividing it, i.e., it cannot understand the indivisible at all. Third, the intellect also proceeds, as Rickert puts it, "heterologically", i.e., it grasps one concept only through another contrasting concept. It would understand a concept like value, therefore, only by its opposite, reality, so that it becomes impossible to explain their unity. Once we distinguish fact and value through theory, Rickert argues, we cannot reunite them through theory (249, 293).

It would seem, then, that if we are to know the unity of fact and value we should quit the realm of theory entirely. Rather than *thinking* the unity of value and reality, it appears we should content ourselves with *intuiting* or *feeling* it instead. Though this seems to be the proper conclusion of Rickert's argument, he is reluctant to admit it. The source of his reluctance is not hard to surmise: it is tantamount to a recipe for silence. It means that philosophy cannot solve its fundamental problem. Rickert notes that such a doctrine would make his own position virtually identical to that of the *Lebensphilosophen*, who insisted that life could only be intuited or felt.

But if we are not to be silent, what should we say? If we destroy the unity of value and reality through thinking about it, how think about it at all? Although Rickert cannot provide, on his own admission, definitive answers, he still offers a consolation prize, a stop-gap. While philosophy cannot formulate the unity of fact and value, it can still come close to it, Rickert argues, if it resorts to "a fiction" (258). This fiction consists in positing a middle term, a third realm, between value and fact, which joins them together while still admitting their separate status. This is a *synthetic* unity, a unity

between *distinct* terms, and so not the unity of lived experience, where fact and value are so intertwined that they are not distinct at all.

What, then, would be the best “fiction” for explaining the unity of fact and value? Rickert thinks that we should examine the place in our ordinary experience where fact and value meet. There facts and values are linked in either of two ways: in *things* that are valued, or in *acts* of valuing. So where should analysis begin? It is best to determine the unity from the acts rather than things, Rickert argues, because there is a closer connection between acts and values than between things and values. We can separate things from values more readily than acts from values, because while it makes sense to think of the thing without the value, it makes no sense to think of the act of valuing without the value. The most basic act of lived experience that involves values Rickert calls “an act of lived experience” (*Akterlebnis*). These acts involve three elements: (1) the psychic act of valuing; (2) the value itself; and (3) the combination of the act and the value (259). What brings together the first two moments in the third is the *sense (Sinn)* or *meaning (Bedeutung)* of the act, i.e., what significance the value has for subject. By sense or meaning here Rickert stresses that he does not mean the sense or meaning of a proposition insofar as it can be abstracted from the act of understanding it; he means rather the sense or meaning insofar as it is inseparable from the act of valuing it, its meaning for the subject. Accordingly, he makes a distinction between *transcendent* and *immanent* sense: the transcendent sense is what is abstractable from the act, whereas the immanent sense is what is connected with the act as its necessary object. The third realm that unites reality and value therefore consists in that of immanent sense. The immanent sense of an act of lived experience unites reality and value because it is neither the psychic act alone (the real), nor the value alone, but the meaning of the value involved in the act.

In focusing upon acts of valuing, Rickert stresses that he does not want to understand them only in their reality, as psychic activities, which would be the proper task of psychology. Rather, he wants to understand these acts insofar as they are directed toward values. While normal psychology wants to understand acts as realities, philosophy wants to interpret them as attitudes toward values. This is not to say that normal psychology ignores the role of values in our experience; but it wants to understand them only insofar as they have become embedded in our lives, and therefore only insofar as they have become facts. Philosophy, however, wants to understand acts insofar as they instantiate values. Values, Rickert insists, must be interpreted, and they cannot be explained according to the laws of natural science. In making this distinction between interpretation and explanation Rickert comes close to Dilthey's own interpretative psychology. He refuses, however, to call the interpretation or understanding of the content of psychic acts a form of psychology (282–3). In his view, such interpretation or understanding is the proper task of a philosophy of values.

Although Rickert concedes that his third realm is a fiction, he does not fully admit its weaknesses for solving his main problem. The problem is that the third realm of immanent sense does not really connect fact and values at all, as it is supposed to do.

Intentional attitudes are indeed very odd kinds of facts, and they cannot be objectified and explained by any normal psychology. They are, however, still facts, and all the objections Rickert makes against metaphysical theories apply *mutatis mutandi* to his own. This becomes evident as soon as we consider that the meaning of a psychic act can be true or false, good or evil, and still be the same psychic act; it is not a value itself but rather that which has to comply with a value. Of course, there is a close connection between the acts and the values of the agent; the speaker thinks that his sentence is true, the agent believes that his action is right. But these are still facts and they do not permit any inference that the sentence really is true or that the agent's intention is really good. So Rickert's third realm connects facts and values only by begging the question: it assumes that what the speaker thinks to be true or good is really true or good.

There is yet another problem with Rickert's third realm. While it connects at best the facts and values involved in intentional states, it does not in turn connect these intentional states with the external world. Assume that some agent is convinced that it would be good to reform the world in some respect, and assume, furthermore, that his intentions are truly in accord with norms of justice and utility. There is in this case some connection between his real beliefs and intentions and the irreal realm of moral value. Rickert has left that connection a mystery, as we have seen; but now we must add to it another mystery: how does the agent realize his good intentions in the sensible world to make it a better place? But here too Rickert leaves us with a conundrum. He admits that we cannot explain "the power of values over reality," i.e., how someone can change the world according to his conceptions of value (308). All that we can do, Rickert admits, is have faith in such a power, but we cannot demonstrate or justify this faith. This seems to be Kant's practical faith; but it is even less than that, because Rickert denies that there is a practical reason with powers to justify such a faith.

9. Battling voluntarism and pragmatism

The net result of Rickert's analysis of knowledge is that the concept of value lies at the very heart of epistemology. Epistemology, and indeed all logic, is for Rickert an essentially normative discipline. Even the laws of identity and contradiction are ultimately values, and more specifically, norms laying down the conditions necessary for all thinking. Judgment too is for Rickert an essentially evaluative activity, involving a *decision* to affirm or deny. Cognition is no less a value concept because it involves the idea of a performance (*Leistungsbegriff*), the capability of complying with standards or norms. Hence there are norms that govern human *thinking* and *knowing* just as there are norms that guide human *doing* or *acting*.

In making epistemology a normative discipline, Rickert was self-consciously breaking with the traditional distinction between theory and practice, which saw theory as a purely contemplative activity divorced from the values of the practical realm (ZW 215–16). That distinction was problematic, he argued, because it saw theory as an essentially value-free activity, and because it placed values entirely in the realm of

practice alone. We must recognize, he insisted, that even theory belongs to the realm of values insofar as it too is governed by ends and norms. This means that it too, at least in a broader sense, is a kind of practical activity. The traditional distinction between theory and practice therefore has to be accommodated within a *broader* concept of value and practice, which makes them both *specific* forms of value and practice.

But in so broadening the realm of practice, Rickert came close to a position he was very anxious to avoid: voluntarism. The voluntarist, on his definition, is someone who holds that the will alone determines standards of value, even cognitive ones. Having placed thinking and knowing in the realm of value, and having admitted the primacy of the will with regard to ethical value, Rickert seems to come close to the voluntarist position; indeed, he seems to place even thinking and knowing under the guidance of the will. Rickert is anxious to avoid voluntarism, however, because it brings with it the danger of relativism. Since the will is the sole source of value, and since the will can change and vary with person and culture, there will be as many legitimate forms of value as there are different people and cultures.

Keenly aware of this danger, Rickert took great pains to avoid it.⁶⁰ Making thinking and knowing a kind of practice does not mean, he argued, that its standards are determined by the will. While thinking and knowing are governed by values or norms, not all values and norms are alike. The main value that governs thinking and knowing is truth, which is distinct in kind from the ethical values that answer to the will. Rickert insisted that we must treat truth as an end in itself, and that we should strive to acquire knowledge for its own sake, regardless of the consequences for other forms of value, be they moral, aesthetic or religious. We cannot derive the value of truth from the will, because the norms that govern truth are prior to the will, and indeed the very conditions under which we would know it (ZW 216). The norms involved in truth have a transcendent validity, demanding that we give our assent or dissent independent of our will (GE 311). It does not depend simply upon our will whether we affirm or deny it because we acknowledge a necessity—"a superpersonal power," so to speak—that binds our will (GE 199).

Although Rickert denies that the will determines truth, he admits that actual knowing presupposes some form of the will to motivate and direct enquiry (GE 309). He is at pains to point out, however, that the dependency of *actual* knowing on the will does not imply that *standards* of knowledge depend on it (GE 310–11). He further insists, as we have seen,⁶¹ that there is such a thing as the will to truth, the attempt to know the truth for its own sake, independent of its utility or moral value. The voluntarist is guilty, in his view, of the common conflation of causes with reasons, since he assumes, fallaciously, that the priority of the will as a cause of cognition gives it priority as a reason. Of course, Rickert concedes, there is a sense in which the will might not be bound by the standards of knowledge, i.e., the individual decides that he

does not want to acquire knowledge after all. In that case standards of truth have indeed no authority for him; but then he forfeits his right to make judgments at all and steps completely outside the realm of theory.

In stressing that the norms of truth have a transcendent validity, Rickert only seems to beg the question against the voluntarist. For why, the voluntarist will ask, *should* the will assent to *transcendent* norms? Why cannot it create its own norms? If norms seem to have a validity independent of the will, the voluntarist will say, that is only because the will has alienated its sovereignty, failing to see that it is the ultimate source of norms of truth. To defend the transcendent validity of truth, Rickert replies that it is an inevitable presupposition of all judgment, even that of the voluntarist. Whenever we make a judgment, we claim that something is true, and we assume that it is true whether someone else assents to it or not. When the voluntarist claims that all truth depends on the will, he too assumes that this proposition is true regardless of whether someone agrees with it. He assumes, in other words, that it cannot be made false simply by someone else willing it to be false (GE 240, 305–6). In other words, the voluntarist position is self-defeating.

Voluntarism is also self-defeating, Rickert thinks, precisely because it leads to relativism. When the voluntarist makes truth a function of volition, he ends in relativism because he has to grant that there are as many different truths as there are volitions; he has to accept that there is no such thing as absolute truth, independent of someone's volition. But relativism is for Rickert an incoherent position. The claim that there is no absolute truth faces an insuperable dilemma: it is either self-defeating, because it is a claim to absolute truth, or arbitrary, because it has to allow that its negation (“there is absolute truth”) has just as much a right to claim truth (GE 305).

Who were the voluntarists against whom Rickert was fighting? There were many representatives of voluntarism in the philosophical climate of the early twentieth century. Rickert finds its main source in Schopenhauer, whose philosophy became very popular in the late nineteenth century.⁶² After Schopenhauer, its chief spokesman became Nietzsche, who was no less influential. Voluntarism then spread throughout Germany, France, England and even the United States. There were voluntarist motifs in Dilthey, Simmel, Bergson and Scheler, to name just a few. But Rickert's favorite *bête noire* among voluntarists was a less predictable target, one from across the Atlantic: William James. There were primarily personal reasons for such an association; for, it so happened, Rickert and James became involved in an undignified squabble.

The quarrel began when James, in “The Notion of Truth,” wrote about the “unutterable triviality” of some rationalist objections against pragmatism. Among the worst offenders he cited Rickert's *Der Gegenstand der Erkenntnis*.⁶³ James saw Rickert's chapter “Der Relativismus” in the second edition as an attempt to refute pragmatism, and dismissed it in a damning footnote: “I can not discuss his text here. Suffice it to say

that his argumentation in that chapter is so feeble as to seem almost incredible in so generally able a writer.”⁶⁴ Wounded and indignant, Rickert replied in kind in a footnote in his *Zwei Wege der Erkenntnistheorie*. He bluntly declared that he found such judgments personal affronts (*persönlich Unhöflichkeiten*), unwarranted even for someone who believed in objective standards of truth, and useless even for someone who did not know the difference between true and false (173). In a similar footnote appended to a later edition of *Der Gegenstand der Erkenntnis* he protested that he never had James’ doctrine in mind when he wrote “Der Relativismus.”⁶⁵ But now that James had insulted him, he took his revenge by peppering later editions of the chapter with remarks specifically directed against the American philosopher. Rickert’s chapter now became a rollicking and reckless polemic against pragmatism. Rightly or wrongly, Rickert equated pragmatism with the doctrine that all truth depends on utility. He then fired a salvo of objections against it: that pragmatists refute themselves by denying the distinction between truth and falsehood; that they make truth whatever they want it to be; that they are committed to the view that the will of the majority is the ultimate standard of truth; and so on. Rickert concluded his polemical romp with the nasty barb that he did not want to be useful to the pragmatists, and that if he believed in their existence at all that had nothing to do with their utility.

Rickert’s clash with James was unfortunate because it obscured some of the close affinities of his position with pragmatism. Both James and Rickert were allies in their campaign against the rationalist tradition and its conception of knowledge as representation and contemplation. Both stressed how knowledge is fundamentally dependent on values and how they are decisive for standards of objectivity. Both wanted to call into question the traditional distinction between theory and practice. Their passionate disagreement was an instance of that strange but common phenomenon of political and religious life: that one’s most bitter enemies are those within one’s own party.

That said, there were still important differences between Rickert and James. Although James could agree with Rickert that values and interests determine theory, he could not accept Rickert’s attempt to define an autonomous realm of truth within the realm of values. Hence in *Pragmatism* James complained that “the rationalists who talk of claim and obligation *expressly say that they have nothing to do with our practical interests or personal reasons.*”⁶⁶ The problem with Rickert’s autonomous realm of truth, in James’ view, was that it was a sheer abstraction. He complained that Rickert’s “ought” was “[an] exquisite example of an idea abstracted from the concretes of experience and then used to oppose and negate what it is abstracted from.”⁶⁷ The problem with such an abstract transcendent “ought”, he rightly pointed out, is that it becomes difficult for someone to know it, because “we have no way of getting at it save by the usual empirical processes of testing our opinions by one another and the facts.”⁶⁸ The most

basic difference between James and Rickert came, however, from their opposing attitudes toward empiricism, which James embraced and Rickert repudiated. This difference was not lost on James, who formulated it with great clarity in his March 16, 1905, letter to Hugo Münsterberg:

Of course I have long been familiar with the essay in Windelband's *Präludien* on Kant; and with Rickert in both editions [i.e., *Der Gegenstand der Erkenntnis*]. As Schiller, Dewey and I mean pragmatism, it is *toto coelo* opposed to either the original or the revived Kantism. What similarity can there possibly be between human laws imposed *a priori* on all experience as "legislative," and human ways of thinking that grow up piecemeal among the details of experience because on the whole they work best? It is this rationalistic part of Kant that pragmatism is expressly meant to overthrow. Both its theory of knowledge and its metaphysics go with an empiricist mode of thought.⁶⁹

10. Defending intellectual autonomy

It was crucial to Rickert's defense of the autonomy of reason to demonstrate the possibility of investigating truth for its own sake. But such a proof would be of a tall order. First, Rickert would have to establish that truth has its own *sui generis* norms, independent of the ends of life and the values of a culture. Second, he would have to show that human beings are capable of following these norms, and that they are not necessarily so culturally or biologically conditioned that it is impossible for them to attain standards of value-free enquiry. Regarding this second proposition, Rickert raised the stakes even higher, because he argued that the necessary condition of all scientific thinking is transcendental freedom. We can think and act according to rational norms, he held, only insofar as we make them alone the cause for our thinking and acting, or insofar as we are not determined into action by external causes.⁷⁰

Both propositions are, of course, extremely controversial. The voluntarist and historicist deny them. The voluntarist holds that the will is not only the sole *rationale* for values (against the first proposition), but also that it provides the only sole *cause* for acting according to them (against the second proposition). The historicist maintains that the more we examine the historical origins and context of intellectual life, the more we find that its standards (against the first proposition), and the actions of people in following them (against the second proposition), are determined by specific social and cultural ends. Sometimes, the voluntarist could join forces with the historicist to provide an especially potent challenge to the neo-Kantian. This is precisely what happens in the case of Nietzsche. In his *Zur Genealogie der Moral*, for example,

Nietzsche traced the belief in truth to the ascetic morality of the ancient world and questioned its value apart from such a morality.⁷¹

Perfectly aware of Nietzsche's challenge, Rickert's strategy for meeting it is to engage in a genealogy all his own. The only way of dealing with historicism, he argues, is to go down the historical path oneself. Or, as he also put it, "Only through the historical lies the path to the superhistorical."⁷² And so in his essay "Das Leben der Wissenschaft und die griechische Philosophie," and in his book *Kant als Philosoph der modernen Kultur*, Rickert responds to the challenge of historicism and vitalism by developing his own theory about the historical origins of modern science.⁷³

Rickert's competing genealogy traces the origins of modern science back to ancient Greece. There are three features of ancient Greek science, he argues, that are still central to, and characteristic of, modern science. First, the search for truth for its own sake, regardless of its value for life. Second, the attempt to know the universe as a whole, to acquire systematic knowledge of the interconnection of things. Third, the reliance on concepts and reasoning as the media of knowledge (KPK 49–51). Although these qualities arose from specific circumstances in ancient Greece, they are still valid as qualities of modern science today, Rickert assures us. Of all these qualities Rickert lays special stress upon the first. It was characteristic of the Greeks, he claims, that they sought knowledge for its own sake, and that they valued contemplation as such (KPK 36). This involved a revolutionary shift in values (*Wertverschiebung*), a reversal of the normal relationship between means and ends. In earlier non-Greek cultures people acquired knowledge solely for the sake of life; but the Greeks wanted to live for the sake of knowledge. Rickert then goes on to provide an interesting argument for the value of truth. It is a general principle of cultural science, he argues, that the goods of a culture cannot be treated in the same manner as the people who produce them (KPK 47). Although the people who create science are living creatures subject to the laws of life, the goods they produce are not subject to these laws; their goods have a theoretical meaning, a claim to truth, that has to be understood and evaluated according to eternal norms. It is precisely the eternal status of their work, its power to be valid and valuable throughout history, that makes truth so valuable. What the ancient Greeks saw in science was an attempt to escape mortality, a chance to rise above the circumstances of their own culture and age to create something that would be valid for mankind as a whole and for all ages (KPK 48). So those who live life to the fullest, as the voluntarist recommends, forfeit eternity. They "sink after a short span of time into the night." And so Rickert formulates the maxim: "Whoever wants to remain constantly alive must be able to do more than live."⁷⁴ He goes on to give a paean to ancient Greek culture for its

creation of science, which is so important for the modern world. Although Greek science flourished as its political and religious culture declined, such a sacrifice was worth it for the enormous contribution it bestowed on humanity in general. Ultimately, Rickert's genealogy of modern science was a weak weapon against the historicist and voluntarist. While it clarified some of the assumptions behind the rationalist standpoint, it did not succeed in fully justifying them. It would not have been convincing to someone like Nietzsche. Indeed, Rickert's argument that we *should* strive after truth to attain eternity seems only to illustrate Nietzsche's point. For is not attaining eternity the very point of ascetic practice? And does not the aspiration for eternity make us forfeit the value of living in the here and now? The weakest aspect of Rickert's defense, however, is his claim that intellectual autonomy presupposes transcendental freedom. While this might be correct, it is difficult to defend belief in transcendental freedom, i.e., the assumption that the sole cause for thinking and acting lies in rational norms alone. This is precisely the assumption that the voluntarist and the historicist intend to explode through their genealogies, which identify the social, historical and biological causes of all human thinking and acting. Rickert's claim that intellectual autonomy presupposes such transcendental freedom is a remarkable concession on his part, for it recognizes that simply distinguishing between the *quid juris?* and *quid facti?* is insufficient to establish intellectual autonomy. To establish such autonomy, it is not sufficient to show that normative questions are logically unlike causal questions; it is also necessary to demonstrate that people can think and act according to norms, that the norms are not only reasons but also causes for their actions. Since "ought" implies "can", it is crucial to demonstrate that people can think and act according to norms. But it is precisely here that Rickert declared himself at wits end. As we have already seen, "the power of values over reality" was for him a mere article of faith.

11. Critique of Dilthey's historicism

For Rickert, the dangers of historicism were especially apparent from the philosophy of his great contemporary and rival, Wilhelm Dilthey. Throughout his career he would take issue with Dilthey on several scores: the distinction between the natural and cultural sciences; the foundational role of psychology in philosophy; the role of understanding in the cultural sciences; and the primacy of immediate or lived experience as a starting point for philosophy. But the greatest challenge Dilthey posed for Rickert came from his critique of historical reason. The thrust of Dilthey's project undermined Rickert's most basic intellectual and cultural value: the autonomy of reason. If Dilthey's project were fully executed, the Kantian transcendental subject, which Rickert had gone to such pains to defend in his *Der Gegenstand der Erkenntnis*, would prove to be nothing more than an artificial abstraction from history and life. Although this subject seemed to exist in a self-sufficient intellectual realm, the critique of historical reason would reveal it to be the product of history. And although this

subject seemed to be a purely contemplative being, activated purely by the desire to know the truth, this critique would also show it to be motivated by desire and emotion. In short, Dilthey insisted on bringing the Kantian transcendental subject back into the realm of life and history, on seeing it as one part of history and as directed by all the energies and forces of life itself. The net effect of his critique was to eliminate the entire transcendental realm of value and meaning. For Rickert, the elimination of the transcendental was a disaster, and it could end only in the relativism and nihilism of historicism. Since he saw Dilthey as a chief spokesman of historicism,⁷⁵ he would have to settle his scores with him.

Rickert responds to Dilthey in many of his works, not least in his writings on history, especially *Kulturwissenschaft und Naturwissenschaft* and *Die Grenzen der naturwissenschaftlichen Begriffsbildung*. But his most important response to Dilthey's epistemological views appears in a chapter from a later edition of *Der Gegenstand der Erkenntnis*.⁷⁶ This chapter is essentially a reply to Dilthey's *Beiträge zur Lösung der Frage vom Ursprung unseres Glaubens an die Realität der Außenwelt*, which appeared in 1890, only two years before the first edition of Rickert's work.⁷⁷ The main purpose of Dilthey's tract is to argue that the source of our belief in the external world comes from the hindrances to our practical activity. Since many of Dilthey's doubts about traditional epistemology appear in this work, it was a natural target for Rickert. His reply is highly instructive, revealing the deeper rationale for his own position. It is in Rickert's critique of Dilthey that we find the most powerful defense of transcendental philosophy against historicism.

In the course of his polemic Rickert makes two fundamental points against Dilthey: first, that his critique of Kant is wide of the mark, having no relevance to strictly epistemological issues; and, second, that his argument for the existence of the external world cannot provide any support for the assumption that there is some object existing independent of any content of consciousness.

Regarding the first point, Rickert happily agrees with Dilthey that the epistemological subject is only an artificial abstraction. Dilthey is perfectly correct to stress, he admits, that in reality the subject is not only a contemplative but also a willing and feeling being. However, he thinks that Dilthey has failed to appreciate the purpose behind postulating such a subject in the first place. The aim of the transcendental philosopher is to determine the ultimate conditions of the possibility of experience, i.e., those conditions under which anything is an object of consciousness. The subject of transcendental philosophy is precisely such a condition: it is that subject for which everything else in experience is only an object of consciousness. The transcendental subject is not the *empirical* subject, which exists in the world of experience; still less is it

an *individual* subject, which stands opposed to other individual subjects; it is purposely stripped of all empirical and individual features because they belong among its objects of awareness. Of course, this transcendental subject is a fiction, not what we find in history or psychology; but, for the purposes of epistemological analysis, it does not matter whether it really exists or not. The point of assuming such a subject is only to provide an analysis of the ultimate conditions of all knowledge. Another reason for postulating such a subject is to find a presuppositionless standpoint, or at least one which is less vulnerable to skeptical doubt. The epistemologist cannot begin simply by assuming that there is a social and historical world outside the realm of consciousness, because such an assumption would be questioned by the skeptic. Although such an assumption is correct, it is so only from within the empirical standpoint, which it is precisely the purpose of the epistemologist to justify and explain. So Dilthey's famous attack on the bloodless and pale abstraction of the epistemological subject is an irrelevance; indeed, it is question begging because it has nothing to say against the skeptic, who would question the belief in a larger social and historical world outside his own realm of consciousness.

Although Rickert was willing to admit that the transcendental subject is only an abstraction, he was especially guarded in formulating the extent of his concession. Of course, the real historical subject is not only a knowing but also a willing and feeling being; but this does not mean that the *whole* subject should be taken as the basis for the theory of knowledge. In the theory of knowledge it is necessary to isolate the *knowing* subject because all that is under investigation is the concept of knowledge itself. Rickert declared himself an opponent of an intellectualist epistemology no less than Dilthey; but he believed that Dilthey had attacked intellectualism only because he had shared the false traditional view of the intellect itself. He had accepted uncritically, Rickert argued, the traditional conception of knowledge as a form of representation, which goes back to the rationalist tradition; he had failed to see that knowledge is an essentially practical activity because it consists in judging, an activity governed by rules. Had he noted this last point, Rickert believes, there would have been no motivation for his critique of intellectualism in the first place (191–2).

Regarding the second point, Rickert points out that Dilthey's voluntarism is insufficient to justify belief in the external world. Here "the external world" is meant to be some transcendent object which exists independent of the contents of consciousness. Dilthey's reasoning does not establish good reasons for assuming the existence of such an object, Rickert argues, for the simple reason that the awareness of our willing, and of the hindrance or restraint upon it, are themselves contents of consciousness, and as such they do not permit an inference to some thing that lies beyond such content (98, 101). For Rickert, Dilthey's attempt to establish the reality of an external world was a relapse into transcendental realism, i.e., the thesis that the objects given in our experience exist independent of our consciousness of them. Although Rickert repudiates transcendental realism, he is keen to explain that he does not deny nor doubt the reality of a world independent of consciousness. He stresses

throughout *Der Gegenstand der Erkenntnis* that his transcendental idealism incorporates *empirical realism*, according to which there are objects that exist independent of our *empirical* and *individual* consciousness. Where he departs from Dilthey is in his attempt to prove the existence of an object independent of the *transcendental* subject. While Rickert insists on upholding the transcendent realm of value and meaning, he rejects the transcendent object of transcendental realism, i.e., the assumption that the objects given in our experience continue to exist independent of our experience of them. Against transcendental realism, he insists on maintaining the “immanent standpoint” of transcendental philosophy, which holds that whatever we know in our experience exists only as some content of consciousness (30, 25).

Rickert formulates his differences with Dilthey most sharply when he articulates two guiding assumptions of “voluntarism,” which is his term for the general position he attributes to Dilthey (100). According to Rickert, the voluntarist holds that (a) the subject of knowledge is essentially a willing rather than representing being, and that (b) the object of knowledge is what hinders or resists the activity of the will. His own transcendental standpoint rejects both assumptions “decisively”. The problem with these assumptions, Rickert argues, is that they fail to see the primacy of the epistemological standpoint, which becomes evident as soon as we admit that the awareness of willing, and of the object resisting willing, are ultimately only contents of consciousness. This means that Dilthey's lived experience is ultimately subordinate to the transcendental standpoint. And so Rickert concludes:

The knowing, purely theoretical subject, which makes everything real into an immanent object [i.e., a content of consciousness], cannot be pushed out of the world by any voluntarist theory of knowledge, for then it would destroy knowledge in general, and so itself as a theory. (100)

Rickert thinks the fundamental fallacy behind Dilthey's critique of traditional epistemology is his conflation of levels of discourse, the transcendental with the empirical. He accepts Dilthey's point that the experience of our voluntary activity is one of the main sources of our belief in the reality of an external world. But this is essentially a psychological fact about the *origin* or *causes* of our belief, which has nothing to do with its *justifications* or *reasons* (96–7). What he wants to know, however, is precisely whether this fact provides sufficient justification or evidence for our belief in the external world (96–7). As soon as we raise this question, however, it becomes clear that it does not, because that experience consists in only the contents of consciousness. Dilthey's confusion of the transcendental and empirical is also evident when he thinks that the resistance to our voluntary activity has its source in some transcendent object. This is indeed proof for the independent existence of an object, Rickert thinks, but its independent existence holds only in the empirical realm. It is independent of the empirical and individual subject, who is one object in space like all others; but it is not independent of the transcendental subject, for whom everything in space is only an object of consciousness.

It was not least on these grounds that Rickert objected to Dilthey's project for a philosophical psychology, one of his oldest and fondest *bête noirs*.⁷⁸ In his view, Dilthey's attempt to make psychology into the foundation of philosophy ultimately rests upon the same confusion of the empirical with the transcendental. Psychology cannot do the work of transcendental philosophy, Rickert argues, for the simple reason that its subject, psychic life, is only one part of our experience. The distinction between the mental and physical, the psychic and physical, only makes sense within our experience, and so it is only by illegitimate abstraction that we take one of these terms to be the basis of our whole experience. Hence psychology, Rickert held, should be no less a special science than physics. What led Dilthey to confuse the empirical with the transcendental is the misleading status of his principle of phenomenality—that everything given in experience is an object of consciousness—which seems to give everything in experience a mental status.⁷⁹ While Rickert accepts this principle, he insists that, strictly speaking, we should not interpret it in psychological terms. These terms have their proper sense only within the context of experience, and so we should not extend them outside that realm onto the transcendental subject. All psychological facts fall within experience, so that they cannot provide a valid analysis of the conditions of experience.⁸⁰

It was on the basis of the same distinction between the transcendental and empirical that Rickert, like Windelband, resisted Dilthey's historicization of the epistemological subject. Although he recognized the legitimacy of seeing people within history, he insisted that this could be valid only from an empirical standpoint, which deals with the individual subject, and which traces the causes rather than reasons for our activities. It would not work at all, however, for the epistemological subject, i.e., that subject which is never an object of knowledge and for which everything else is only an object. The impossibility of dragging this subject into the historical realm becomes evident, Rickert thinks, as soon as raise the question: *For whom* does the real, historical subject exist? As one part of history, this subject is an object of experience, and so it is necessary to ask for which subject it is an object. This shows that all history presupposes a transcendental standpoint, from which it cannot ever abstract. Hence Rickert concluded that history could provide only the *materials* for a philosophy but never a philosophy itself.⁸¹ Historicism arose from the presumptuous effort of historians to make a philosophy out of history, which should really be nothing more than an empirical science.

12. Rickert's Kantianism

Rickert did not hesitate to describe himself as a Kantian.⁸² Indeed, in his view, it was an honor to carry such a label. “I believe that since the Greeks no thinker has lived to whom philosophy even begins to owe so much as it does to the creator of criticism.” To be a Kantian, however, did not mean agreeing with all the essentials, let alone the details, of the Kantian system. It meant only adhering to the *spirit* of his philosophy. Rickert found that spirit in two places: in Kant's “critical subjectivism” and in his concept of the transcendental.⁸³ He valued his critical subjectivism because it served as a bulwark against metaphysics and psychologism; and he prized his concept of the transcendental because it pointed to a realm hitherto unheard of in the history of philosophy: the “irreal” realm of meaning and value. Kant was nothing less than “the discoverer of a new world,” because this realm is neither physical nor mental, neither natural nor supernatural; it does not lie in experience or beyond it but prior to it in the conditions of its possibility.⁸⁴ For Rickert, Kant's concept of the transcendental alone sufficed to make him “the greatest thinker of all time.” The great significance of the transcendental is that it secured the autonomy of reason against all the forces of historicism, relativism and voluntarism. It ensured that the thinker could enquire into the truth for its own sake, and that he could discover truths having nothing less than eternal validity.

Although Rickert believed that the significance of Kant's philosophy is universal and eternal, he also held that it had a special relevance to his own age. Like Windelband, he believed that Kant was still a living voice in the present, and that he was nothing less than “the philosopher of the modern world.” He still feared, however, Kant's obsolescence in the hostile irrationalist climate of his age. The apostles of *Lebensphilosophie*—the “*überwissenschaftlichen Weltanschauungsdilettanten*,” as Rickert called them—consigned Kant to the dustbin of history, dismissing him as another antiquated rationalist of the age of enlightenment. They believed that they had gone beyond Kant, whose rationalism made him unable to address the new concerns of the age and the interests of the “concrete existing individual.” To counter these trends, Rickert wrote his *Kant als Philosoph der modernen Kultur*, whose main purpose is to make the case for Kant's abiding relevance in the early twentieth century.

To establish Kant's contemporary significance, Rickert first had to outline the general characteristics of modern culture. Since he could do this only by showing how modern culture differs from the ancient and medieval worlds, he embarked upon a general philosophy of history. The methodology of this philosophy of history is anything but historicist, and far from the individualizing procedure Rickert himself regarded as paradigmatic of history. Rather than deriving his concepts from the

material, Rickert comes to the material with his concepts already formed and he organizes it accordingly. Such an *a priori* procedure is dictated by his purpose: he does not want to examine the past for its own sake, but to treat it only insofar as it anticipates some of the chief characteristics of modern culture. We are a long way from Ranke when Rickert rationalizes his method with the weary statement: "It is hard to understand why historical material has to be presented only historically and not also according to systematic points of view". (KPK 16). The danger that such an *a priori* undertaking fosters circularity—that one reads into history the very principles one wants to prove—does not trouble Rickert.

After brief surveys of the ancient and medieval worlds, Rickert finds three major contributions to modern culture: Greek science, Roman law and Oriental religion. Each contribution represents for him a distinct realm of activity and value. Greek science belonged to the realm of theory and its major value was intellectual enquiry, knowledge of truth for its own sake. Roman law fell into the realm of practice, and its chief value was will and action. Oriental religion stood in the realm of faith and represented the value of feeling, the bonds of love between God and man. Throughout history, Rickert notes, there were often conflicts between these elements: Greek science tended to undermine faith; and the state was often in conflict with the church. Nevertheless, it was also possible to unite these elements. The great achievement of medieval culture was that it synthesized all them under the authority of the church. Science was in the service of faith; and faith bolstered secular authority, which in turn supported the church. What is characteristic of the modern world, however, is the separation of these realms. The rebellion against the authority of the church led to each element following its own path. Modern culture consists in the divorce of science, religion and the state, so that each develops its distinct values apart from the other. Rickert's fundamental thesis—that modern culture consists in the separation of these domains—seems to derive from Max Weber, whose work he explicitly cites (KPK 123n).⁸⁵

Having provided his analysis of modern culture, Rickert was now able to explain Kant's relevance for it. Given that modern culture consists in the separation of science, religion and state, Kant deserves to be called the philosopher of modern culture, because, more than any other thinker in the modern era, he has articulated and promoted this separation. The tripartite structure of Kant's critical philosophy—its separation into three critiques—corresponds to the modern division between the realms of intellect, will and feeling. Indeed, Kant's division of the faculties of the mind into the intellect, will and feeling mirrors the modern separation between science, state and religion (168–9) It was the driving pathos and motive behind Kant's critical philosophy, Rickert argues, to establish the autonomy of different disciplines and discourses (141, 143). For Rickert, critique is essentially a business of

separation, which means distinguishing between distinct kinds of discourse so that each has its own proper domain. Kant's separation of science from morality, politics and the state is apparent from his distinction between theoretical and practical reason; and his distinction between science and religion is evident from his famous dictum in the preface to the second edition of the *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* that he had to deny knowledge in order to make room for faith (192). So, for Rickert, Kant was the great divider, the grand partitioner of the intellectual realm, and it is this primarily that makes him the spokesman for modernity.

Rickert thinks that Kant's claim to be "the philosopher of modernity" rests especially upon his critique of Greek "intellectualism". As we have already seen, Rickert makes a sharp distinction between "rationalism" and "intellectualism": while rationalism makes the intellect sovereign only in the realm of theory, intellectualism makes it sovereign in all fields of culture, so that it rules over state, morality and religion. Intellectualism elevates the intellect into the guiding faculty of the mind, so that it controls and dominates will and feeling. It sees the will only as desire arising from the representation of the good, and feeling as nothing more than a confused sensible representation of the good. Intellectualism also assumes that there are in principle no limits to knowledge, that the universe consists in a rational structure that corresponds to the concepts of the intellect. It is important to see, Rickert argues, that while Kant was an uncompromising defender of rationalism, he was a no less relentless critic of intellectualism. His critique of intellectualism is apparent from his limitation of knowledge to appearances, his denial of knowledge to make room for faith, and his separation of the will from the intellect. What distinguishes Kant from his great rationalist forbears—Descartes, Leibniz and Spinoza—is precisely his critique of Greek intellectualism, which his predecessors had inherited and revived.

Although it has some initial plausibility, Rickert's interpretation of Kant proves forced and artificial. The problem is that Kant is more representative of intellectualism than Rickert wants to admit. It was crucial to the very spirit of Kant's philosophy—and no mere dispensable legacy of Enlightenment rationalism—that reason is the sovereign authority in the realms of morality, politics and religion. The fundamental principle of Kant's ethics, the categorical imperative, is meant to represent the very essence of rationality, the power of an intelligent being to according to the mere concept of a law, i.e., its universality. The same principle is the basis for Kant's theory of the state, which permits no separation of moral principle and political practice; and it is the starting point of his philosophy of religion, which makes moral action the central purpose of religion. Rickert, however, plays down this fundamental feature of Kant's philosophy because he fears that it makes him represent a spent cultural force—Enlightenment intellectualism—which no longer addresses the concerns of his more irrationalist age. Rather than admitting that Kant makes reason the supreme authority for morality, religion and state, Rickert praises Kant for recognizing "the irrational" and makes this into one of the selling points of his philosophy (177, 180).

The extraordinary extent to which Rickert bends to the irrationalist forces of his age is apparent from his own theories of state and religion. He thinks that law is founded upon the will alone, and that reason serves only as an instrument to achieve its ends (80–81, 147, 177). He also holds that faith is based upon feeling alone, and that reason has no jurisdiction over it (190–3). Such theories have their own strengths and weaknesses and deserve to be examined on their own terms. The only problem with them in the present context is that Rickert attributes them to Kant (176, 177). It is almost incredible to find Kant a spokesman for the power of the state and the purely instrumental role of rationality in politics; it also defies belief to see him made into a champion for the integrity of religious feeling. Now and then Rickert admits that such doctrines are not strictly Kantian, and that they are at odds with Kant's claims for the powers of practical reason (141, 176, 211). Nevertheless, he continues to ascribe them to Kant on the grounds that the spirit of his philosophy lies in his separation of the faculties. Rickert is on firmer ground when he points out how much Kant departed from rationalism in his critique of taste in the *Kritik der Urteilskraft* (180). Yet this more plausible point does not help his main thesis, because he does not make art or taste into one of the main elements of modern culture. Rather than assigning feeling to the realm of taste, as Kant had done, Rickert places it in the domain of religion.

In the final analysis, Rickert's *Kant als Philosoph der modernen Kultur* has to be judged a miserable failure, a questionable effort to make Kant serve his own purposes. Rickert made Kant an apostle of modernity only by betraying his rationalism. While Rickert recognizes Kant's rationalism in the realm of science, he refuses to recognize importance it had for him in the realms of ethics, politics and religion. To be sure, Kant was a critic of intellectualism; but he never limited the authority of reason to science or the theoretical domain alone but was intent on extending it to the realms of practice, especially morality and the state. The purpose of Kant's doctrine of the primacy of practical reason was not only to thwart the claims of theoretical reason but also to ensure the supremacy of reason in the moral and religious realm.

13. Final appraisal

Rickert was one of the last great voices to speak on behalf of the authority of reason before the advent of the Third Reich. His cause did not have, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a more rigorous and formidable spokesman. Yet, for all the merit of his defense of reason, it would be a mistake to portray Rickert as a lonely rationalist struggling against the irrationalist forces of his age. It is an image that Rickert himself sometimes encourages; but it is accurate only to a limited degree. For Rickert's defense of reason was devoted to a very limited cause: securing the autonomy of *theoretical* reason in the natural and historical sciences. Despite his Kantian pretensions, Rickert did not believe in the powers of *practical* reason. He insisted that reason has no jurisdiction over the spheres of aesthetics, morality and religion. As long as Apollo

could reign over the sciences, it was fine for Dionysus to hold sway over art, morality and religion.

Rickert's concessions to the rule of Dionysus show that his position was not that far from the *Lebensphilosophie* from which he often distanced himself. He believed that the *Lebensphilosophen* were right to resist intellectualist culture and to stress the fundamental role of feeling in religion and art. He also affirmed their fundamental dictum: *individuum est ineffabile*. No less than Dilthey and Bergson, Rickert would stress how concepts fail to grasp the immediacy of life, and how the unity of fact and value in life experience transcends all discursive thought. Such indeed was his affinity to *Lebensphilosophie* that in his *System der Philosophie* he went so far as to call his own *Wertphilosophie* a kind of *Lebensphilosophie* (316). He claimed that philosophy should begin from lived experience, and that we should understand such experience in terms of life. Where his own *Wertphilosophie* differs from most forms of *Lebensphilosophie* is in attempting to understand life from values rather than values from life. Whoever wants to philosophize over life, he insisted, must stand above it. This was indeed the chief difference between Rickert and *Lebensphilosophie*. He too was a *Lebensphilosoph*, only a recalcitrant one who would not surrender his claim to intellectual autonomy. While he did not expect reason to control life, he could not allow life to control reason.

But, even to this modest degree, Rickert had great difficulty in upholding the claims of reason. He could not secure the autonomy of theoretical reason against the forces of voluntarism and historicism. His chief strategy for securing that domain was his distinction between values and facts, between the normative and the natural. But this strategy was much too weak to support the ambitious structure Rickert wanted to build upon it: the universal and eternal status of intellectual values. The distinction between the normative and natural is fundamentally a distinction between kinds of discourse; it means that it is one thing to evaluate a belief and action, to assess its reasons, and another thing to explain it, to determine its causes. The problem is that this distinction is compatible with natural and historical determinism, and indeed value relativism. A distinct kind of discourse about human beliefs and actions does not insulate them from natural causes and historical change; in other words, even though assessing beliefs and causes is distinct from explaining them, it is still possible that all beliefs and actions are determined by natural and historical causes, and that they vary and change with them. The ineffectiveness of the distinction becomes evident once we see that it is still possible to evaluate beliefs and actions even if they are relative to a specific culture. As soon as we see this, Rickert's unreal realm of values and norms proves to be a preposterous irrelevance.

To be fair, in his later years Rickert himself seemed to realize the weakness of this approach. He eventually saw that the distinction between *quid juris?* and *quid facti?* is insufficient to establish the autonomy of reason; he recognized that it is not enough to demonstrate the distinctive properties of evaluative discourse, but that it is also necessary to assign such discourse to a self-sufficient ontological realm, one secure

from the influence of natural causes and historical change. Accordingly, in his *System der Philosophie* he made transcendental freedom the necessary condition not only of moral action but also reasoning and cognition. But this too is a very problematic position, given that transcendental freedom requires the existence of a mysterious and supernatural noumenal realm. Such a realm must be in principle inaccessible to natural and historical explanation, imposing an arbitrary and artificial limit upon natural and historical enquiry.

Rickert's philosophy was meant to be first and foremost a *Wertlehre*, a theory of values. He saw this as its distinguishing feature, its chief contribution to the republic of learning. But at the heart of this theory there lies a troubling mystery: the irreality of the realm of values. Upon examination, this realm proves to be worse than an irrelevance: it is a downright nuisance, creating more difficulties than it solves. The chief problem with the theory, as we have seen, is that it cannot explain the connection between value and fact. It fails to do so in two basic respects: it cannot account for how actual thinking conforms to norms, or for how we act according to norms in the concrete historical world. Rickert has to be given credit for seeing this problem; yet he argues that it is impossible to solve it. He not only admits but insists that reason does not have the power to explain the connection between the normative and the natural. He declares it an irresolvable, eternal mystery that actual thinking could conform to norms, and that moral purposes could be realized in the empirical world.

Of no greater success was Rickert's attempt to provide a foundation for history, to secure its *sui generis* status apart from the natural sciences. There was a great discrepancy between his official strategy and his practice. Although Rickert attempted to make a purely formal distinction between the cultural and natural sciences, as if it were only a matter of methodology that separates them, he was forced in the end to make a material distinction, so that the real difference between them rested upon their subject matter. And although Rickert wanted to secure the objectivity of historical knowledge, his emphasis upon the role of values in historical enquiry undercut that objectivity. He could remove this inconsistency only if he could somehow establish *per impossible* the universal and necessary status of the values behind historical enquiry.

Quite apart from these problems, there was another even deeper failure behind Rickert's attempt to provide a foundation of history: namely, his weak grasp of hermeneutics. Rickert failed to follow the lead of Schleiermacher, Droysen and Dilthey and to investigate the logic of interpretation. He realized only late in his career, after he wrote his major writings on historical method, that there is a profound difference between explaining and interpreting an action. Remarkably, for all his efforts to specify the distinct logic of historical enquiry, Rickert never asked what it meant to understand actions if they were not subsumed under universal laws.

All told, Rickert's philosophy was a failure, and even when it is measured solely by his own purposes and standards. Still, it was a noble, not a miserable failure. Rarely in the history of philosophy has such intelligence spoken so well in behalf of the virtues of rationality. While it never achieved its objectives, much was learned along the way.

Notes:

- (1) See Rickert, *Wilhelm Windelband*, second edition (Tübingen: Mohr, 1921), p. 15.
- (2) See Rickert's statement in the "Vorrede" to his *System der Philosophie* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1921), p. xi. (All references to this work in the text will use the initials SP).
- (3) See Rickert, *Windelband*, pp. 12–23; and *System der Philosophie*, pp. 136–7.
- (4) See Windelband, *Geschichtsphilosophie, Kant-Studien Ergänzungsheft XXXVIII* (1916), p. 48.
- (5) On the relationship between Rickert and Heidegger, see their own correspondence, *Martin Heidegger, Heinrich Rickert. Briefe 1912–1933*, ed. Alfred Denker (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 2002).
- (6) The scholars who discuss Rickert are usually historians, who have little patience or appreciation for his "logical subtleties." Maurice Mandelbaum, one of the few philosophers to read Rickert in the Anglophone world, has this to say about him: "Rickert, more than any other thinker, stands at the center of all philosophical discussion concerning the problem of historical knowledge. *Die Grenzen der naturwissenschaftlichen Begriffsbildung*...is beyond dispute the classic work in the field. Together with Rickert's other discussions of the historical problem, it provides a theory which in scope, consistency, and logical subtlety far surpasses all other works with which we shall be dealing." See his *The Problem of Historical Knowledge* (New York, NY: Liveright, 1938), p. 119.
- (7) For more on this issue, see my "Normativity in Neo-Kantianism: Its Rise and Fall," *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 17 (2009), 9–27.
- (8) *Der Gegenstand der Erkenntnis*, sixth edition (Tübingen: Mohr, 1928). This text will be designated GE.
- (9) *System der Philosophie*, p. 41, 45, 143.
- (10) *Die Probleme der Geschichtsphilosophie*, third edition (Heidelberg: Winter, 1924), p. 130. (Henceforth this edition will be designated PG). The first edition of this work appeared in 1905 in *Die Philosophie im Beginn des zwanzigsten Jahrhunderts. Festschrift für Kuno Fischer* (Heidelberg: Winter, 1905) II, 51–135.
- (11) *Windelband*, p. 29.
- (12) *Ibid*, pp. 29–30. Cf. *System der Philosophie*, pp. x–xi.
- (13) This eventually became one of his favorite maxims. See "Das Leben der Wissenschaft und die griechische Philosophie," *Logos* XII (1924), 311. See also his "Geschichte und System der Philosophie," in *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* XL (1931), 420.
- (14) *Die Grenzen der naturwissenschaftlichen Begriffsbildung*, second edition (Tübingen: Mohr, 1913), pp. 8. (This work will be designated in the text as GB). Aspiring students of Rickert are advised that there are five editions of Rickert's book, and that there are considerable differences between them. The later editions not only added new material but also deleted old, which is often very revealing. The various editions mirror Rickert's constant rethinking of the issues. The first edition appeared in 1902; the second in 1913; the third and fourth in 1921; and the fifth in 1929. All editions were published by J.C.B. Mohr in Tübingen. There is a desperate need for a new critical edition. Because of its greater availability and date of publication, I have used the second edition.
- (15) See chapter 9, section 6.
- (16) See especially "Das Leben der Wissenschaft und die griechische Philosophie," *Logos* XII (1923/24), 303–39; and "Wissenschaftliche Philosophie und Weltanschauung," *Logos* XXII (1933), 37–57.

- (17) See especially his *Philosophie des Lebens* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1920); and “Lebenswerte und Kulturwerte,” *Logos* II (1912), 131–66.
- (18) See especially “Geschichte und System der Philosophie,” *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* XL (1931), 7–46 (Teil 1) and 403–48 (Teil 2); and “Wissenschaftliche Philosophie und Weltanschauung,” *Logos* XXII (1933) 37–57.
- (19) See below, section 12.
- (20) See his “Über logische und ethische Geltung,” *Kant-Studien* 19 (1914), 182–220, esp. 207.
- (21) This was the interpretation of Rickert's student August Faust, “Heinrich Rickert,” *Kant-Studien* 41 (1936), p. 211. It has been endorsed by others. See, for example, Thomas Willey, *Back to Kant* (Detroit: Wayne State Press, 1978), pp. 143–4.
- (22) Since this claim is controversial, we will examine in section 12 Rickert's own treatment of Kant.
- (23) For Rickert's critique of intellectualism, see especially his “Das Leben der Wissenschaft und die griechische Philosophie,” *Logos* XII (1923/24), 303–39.
- (24) See *Philosophie des Lebens*, pp. 171–95.
- (25) *System der Philosophie*, pp. 30–1.
- (26) See chapter 9, section 4.
- (27) See Windelband, “Geschichte und Naturwissenschaft,” *Präludien* II, 149–51. See Rickert's comments in *Windelband*, p. 19, and *Die Grenzen der naturwissenschaftlichen Begriffsbildung*, p. 362.
- (28) On this work, designated PG, see note 10 above.
- (29) See chapter 8, section 2.
- (30) See “Natur und Geist,” *Die Probleme der Geschichtsphilosophie*, pp. 13–29.
- (31) *Kulturwissenschaft und Naturwissenschaft*, vierte und fünfte Auflage (Tübingen: Mohr, 1921). The first edition of this work was published in 1898, though it underwent many changes in its later editions.
- (32) See Rickert's forward to the first edition of *Die Grenzen der naturwissenschaftlichen Begriffsbildung*, pp. iii–iv. See also his comments on Lamprecht in the second edition, pp. 468, 523n, 544.
- (33) On the *Lamprechtstreit*, see Friedrich Jaeger and Jörn Rüsen, *Geschichte des Historismus* (Munich: Beck, 1992), pp. 141–6; and Roger Chickering, *Karl Lamprecht: A German Academic Life (1856–1915)* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1993), pp. 146–283.
- (34) On the dangers of determinism for intellectual and moral autonomy, see *System der Philosophie*, pp. 297–311.
- (35) Such is Rickert's explicit argument in *System der Philosophy*, pp. 299–300, 306.
- (36) This argument is most explicit in GB 77–8, 186, 192–4, 196, 198 and KN 135–43.
- (37) This was Rickert's response to Cassirer's critique in *Substanzbegriff und Funktionsbegriff* (Berlin: Cassirer, 1910), pp. 292–310. See Rickert's note in the second edition of GB, p. 203n1. An account of their dispute would take us too far afield here.

(38) Rickert pursued these arguments in more detail in “Das Eine, die Einheit und die Eins. Bemerkungen zur Logik des Zahlbegriffs,” *Logos* II (1911) 26–78.

(39) In this regard Rickert's account of scientific truth is the opposite of Cassirer's, who gave it a higher epistemic status than lived experience. The difference between Rickert and Cassirer here will later be played out in the dispute at Davos between Cassirer and Heidegger, who in this respect proves to be the loyal student of Rickert. On that dispute, see Peter Gordon, *Continental Divide: Heidegger, Cassirer, Davos* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), pp. 215–56.

(40) Thus H. Stuart Hughs, *Consciousness and Society* (New York: Knopf, 1958), p. 191.

(41) GB, pp. 586–610.

(42) Rickert also outlines the same strategy in his “Vom System der Werte,” *Logos* IV (1913), 295–327, esp. 297–300.

(43) A complete system of values was the task for Part II of his *System der Philosophie*, which Rickert never wrote.

(44) Of course, this is an assumption some historians would question. See, for example, Alfred Stern, *Philosophy of History and the Problem of Values* (The Hague: Mouton, 1962), pp. 122, 133, 135.

(45) This difficulty with Rickert's project was pointed out by Ernst Troeltsch in his *Der Historismus und seine Probleme* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1922), pp. 151–7, 228–39.

(46) See chapter 6, section 6.

(47) This point was stressed by Friedrich Meinecke in his critique of Rickert, “Kausalitäten und Werte in der Geschichte,” in *Zur Theorie und Philosophie der Geschichte*, ed. Eberhard Kessel (Stuttgart: Koehler, 1965), pp. 61–89, esp. 68–9.

(48) Cf. “Vom Begriff der Philosophie,” pp. 12–13; *System der Philosophie*, pp. 112–21; and *Gegenstand der Erkenntnis*, pp. 193–6.

(49) On this score Windelband seemed to distance himself from his former student. He found it paradoxical to think of values having no being at all and attributed to them some higher form of being. See his *Einleitung in die Philosophie* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1920), pp. 212–13.

(50) *System der Philosophie*, pp. 106–9. See also “Urteil und Urteilen” *Logos* 3 (1912), 230–45. Rickert restated this argument from different angles in later works. See “Thesen zum System der Philosophie,” *Logos* XXI (1932), p. 99; and the so-called “Systematische Selbstdarstellung” in *Deutsche Systematische Philosophie nach ihren Gestalten*, ed. Hermann Schwarz (Berlin: Junker und Dünhaupt, 1934), pp. 266–7.

(51) *Der Gegenstand der Erkenntnis*, p. 196.

(52) *Ibid*, p. 120.

(53) See “Vom Begriff der Philosophie,” *Logos* I (1911/12), 1–34.

(54) See *Zwei Wege der Erkenntnistheorie*, *Kant-Studien* XIV (1909), 169–228. The article was published independently the same year by C.A. Kaemmerer in Halle. It has been reissued by Königshausen & Neumann, Würzburg, 2002. All references follow the pagination of the original article. This work will be designated ZW.

(55) KrV A 126.

(56) “Psychologie der Weltanschauungen und Philosophie der Werte,” in *Logos* IX (1920–21), 2–3.

- (57) See *Der Gegenstand der Erkenntnis*, second edition (Tübingen: Mohr, 1904), pp. 74–125. This chapter was drastically revised in the third edition.
- (58) The influence of these figures is clear from GE, pp. 275–6.
- (59) See below, chapter 11, section 4.
- (60) Cf. *Zwei Wege*, pp. 215–16; *Gegenstand der Erkenntnis*, pp. 301–12; *Grenzen*, pp. 602–4.
- (61) See section 5 above.
- (62) *Philosophie des Lebens*, p. 18.
- (63) *Pragmatism* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co. 1907), p. 228.
- (64) *Ibid*, 236.
- (65) GE, 301–2.
- (66) *Pragmatism*, p. 228.
- (67) *Ibid*, p. 229.
- (68) See James, *The Meaning of Truth* (New York: Longmans, Green & Co., 1911), p. 265.
- (69) Ralph Barton Perry, *The Thought and Character of William James* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1935), II, 469.
- (70) *System der Philosophie*, pp. 303, 306.
- (71) *Zur Genealogie der Moral* §24, *Sämtliche Werke* V, 398–401.
- (72) *System der Philosophie*, p. 322.
- (73) “Das Leben der Wissenschaft und die griechische Philosophie,” *Logos* XII (1924), 303–39; and *Kant als Philosoph der modernen Kultur* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1924) (cited as KPK).
- (74) “Das Leben der Wissenschaft,” p. 333.
- (75) *Die Philosophie des Lebens*, p. 27.
- (76) See “Das Transzendente und der Wille,” *Der Gegenstand der Erkenntnis*, pp. 95–104. See also pp. 188–92.
- (77) See chapter 8, section 5.
- (78) Rickert's objections against Dilthey's psychology appear primarily in *Kulturwissenschaft und Naturwissenschaft*, pp. 14–18, 59–60, 69–81; and in *Die Grenzen der naturwissenschaftlichen Begriffsbildung*, pp. 147–94.
- (79) *Die Grenzen der naturwissenschaftlichen Begriffsbildung*, pp. 139–40.
- (80) See *Der Gegenstand der Erkenntnis*, pp. 104–17.
- (81) *Die Philosophie des Lebens*, pp. 49–50.

(⁸²) See Rickert's statements in the preface to *Kant als Philosoph der modernen Kultur*, p. viii and the preface to *System der Philosophie*, p. xi.

(⁸³) *System der Philosophie*, p. xi–xii.

(⁸⁴) *Kant als Philosoph der modernen Kultur*, p. 4.

(⁸⁵) Rickert cites Weber's lecture *Wissenschaft als Beruf*. In an earlier chapter he borrows heavily from Weber's analysis of modern culture (pp. 23–7).

Emil Lask and the End of Southwestern Neo-Kantianism

1. A tragic loss

Any account of Southwestern neo-Kantianism must include the tragic figure of Emil Lask (1875–1915). Alongside Windelband and Rickert, Lask was one of the triumvirate who led Southwestern neo-Kantianism. Lask was the student of Windelband and Rickert, but he quickly became an original thinker in his own right. In his own day he was regarded as the *avant-garde* of his movement, the brilliant young man who would lead it to new exciting places. Today, Lask has been almost entirely forgotten, especially in the Anglophone world.¹ This has something to do with his difficult writings; but it has much more to do with his tragic early death, which struck him down at the very height of his powers. Windelband, Rickert, Heidegger, Lukács, Husserl and Weber all regarded Lask's death as a major loss for German philosophy. Any thorough contemporary reassessment of his thought will come to the same conclusion.

If Southwestern neo-Kantianism is born with Windelband and matures with Rickert, it reaches its dénouement with Lask. Like Windelband and Rickert, Lask's problematic was set by the apparent failure of Kantian principles, their inability to explain the latest developments in history, logic and psychology. Lask too was deeply troubled by the fact that these principles did not seem to accommodate the scientific status of history demanded by Ranke, the phenomenon of intentionality taught by Brentano, or the objective character of logical truth stressed by Husserl. History, intentionality and logical truth seemed to reveal completely new worlds undreamt of in the Kantian imagination. However, in his attempt to conquer these realms for the critical philosophy, Lask stretched his neo-Kantian principles to the limit, indeed to the breaking point, so much so that the question remains whether he was really a Kantian at all.

Lask's chief contribution to the Southwestern school lay with his critique of the concept of normativity. We have already seen how that concept played a crucial role in the philosophy of Windelband and Rickert, viz., how they interpreted Kant's philosophy in its terms, how they used it to disarm the threat of historicism, how they explained truth and validity with it. Lask, however, saw through some of the fundamental weaknesses of the concept, especially its inability to explain the objectivity of logical truth. It was this discovery that eventually drove him beyond the confines of the critical philosophy. With Lask, the concept of normativity, the pivotal concept of the Southwestern school, loses its magic and power, and thus the movement comes to a fitting (logical if not chronological) close.

Lask's origins are obscure. He was born in Poland on September 25, 1875. Where he grew up is not known. Some sources place him in Vienna, others in Brandenburg. Rickert, who knew Lask best, confessed his ignorance about his early years. We do know that Lask was Jewish, though his life and beliefs appear to have been entirely secular.²

Whatever his origins, Lask's career began when, at the age of nineteen, he went to study law in Freiburg. He soon gravitated toward philosophy, writing his doctoral dissertation on Fichte under Rickert's supervision. In 1905 he came to Heidelberg to do his *Habilitation* under Windelband, giving his *Antrittsrede* on *Hegel und die Aufklärung*. Such were Lask's talents that in 1910 he was offered one of the two professorships in philosophy in Heidelberg. Apparently, Lask was a popular and effective teacher; and though the difficulty of his philosophy eventually scared off some students, he attracted a small and devoted following. Among these students was Eugen Herrigel, who edited Lask's writings after his death.³

Because of his early death, Lask's opus is small. The Herrigel edition, which is virtually complete, consists in three slender volumes. Lask wrote two major works: his 1911 *Logik der Philosophie oder die Kategorienlehre* and 1912 *Lehre vom Urteil*. Lask regarded both works as "provisional" or "preliminary". They should not be regarded, therefore, as the final statement of his philosophy, which he continued to reformulate and refine until shortly before his death.⁴ The best introduction to Lask's thought is his own late lectures, *Zum System der Logik*, where he explains to students in straightforward terms some of his basic problems and solutions to them. Apart from his writings, an important aspect of Lask's legacy was his influence on others. Lask was crucial for the young Heidegger, not only for the substance but also the style of his thought. Rickert,

Doktorvater of both Lask and Heidegger, noted in his final report on Heidegger's habilitation that he was "very much obligated to Lask's writings for his philosophical orientation as well as his terminology, perhaps more than he is conscious of."⁵ Lask was also an important influence on Max Weber. It is noteworthy that, in his charming reminiscences of the *Weberkreis* in Heidelberg, Paul Honigsheim tells us that "Lask was probably closer to Weber than any other contemporary philosopher."⁶ Finally, among Lask's closest friends in Heidelberg was Georg Lukács, whose early aesthetics shows a great debt to him. Lukács repaid that debt by writing a commemorative summary of Lask's thought for *Kant-Studien*.⁷

When war began in 1914, Lask immediately volunteered. Since, as a Heidelberg professor, he would have been regarded as "*unabkömmlich*", i.e., indispensable on the home front, he did not have to enlist. But, conscientious and idealistic, Lask believed that he had an obligation to serve his country.⁸ He was made a sergeant and sent to Galicia in the Eastern front. Severely myopic and having a frail constitution, he quickly learned that he was not a good soldier; nevertheless, he felt obliged to remain at the front. In one of his last letters he wrote Rickert:

I was not born for the military. I will not be able to make a great contribution. Nevertheless, I want to be present. To me all that is important is that, in some way, I can help in this kingdom of bullets.⁹

According to Marianne Weber, because of his myopia Lask could not shoot, and so was placed in the rear lines.

Nevertheless, during a *Sturmangriff* in May 1915, he was shot and killed instantly.¹⁰ His body was never recovered.

Since most of Lask's philosophical work was in the realm of logical theory, it would seem, strictly speaking, to fall outside the purview of a study of historicism. His relevance to that topic seems to be largely indirect, the implication of his critique of the concept of normativity. But this impression is very misleading. Lask's first publication, *Fichtes Idealismus und die Geschichte*, is in large part a study of the logic of historical explanation, the central interest of the Southwestern school, and it takes forward the discussions started by Windelband and Rickert. His second publication, his 1905

Rechtsphilosophie, considers another central theme of historicism: relativism and the status of natural law. The themes of these early works persist in the later ones, and are indeed the precondition for understanding Lask's thought as a whole. Lask's first major work, his *Logik der Philosophie*, is a study of the logic of intentionality and meaning, which had become the crux for the study of human actions in the early 1900s.

Our task in this chapter will be to consider, however briefly, Lask's major writings, especially those relevant to historicism, but also his logical theory, whose discussion of normativity is crucial for an understanding of this central theme of the Southwestern school. Given the contemporary interest in the concept of normativity, Lask's reflections on its limits, and how to avoid them, are still of interest today.¹¹

2. Hiatus irrationalis

Any account of Lask's contribution to historicism must begin with his doctoral dissertation, *Fichtes Idealismus und die Geschichte*, which was first published in 1902.¹² This work is, true to title, primarily a study of Fichte's philosophy and its relation to history. But it is also much more than that: an investigation into the problem of historical knowledge. Lask himself stresses this point in the foreword to his work, where he states that he is interested in Fichte's philosophy only insofar as it contributes toward an understanding of this problem (3–4).¹³ He declares that his proper concern is with “*the methodology of history*” or “*the methodology of the history of philosophy*”; and insofar as his work is historical at all, he intends it to be “*a contribution to the history of the logical problem of individuality and irrationality*” (4; Lask's italics). Rickert was the *Doktorvater* of Lask's dissertation; and, as one would expect, it is very much indebted to him. But it would be a mistake to see it as a dutiful application of Rickert's views. Lask states the problem of historical knowledge in new and striking ways; and he suggests new perspectives on it and new strategies to deal with it. Weber's later discussion of this problem was influenced decisively by Lask's dissertation.¹⁴

The basic problem of historical knowledge Lask describes as the “*Irrationalitätsproblem*”, i.e., that the individual, the subject matter of history, is “irrational” in the sense that it cannot be fully analyzed, described by concepts, or explained by general laws. Since the individual is indivisible, unique and infinitely rich, it acts as a surd, eluding

complete analysis, adequate description or exhaustive explanation. We can *subsume* particulars under universals, i.e., we can make true statements about them; but the problem is that we cannot *derive* their determinate content from universals, i.e., it eludes complete conceptualization. Hence the individual is radically *contingent* for our understanding, which is limited to purely abstract concepts or general laws. Borrowing a term from the later Fichte, Lask gives a special name to this contingency: the *hiatus irrationalis*.¹⁵ Given this gap between individuals and concepts, the question arises: How we can have historical knowledge at all? If the subject matter of history is the individual, and if the individual eludes analysis and explanation, it would seem that history cannot be a science.

Lask outlines two approaches to the irrationality problem. One is the *analytic* approach, which accepts the dualism between particulars and universals, and which admits that the particular is contingent for reason because the particular cannot be derived from abstract concepts or universals. The other is the *emanationist* approach, which denies the dualism between particular and universal, and which insists that the particular is necessary for reason, which has the power to grasp the particular by its place within a whole. The analytic approach corresponds to a *nominalist* theory of concepts, according to which only particulars are real while universals are only abstractions created by our intellectual activity. The emanationist approach follows a *realist* theory of concepts, according to which universals are real, organic wholes or unities that are the source of the particulars that fall under them. For the analytic approach, the irrationality problem is irresolvable in principle, because the particular remains forever contingent; for the emanationist approach, there is no problem at all, because the particular is really necessary. Lask sees Kant as the chief representative of the analytic approach, and Hegel as the main exemplar of the emanationist approach.

True to the Kantian tradition, Lask decides in favor of the analytic approach. He does so because it alone is in accord with the limits of the human understanding, which remains forever confined by the dualism between particular and universal, intuition and concept. Hegel's concrete universals would indeed solve the irrationality problem; the only trouble is that our limited human intellect does not have the power to create them (71, 72). Such concrete universals are the sole prerogative of an intuitive understanding, an *intellectus archetypus*, which creates particular things in the act of knowing them. Although the analytic approach admits the irrationality problem cannot be resolved, it does not resign itself to complete ignorance. It is still possible to make some progress toward greater knowledge of the particular (59). We can analyze, describe and explain more and more of it; and thus we can approach, even if we cannot attain, *complete* knowledge of it, which remains strictly a regulative ideal. Hegel's concrete universal is simply a hypostasis of the final goal of enquiry (68).

Going against the common nineteenth-century estimate of Kant as an ahistorical thinker, Lask sees Kant as nothing less than “the founder of the philosophy of history.” It was Kant who defined the proper domain of history, because his distinction between values and facts allowed one to see for the first time that history is really about human values rather than just facts and the explanation of them (7). Nevertheless, Lask thinks that Kant’s historical thinking was still limited in one crucial respect: he did not fully appreciate that the aim of history is to grasp the individual as such. Still a child of the Enlightenment, Kant accepted the classical rationalist paradigm of knowledge: the subsumption of a particular under a universal concept or general laws (13). For this reason he failed to value the individual for its own sake, seeing it instead only as “a bearer of universalities of value” (12). Hence he measured the deeds of a statesman according to his contribution to the public good, or the value of an historical personality according to whether or not he complied with the categorical imperative (11).

Although Lask is sympathetic with Kant, and even sides with him against Hegel regarding the irrationality problem, there is still one respect in which he prefers Hegel over Kant. Namely, Hegel rightly saw that the task of history is to grasp the individual as individual, and that it is never sufficient simply to grasp the individual only as an instance of some general law or universal concept. If only as a regulative ideal, Hegel’s concept of a concrete universal is of great value in history, Lask believes, because it attempts to grasp the necessity of the individual, to see its place in a specific whole, whether that is an event, culture or epoch. So, although Lask was critical of Hegel’s metaphysics, his ideal of historical explanation is ultimately more Hegelian than Kantian. He thinks that the ideal of historical explanation should be not subsuming an individual under universal laws but placing it within the context of a concrete whole, i.e., grasping its necessity by seeing how it plays an indispensable role within a particular whole. He wants the concrete universal without the metaphysics, so that it is taken as a regulative ideal rather than a reality.

Granted that there are strengths and weaknesses to both Kant’s and Hegel’s approach to history, is there any philosopher who manages to avoid their weaknesses and to combine their strengths? There is indeed. That philosopher is the hero of Lask’s dissertation: Fichte. The main thesis of Lask’s dissertation is that Fichte is the true father of the critical approach to history. Concerning the irrationality problem, Fichte avoids the pitfalls of Kant and Hegel. Unlike Kant, he sees that the end of history is to grasp the individual; but, unlike Hegel, he fully recognized the limits upon human knowledge. We cannot explore or assess here the accuracy of Lask’s interpretation of Fichte.¹⁶ Suffice it to say that Lask’s interpretation was directed against the prevalent

interpretation of Fichte as a radical rationalist intent on deriving all reality from the absolute ego. While Lask accepts this as an interpretation of Fichte's early 1794 *Wissenschaftslehre*, he argues that Fichte rejected this position in 1797 when he saw that it is impossible to derive the particularity of the empirical world from his first principles. In all his later writings, Lask maintains, Fichte stressed the *hiatus irrationalis* as the fundamental problem for the philosophy of history.

In his later work Lask will continue to reflect on the irrationality problem, though he will take the issue beyond its original context in history. It will later become for him a problem about judgment, and more specifically the classical problem of transcendental philosophy: namely, how do we know that the categories apply to experience? It is noteworthy that Lask already extends the irrationality problem in this general direction in the dissertation. It is even more striking that he takes a decidedly skeptical stance toward its solution: he doubts that we can demonstrate from experience, whose intuitions are particular and contingent, that any universal and necessary concept applies to them. Kant's schematism does not provide a solution to this problem, he argues, because it shows how the categories work with the *pure* intuition of time but not with the *empirical* intuitions of the manifold (47). It is of the greatest historical and philosophical interest in this context that Lask frequently refers to the skepticism of Solomon Maimon, whose work he greatly appreciates and approves.¹⁷ Lask adopts Maimon's chief criticism of Kant: that the critical philosophy cannot bridge the gulf between universal and particular.¹⁸ The general upshot of Maimon's skepticism, he explains, is that we can have *synthetica priori* knowledge only in mathematics and not natural science, that we can demonstrate only general synthetic *a priori* principles but never single empirical propositions (51). All his life, Lask remained faithful to Maimon's skepticism. It surfaces in the *Urteilslehre* where Lask argues at length that there is a gulf between judgment and the realm of the objective. Though Lask does not refer to Maimon in his later work, Maimon's skepticism is a tacit presupposition of his argument and helps to explain why Lask thinks that there is such a sharp divide between judgment and the objective realm. The best general way to describe Lask's thought, I would propose, is along the same lines Maimon described his own thought: namely, a "*Koalitionssystem*", a paradoxical blend of rationalism and skepticism.

3. Legal theory

Lask's *Rechtsphilosophie*, which was first published in 1905,¹⁹ served as his *Habilitationsschrift*. It is essentially an investigation into the method of jurisprudence, an application of Windelband's and Rickert's philosophy of value to legal theory. But Lask went well beyond his teachers, who had no legal theory of their own. His essay came to represent the Southwestern approach to jurisprudence, its position on legal theory.²⁰ It was not without influence on the jurisprudence of his day.²¹

Lask's essay was a timely re-examination of the classical question of the foundation of law. The question of the moral basis of law—"Why should I obey the laws of the state?"—is as old as Plato, and answering it had been the motivation for the natural law tradition. Lask fears, however, that this question has been nearly forgotten. With the rise of the historical school of law, and with the decline of the natural-law tradition, it has fallen out of favor. A new positivist mentality has arisen. The historical school is eager to make a science out of jurisprudence, and so its interest is solely in positive law, the study of its origins and context. It therefore treats law not as norm claiming a value but as an object deserving an explanation. To some extent, Lask approves of this development. In its attempt to make jurisprudence a science, the historical school freed itself from the metaphysics of the past, and it has successfully employed a strictly empirical method for the understanding of law. Nevertheless, Lask thinks that this has now been taken to an extreme. Rather than mere autonomy, the jurists want complete hegemony. They claim that their empirical method is the *only* way of approaching the law. Whoever wants an absolute or moral justification of the law is suspected of metaphysics, of relapsing into the bad old ways of the natural law tradition. And so the empirical method of the historical school has become a full-blown philosophy: empiricism. Even worse, it has become "historicism". When empirical methods are held to be the sole way of understanding the law, Lask argues, the result is historicism. "Historicism is nothing else than the empirical methods of science that postures as a worldview..." (290). Historicism is for Lask, as for Windelband and Rickert, tantamount to relativism, the complete destruction of philosophy (291).

So, on Lask's account, jurisprudence at the beginning of the twentieth century was in a dire state. It seemed to face two alternatives: going forward with the empirical

approach of the historical school or going backwards to the natural-law tradition. To go forward was to encourage historicism; and to go backwards was to condone the old metaphysics of the natural-law tradition. As Lask summed up the dilemma: "Natural law and historicism are the two cliffs against which legal philosophy must protect itself." (291).

To avoid this dilemma, Lask proposes a new approach to jurisprudence, one based upon the philosophy of value of Windelband and Rickert. This new approach Lask calls "critical value theory" (*kritische Wertlehre*) or "critical legal philosophy" (*kritische Rechtsphilosophie*), which, true to name, has its inspiration in Kant's critical philosophy. Critical value theory accepts one of the basic aspirations of the old natural law tradition: the demand for a higher moral justification of the law, the attempt to justify the basic principles of justice. The historical school cannot escape the demand for a justification of the law, Lask argues, because the refusal to answer the *quid juris?* is tantamount to dogmatism, accepting beliefs simply on grounds of authority (279). Even worse, if it refuses to answer the question "Why should I obey the law?" it ends out sanctioning the *status quo*, valuing positive law simply because it is positive. But if critical jurisprudence supports the philosophical aspiration behind the natural law tradition, it cannot accept the metaphysics it used to justify the basic principles of natural law. The natural law tradition clung to an old Platonic two-worlds theory: because it could not justify absolute value in the empirical world, it postulated an ideal world above and beyond the empirical world (279). Critical legal philosophy sees this ideal world as nothing more than hypostasis, i.e., it commits the fallacy of treating values as if they were kinds of things (280). Rather than a two-worlds theory, critical legal philosophy adopts a one-world theory. It insists that there is only one reality (or at least only one that we can know), which is the empirical world given to our senses.

Admitting that there is a single reality does not mean, however, that the historical school is right after all, and that there cannot be any higher justification of the law. None of this follows, Lask argues, because it is necessary to make a fundamental distinction between two kinds of question: those of value and those of fact. We engage in one kind of activity when we assess the reasons for a belief, another kind when we determine its causes. The validity of a belief, or the value of an action, is not something that exists in the social or natural world, and whose existence and causes can be ascertained like ships, shoes and sealing wax. Once we see the logical difference between these questions, Lask assures us, we will be able to replace the old ontological dualism of the natural law tradition with a methodological dualism. Rather than postulating a dualism between two kinds of world, one should adopt a dualism between two different manners of treating (*Betrachtungsweise*) one and the same world (280).

We are now in a position to see the false common premise behind the dilemma between natural law metaphysics and historicism: hypostasis, the assumption that we treat values as if they were matters of fact. Lask thinks that both the natural law tradition and the historical school are each, in their own way, guilty of this fallacy. The natural-

law tradition treated questions of value as if they were matters of fact; and the historical school treated matters of fact as if they were questions of value. "Natural law conjures fact from the absoluteness of value, and historicism the absoluteness of value from empirical fact." (291). Resorting to a strategy like Kant's in the solution of the dynamical antinomies, Lask argues that the conflict between these schools can be resolved provided that we assign to each its proper discourse and domain. A critical philosophy considers reality from the point of view of its value-content (*Wertinhalt*), whereas empirical science treats it from the point of its factual-content (*tatsächlichen Inhaltlichkeit*). Alternatively, when the critical philosophy treats legal questions it asks for their normative justification; but when the historical school considers them it asks about their origins and factual content.

Having addressed the crisis of jurisprudence in section I of his essay, Lask proceeds in section II to undertake a new classification of the social sciences and the place of jurisprudence within them. "One cannot take a single step forward in the methodology of jurisprudence," he writes, "without taking into account methodological dualism, to which all jurisprudence is subject and which one can rightly call the ABC of judicial methodology" (311). The details of Lask's classification do not concern us here. It is important to see, however, the general disclaimers behind it. Lask explains that his investigations concern solely the methodology of empirical jurisprudence, and therefore the philosophy of science (*Philosophie der Wissenschaft*) rather than the philosophy of right (*Philosophie des Rechts*). In other words, his reflections deal with the "value-type of science" (*Werttypus Wissenschaft*) rather than the "value-type of right" (*Werttypus Recht*) (307). Lask does not deal, therefore, with the foundation of value theory itself. He does not attempt to answer the question that most begs for an answer: What should be the method for the philosophy of right? How should it attempt to establish the principles of justice?

In the absence of any attempt to provide such a method, Lask leaves us with the aporia with which he began. We simply do not know if there really is a rational method for treating questions of value. We have a promise, a program, but no way of assessing if it can ever be fulfilled. The historical school shunned this question precisely because it could find no such method. Neither the Kantian categorical imperative nor the utilitarian felicific calculus seemed to provide a foundation for the law. And so it seemed the only way forward in jurisprudence is positivistic, limiting enquiry to what is rather than what ought to be. This was unfortunate and unpalatable, perhaps, but could it be otherwise? It was the great service of Lask's *Rechtsphilosophie* to have once again placed the question of the foundation of law into the foreground of philosophy; it was its great failure not to give any indication of how this question could be answered. The threat of relativism was seen but not contained.

4. Dispute with Rickert

A crucial moment in Lask's intellectual development came, perhaps some time around 1905,²² when he read Edmund Husserl's *Logische Untersuchungen*. Husserl's work had appeared in 1900, and it had begun to make an impact shortly thereafter. Upon reading volume I of the *Untersuchungen* Lask had a disturbing epiphany: that the neo-Kantian conception of normativity was deeply flawed, an inadequate explanation of intersubjective validity. The first volume of Husserl's *Untersuchungen* is a thorough critique of psychologism in all its forms. Amid this critique Husserl complained that the Kantian normative conception of truth, despite its admirable intentions, is tainted with psychologism! It was this point that so troubled Lask. Husserl had convinced him that Windelband's and Rickert's own conception of normativity was much too subjectivistic, still polluted with psychologism. In drawing the full implications of this point Lask would begin to move away from neo-Kantianism.²³

There was much in Husserl's critique of psychologism the neo-Kantians admired. Windelband, Rickert and Lask had been long convinced of the flaws of psychologism. They all agreed with Husserl that validity cannot be explained in psychological terms, that logical laws, and indeed all mathematical truths, are not laws of thought. These truths have an eternal validity, whether anyone thinks like that, and indeed even if there never were thinking beings. But the crucial question remained: How should we characterize this validity? How do we describe the remarkable phenomenon that logical principles, and mathematical truths, are somehow objective, independent of our thinking about them? Windelband and Rickert used the classical Kantian conception of normativity to describe it. They interpreted objectivity in terms of normativity, i.e., as rules or precepts about how we ought to think. Before 1905 Lask too accepted this account of objectivity.²⁴ It was just this Kantian conception of normativity, however, that Husserl had subjected to withering criticism in the first volume of the *Untersuchungen*.²⁵ According to Husserl, logical laws and mathematical propositions are theoretical propositions which state general truths independent of how people think. We cannot identify them with norms because norms make sense only with respect to the psychological activities that they regulate, whereas validity holds even if no one ever thinks of

it. Husserl realized that the Kantians disapproved of psychologism and that they were allies in his campaign against it. Nevertheless, he criticized the Kantians for swithering over the objective versus subjective status of logical laws; they were right in their criticism of psychologism; but whenever it came to describing validity itself, they would resort to psychological language, talking about faculties like judgment or reason and the norms that regulate them.

Much of Lask's mature thought came from his thinking through Husserl's simple point that validity is independent of thinking. His first writing to develop its implications was his short piece "Gibt es einen Primat der praktischen Vernunft in der Logik?," which Lask called his "*Kongreßvortrag*," a lecture he gave at the third international congress of philosophy in 1908.²⁶ Lask's lecture was first and foremost a critique of the normative conception of validity, though he somewhat masks the target of his polemic by describing it in terms of the doctrine of the primacy of practical reason. Lask does not entirely reject this conception; but he thinks that it fails to provide a completely accurate account of truth or validity. Rather than fully appreciating the objectivity involved in the concept of validity, it focuses our attention on its subjective aspect (353–4). We learn less what the truth is and more about how people should react to it. The doctrine of the validity of practical reason defines validity or value in terms of our practical attitudes (349). Truth or validity is that to which we ought to give our assent; it is therefore an ought, a norm. But the idea of an ought or norm has ethical connotations, Lask argues, that strictly speaking do not belong in the realm of truth. Truth is fundamentally concerned with our theoretical attitudes, with what we know or must accept to be true. Norms or obligations, however, have an ethical connotation, because they are directed toward the will or our voluntary attitudes. Norms therefore hold for the practical realm, which concerns what we do, the realm of action (354–5). Lask does not deny that there is a subjective element involved in the concept of truth. But he insists that we describe it in minimal terms, as nothing more than our attitude of acceptance and recognition. We must not import connotations from the realm of lived experience because these are psychologistic, referring to psychic acts rather than their objects (352). The problem with the normative theory, then, is that its account of truth is too subjective. It sees the truth as a demand (*Forderung*) or ought (*Sollen*); but it is really *that which* justifies a demand or ought. In short, norm is a secondary or derivative, not primary or original, conception.

One can only imagine Rickert's consternation upon listening to Lask's lecture in Heidelberg. He had always prided himself on being a liberal professor, not only tolerating but encouraging dissent and discussion among his students. Yet Lask's lecture would have troubled him nonetheless, because it struck directly at the heart of his teaching. The differences between Rickert and Lask are subtle, and they have often

been misdescribed, so it is important to see precisely where they disagree. For one thing, Rickert did not hold the doctrine of the primacy of practical reason in the precise terms in which Lask described it in his lecture. As we have seen, Rickert always insisted that the theoretical realm should be autonomous and not subject to the demands of practice or ethics. Rickert and Lask agreed that theoretical value is *sui generis*, and that it should not be subordinated to the will. Both also rejected any equation of value with ethical value. Where Lask takes issue with Rickert, however, is regarding the measures necessary to secure the autonomy of the theoretical. Lask thinks that Rickert has not gone far enough to secure the autonomy of the theoretical because he understands theoretical value in terms of an "ought" or norm, which only makes sense relative to some ethical attitude of recognition on the part of the subject. So Lask's critique of Rickert was in a sense internal or immanent: he was pointing to an inconsistency between Rickert's demand for the autonomy of the theoretical and his normative conception of truth.

Rickert was troubled enough by Lask's lecture to write a lengthy reply, his 1909 tract *Zwei Wege der Erkenntnistheorie*. We have already had occasion above to examine the general context and argument of Rickert's piece.²⁷ Our interest now is only to consider Rickert's response to Lask and Husserl. On that score, Rickert conceded much to Lask and Husserl. He admitted that it is necessary to make a sharp distinction between value and norm (211), and that the concept of a norm, because it involves reference to a subject, is secondary to that of value or validity (210). He also granted that Husserl was perfectly correct that normative disciplines require a completely theoretical foundation, and that the purely theoretical side of a discipline makes no reference to norms, which concern more its practical application (211). Nevertheless, having conceded all this, Rickert went no further and began to defend himself. He insisted that the concept of a norm remains vital for understanding the connection between value and the subject, between the object of knowledge and the knower (214). The value is something that the knower *ought to* accept and recognize, and as such it acts as a norm with respect to him (210, 215). As soon as we raise the question "Valid for whom?" the concept of normativity comes into play. It is crucial, however, that we raise this question, and that we think of the realm of validity with respect to some knower. Try to imagine, Rickert bids us, the realm of validity as completely transcendent and objective, subsisting independent of any attempt to know it. It then becomes a sublime irrelevance, losing all interest for us: "As pure value, the transcendent is separated from all knowing by an unbridgeable chasm. Truth reigns in a transcendent supremacy. The meaning of the true proposition is valid timelessly; yet for no one." (217). While pure logic need not bother with any regard to the knower, this is hardly the case for epistemology, which is above all a theory about how the truth is known: "I cannot know *what* the object of knowledge is if I do not also know *how*

I can know the object. The concept of an object of knowledge loses its meaning without the concept of the knowledge of the object.” (217). Epistemology, as a theory of knowledge, finds the concept of normativity indispensable, because a norm is simply the directive by which the knower achieves his end and comes into relation with the truth. Once we accept the concept of normativity, Rickert argues, we also should recognize that the concept of the practical does play a role in the theory of knowledge after all. This is not the practical in the narrow ethical sense—Lask is right to banish that from epistemology—but it is the practical in a broader sense, because norms govern our attitudes, if not our actions, telling us to assent or dissent (215, 220).

In responding to Husserl and Lask, Rickert did not stop with a defense of the concept of normativity. He went on the offensive, finding problems in their own conception of validity.

One of the reasons he chose the concept of a norm to designate the realm of validity, Rickert explained, is that it makes clear the distinction between the realm of validity and that of being (213). A norm does not refer to something that is, but only states what ought to be. There is a danger of hypostasizing the concept of validity if we refer to its purely transcendent and objective status, independent of any attempt of a subject to know it. We must avoid at all costs “a Platonizing value metaphysics.” In *Zwei Wege der Erkenntnistheorie* Rickert only warned of the dangers of hypostasis. But in the third edition of *Der Gegenstand der Erkenntnis* (1915) he claimed that Husserl and Lask actually committed this fallacy. If we treat the realm of validity on its own, apart from any attempt of the subject to know it, then we relapse into a dogmatic metaphysics (284). It was the very essence of the Kantian Copernican Revolution that the object of knowledge is incomprehensible apart from how it can be known by a subject.

Lask's *Kongreßvortrag* marks only the beginning of his break with Rickert. Though Rickert and Lask would remain close friends, their philosophical differences would grow in the following years.²⁸ We cannot pursue in detail here their later disagreements. We have found it necessary to consider the initial one, however, because, as we shall soon see, it is indispensable for an understanding of Lask's major works.

5. Logic of philosophy

Lask's first major philosophical writing was his 1911 *Logik der Philosophie und die Kategorienlehre*.²⁹ This treatise is devoted to solving a classical problem in transcendental philosophy: namely, the notorious meta-critical problem: How does the critical philosopher know the conditions and limits of knowledge itself? Kant had limited all knowledge to possible experience; but that raised the question of how we know the

categories themselves, which are not given in experience. Although this problem was centuries old—it goes back to Hamann's 1786 "Metakritik" essay—there was no systematic answer to it in the Kantian tradition. Lask deserves some credit for trying to fill this gap.

It is important to see, however, that Lask gave this problem a new twist, one that goes well beyond the confines of its traditional formulation. He explains that he intends to extend the principles of the critical philosophy so that they hold for a new and exciting ontological sphere: the realm of validity (*Geltung*). The realm of validity does not fall into the realm of *being*, into the sphere of what is, but into the realm of *non-being*, of what is not, because validity is independent of existence. The basis for this distinction goes back to Lotze's famous dictum about validity: "*es gilt, ohne sein zu müssen*."³⁰ The task of Lask's logic is to investigate "the simple fact of the knowability of non-being." (22)

As it stands, Lask's formulation of the task of logic appears paradoxical or trite. Paradoxical, because the realm of being by definition does not exist, so that there is really nothing to know about it. Trite, because all logicians know that the validity of an argument is a formal matter that does not depend upon the existence of anything. To correct these misleading impressions, we have to see beyond the superficial meaning of Lask's terms and to place them in their larger historical context. That context was set by the work of Brentano, Husserl and Rickert, who had opened up the new "irreal" realm of intentionality and meaning. What Lask means by non-being is primarily their new realm. The meaning of terms, the objects of cognitive states and mental attitudes, do not exist in any straightforward empirical sense—we cannot taste, touch or see them—and yet they are also not purely subjective either, depending for their significance on what particular people understand by them. They have an intersubjective meaning and truth that somehow remains the same even if no one ever thinks of them, and even if very different people think of them at different times. How do we explain the peculiar status of such things, their being neither physical nor psychological? From what do they derive their meaning, if it does not depend on their reference to objects in experience or someone's psychological states? And what is it that makes them true or false? The purpose of Lask's logic was to answer these questions. So, even if his terms make it seem trivial or paradoxical, Lask had embarked upon a very important project indeed. He wants to develop a "logic"—a vocabulary and set of concepts (i.e., categories) to talk about the "irreal" realm of meaning and intentionality.

In envisaging such a logic, Lask prided himself that he had taken an important step beyond Kant. Since he had limited knowledge to possible experience, Kant had limited it strictly to the realm of being (21–2, 91,131). He did not have a sufficient explanation for the phenomenon of meaning and intentionality, whose objects are not

given in possible experience. Kant sensed that validity could not be described in metaphysical or psychological terms; but he did not assign it a special place in his system (261). So, Lask believes, Kant had not really seen the problem which meaning and intentionality present. Nevertheless, despite these shortcomings, Lask still swore loyalty to Kant's fundamental principles. The realm of non-being would have to be conquered for the critical philosophy. Hence Lask wrote in the *Selbstanzeige* for the work: "Kant's Copernican feat is to be applied to the object of philosophical knowledge."³¹ Somehow, Lask would have to demonstrate that Kant's principles are a necessary condition of *all* knowledge—not only the knowledge of experience, which falls in the realm of being, but also the knowledge of all kinds of sense or validity, which falls into the realm of non-being.

Given his earlier critique of the concept of normativity, it is odd to find Lask so intent on upholding Kantian principles for his new logic of philosophy. The apparent contradiction disappears, however, as soon as consider Lask's interpretation of Kant. Unlike Windelband and Rickert, Lask saw the fundamental contribution of the critical philosophy not as its conception of normativity but as its conception of value, which he regards as the basis of normativity. It was Kant who saw the fundamental difference between *quid juris?* and *quid facti?*, so that a logic about the realm of value, understood as distinct from the realm of being, was still, in Lask's view, a fundamentally Kantian enterprise.³²

Given this interpretation of Kant, it is odd that Lask explains the main principle behind Kant's Copernican Revolution in the following terms: that the realm of being is identical with the logical realm, or with the forms of understanding (28–9). Contrary to his earlier distinction between validity and being, Lask now seems to identify the two realms: "Objectivity of being is nothing further than the absoluteness of validity" (30); "Objectivity is nothing more than validity, unconditional validation and determining justification" (30). He explains that while pre-critical philosophy accepts a dualism between being and cognition, the critical philosophy affirms their identity (28). Lask complains that even Husserl has not sufficiently honored the Kantian principle. By attempting to uphold a correspondence between the realm of logic and that of being, Husserl had sanctioned a dualism and thus relapsed into a pre-critical dogmatism (41).

It seems difficult, then, to take Lask's Kantianism at its face value. There seems to be a flat contradiction between Lask's account of the Copernican Revolution and his distinction between the realms of being and validity. While the Copernican Revolution identifies being with logic, which consists in the forms of validity, we are also told that we must distinguish between what is and what is valid. Lask resolves this

contradiction with an important distinction, one fundamental to his argument as a whole. He explains that the forms of validity are necessary only for the *objectivity* of objects, not for the objects themselves (31). We must distinguish between the general character of objectivity, which has a value conferring function, from things that are objective; or, as Lask puts it in a famous phrase later appropriated by Heidegger, we must distinguish being (*das Sein*) from what has beings (*das Seiende*) (31, 46). So the more accurate formulation for the difference between the realm of being and validity, as Lask now puts it, is between beings, or *those things* having being, and validity. This, he writes, is the ultimate distinction, “the last breach and heterogeneity” (47).

Assuming now that there is a fundamental distinction between that which has being and validity, how are we to explain the connection between them? In slightly new terms, that was the fundamental problem of philosophy as Rickert explained it in 1911, as we have already seen.³³ Lask now takes up Rickert's problem in his *Kategorienlehre*. He attempts to solve it in standard Kantian fashion by employing the classical distinction between matter and form. While that which has being is matter, that which gives validity is form. We thus replace a dualism between *entities* with one between *elements* (45). The objects in the sensible world should be content, the validity of the intellectual world should be form. We can then explain the connection of these realms by the unity of matter with form.

What is the connection between matter and form? How do we explain their unity? The fundamental proposition of the philosophical science of validity, Lask writes, is that valid content (*Geltungsgehalt*) does not have its sense in itself but refers to something beyond itself (32). The formal character of validity is that it refers to something outside itself, its content (33). Identity, for example, is incomprehensible without something that is identical, difference is incomprehensible without something different (32). “Form refers validating towards a content, and content stands in a form.” (33). In the matter–form relationship Lask stresses that form is always the dependent variable, and matter the independent variable. Form is dependent upon matter because its function is to refer to something beyond itself, namely matter, which stands on its own (92–4). The unity of form and content is sense or meaning (*Sinn*) (34). Sense is distinct from mere form because it also needs a content, something for it to represent. It is form inhering in content, content shaped by form. While thus stressing the interpenetration of form and content, Lask also insists on their difference. We must distinguish between what is represented and that which represents. The content of what is represented cannot be derived from the act of representing, which produces only the general forms of objectivity. The problem of classical rationalism, Lask writes, is that it did not understand how alogical material can stand in a logical form without becoming logical itself (36).

Granted that we should replace a two-entities theory with a two-element theory, there is still the problem of explaining how these elements unite. If they are still so distinct—a sensible and temporal matter in contrast to an intellectual and eternal form—how do they come together to produce meaning? Lask admits that there is a mystery here. Yet he is less troubled by it than Rickert. He is more concerned that we acknowledge it than we attempt to explain it away. A logic of philosophy, he firmly believes, needs to recognize the limits of reason as much as its powers. Philosophy has to accept that the dualism between being and validity is fundamental, ultimate, insurmountable (48). Being is what does not have validity, validity is what does not have being (48). That which has mere being, the realm of matter, which comprises all the crude particularities of sense experience, stands forever apart from the realm of validity because it remains indescribable, inexplicable, undeducible. It is that which can be only felt and sensed. Of course, we can describe, explain or deduce it to some extent; but insofar as we do so, it has become contaminated by the form of validity, and so is no longer *pure* matter. We can have at best only a *negative* characterization of the particular material of our sense experience (51–2). We cannot say what it is but only what it is not. Indeed, it does not have any sense or meaning at all, given that sense requires the combination of content with form (56). The realm of the sensible, of the pure matter of lived experience, is therefore “that which is without essence or alien to essence” (*Das Wesenlose oder Wesensfremde*). Lask insists, therefore, upon the existence of a raw, purely given content in experience. Although the material is “touched” and “clothed” by form, it is only “decorated” by it and not “penetrated” by it. What we get through logical form is clarity, a better focus; but clarity casts light around something without penetrating it (75). Taking issue with rationalist interpretations of Kant, Lask insists that one should polemicize against the idea that content is somehow transformed by form (76). He even recommends revising Kant's formula, so that content without form is not blind but simply naked (74).

Though it is only implicit, in insisting on the brute given element of experience, Lask was in effect taking issue with his old mentor, Rickert. No less than Lask, Rickert had always stressed the irrationality of the given content of experience, its irreducibility and contingency. But there is an important difference between them regarding the status of individuality. Are the individual things of sense experience given or created? Rickert had argued at length in *Die Grenzen der naturwissenschaftlichen Begriffsbildung* that the *principium individuationis* is something created by our interests and concepts.³⁴ The manifold on its own is an undifferentiated mass, inexhaustible in its richness and complexity; we individuate it by singling out some factor within it which we wish to discuss or analyze. The work of individuation is entirely the product of the subject. So, for Rickert, the individual is therefore created rather than given. For Lask, however, just the opposite is the case: the individual is given. Hence he argues in

Die Kategorienlehre that we individuate forms according to their matter (58–9). The determinate forms in the sphere of validity are identified by their content, by what they refer to (63). The manifold on its own therefore comes in discrete qualities and particular shapes. If it were not for that, there would be no way of distinguishing between particular forms. The content of these qualities is accessible to us, Lask holds, through immediate intuitions. We have an immediate lived experience of the sensible, as well as the non-sensible, even if on its own it does not constitute an act of knowledge (191). Rickert had denied the very possibility of such intuitions.³⁵

In stressing the givenness of individual things, their raw or “untouched” materiality, Lask was returning to his favorite theme: the *hiatus irrationalis*. It is his insistence on the irreducible, irrational and given aspect of experience that is often held to mark his distinctive place in neo-Kantianism.³⁶ It separates him from not only Rickert but also the Marburg neo-Kantians, as well as the late Kant of the *Opus postumum*, who had struggled to diminish the realm of the given through an expansion of the realm of forms. What they hope to eliminate, Lask wants to retain. The attempt to shrink the irrational, Lask believed, was a forlorn hope, arising from a deep mistake in principle, a failure to recognize the limits of reason. It is especially here that we can see Lask's anticipation of Heidegger.

Having analyzed the realm of meaning in Part One of the *Kategorienlehre*, Lask proceeds in Part Two to investigate how we have knowledge of that realm. Given that matter as such is only intuitable by the senses, the specific object of philosophical knowledge is form (92). A philosophical category for the realm of form is therefore a second-order form, a form of form. The matter–form distinction again applies on this level, because the form, in becoming an object of knowledge, serves as the matter for the form of form (101). Though form has now become matter, it does not have the same characteristics of first-order matter, i.e., it is not indefinable and indescribable. Form is something we create and is therefore more intelligible to us. Lask sees no special difficulty in the fact that we can talk meaningfully about form through form. This seems like a problem, he contends, only if one accepts the Kantian thesis that meaningful discourse is limited to possible experience (132). The Kantian thesis flies in the face of the fact that we can talk about form—as indeed Kant's own philosophy attests. While we must recognize the given element in all knowledge, even philosophical knowledge, we should not allow that to prevent us from talking about anything. And so Lask writes in italics: “*Not panlogicism, but the panarchy of the logos, should again be brought into honor*” (133).

Given Lask's aim is to establish a new logic for the realm of validity, one is eager to know the specific categories that hold for this realm. One hopes for something like a

Kantian table of categories, only this would be a system of *second-order* categories. But a reader who expects this quickly finds himself disappointed. Lask's treatise is strictly programmatic; it is more about the idea for such a logic rather than such a logic itself. Lask flatly denies that there can be an *a priori* deduction of the basic categories. Why? His explanation goes back to his central theme: the *hiatus irrationalis*. That hiatus works as much on the second-order level as the first-order. It means that there is no fundamental first principle that can derive all the categories, whose particularity remains utterly contingent. Since we can differentiate between forms only by their contents, we can individuate and classify the categories only *a posteriori* (169–70). Pure form on its own is purely abstract and general, too empty to derive the particular categories that fall under it. Why not, then, derive the categories from an inductive survey? While Lask does not rule out this possibility, he thinks that the theory of meaning is in too primitive a state to make even a survey. Before one conducts such a survey, one must first have “a complete theory of meaning, a doctrine of the structure of a philosophy of validity, the basic concepts of the sphere of validity” (170). But none of this has been done. And so, in the end, Lask leaves his logic as a task for future generations.

6. Theory of judgment

Lask's final settling of accounts with the value theory of the Southwestern school is his 1912 treatise *Die Lehre vom Urteil*.³⁷ This is Lask's most difficult writing. Both style and content present formidable difficulties to the reader. Lask writes in an involved syntax, uses his own peculiar vocabulary, and expects that the reader is thoroughly familiar with all the niceties in current logical theory (*circa* early 1900s). One has the impression that Lask has thought so deeply inside the material that he has lost his ability to get outside it, that he no longer has the perspective necessary to expound it to those less familiar with it. Lask could well say of his treatise what Wittgenstein said of his own nearly contemporary work: “This book will perhaps be understood only by someone who has already had the thoughts expressed in it, or at least similar thoughts.”³⁸ But, all appearances to the contrary, *Die Lehre vom Urteil* was not meant to be a sealed book of wisdom. There is indeed a key to its understanding: namely, its historical context, more specifically, Lask's earlier discovery of Husserl and his dispute with Rickert. Lask's treatise simply defends and develops his earlier position in greater depth and detail.

Lask explains the basic problem behind his theory in the opening paragraphs of his introduction. He takes as his starting point Kant's Copernican Revolution, which for him is still “the turning point in the whole history of theoretical philosophy and logic” (286). He accepts the basic principle behind this Revolution: that the realm of

objectivity consists in certain basic concepts, i.e., the categories, and not a thing-in-itself that exists apart from them (286). But now that the realm of objectivity has been identified with the logical—now that the object is the *concept* of an object—a new dualism emerges within the realm of logic itself. There is now a gap between the material or objective and the formal or non-objective side of logic (286–7). The material or objective side consists in the categories, whereas the formal or non-objective side consists in the means by which the subject *judges* the material or objective realm (287). The crucial question is then how to explain truth *within* the realm of logic itself. The old pre-critical problem of truth is how does a representation correspond to an object that exists independent of it (the thing-in-itself)? But now that the objective realm consists in concepts, that question has been transformed: How does a representation correspond to the *concept* of the object, the category? The problem of correspondence recurs all over again, Lask believes, even if objectivity is no longer a thing-in-itself but something logical and constituted by the categories. If the basic task of a theory of judgment in the *pre-Kantian* age was to clarify the relationship of judgment to concepts and inferences, its central role in the *post-Kantian* age is “to clarify the relation of judgment to the objective-logical region” (287–8).

Following his earlier account in the *Kategorienlehre*,³⁹ Lask ranks the two sides of logic according to their conceptual priority (288–90). The objective or material side is primary because it is that to which the non-objective or formal side corresponds. Judgment belongs strictly to the non-objective or secondary sphere, and for two reasons: first, because it is only formal and refers to something beyond itself, namely the objective realm; and, second, because it is true or false depending on its correspondence with the objective realm (288–9). Hence the objective side is prior to the non-objective or formal side because it sets the standard to which judgment should correspond; it is the prototype for which judgment is the copy or ectype (291, 356, 358).

Lask laid the greatest stress on the point that the realm of judgment is secondary, dependent for its truth on the objective realm (288). He saw this as the central and characteristic thesis of his theory, and regarded it as his original contribution to the neo-Kantian tradition (295). That it was original there cannot be any doubt. For Lask was really reversing the priority given to judgment in the Kantian tradition. In the first *Kritik*, in the *Metaphysical Deduction* and second edition. *Transcendental Deduction*, Kant had made judgment the basis for his derivation and deduction of the categories. And in *Der Gegenstand der Erkenntnis* and in *Zwei Wege* Rickert attempted to derive the concept of an object from the analysis of judgment. Lask believes that this method is a mistake: it places the standard of judgment inside the sphere of judgment itself when it should lie outside it.⁴⁰ The rationale for his position

emerged during his dispute with Rickert. Following Husserl, Lask had argued for a purely objective concept of truth, according to which theoretical propositions are true not because they conform to norms but because they correspond to something objective, something which exists or subsists completely independent of the subject. We therefore cannot derive this concept of objectivity from an act of judgment, as Kant and Rickert propose, because this would erase the requirement that truth be independent of the knowing subject.

In demoting the role of judgment and in promoting an objective concept of truth, Lask seems to be returning to the old pre-Kantian way of thinking. For he makes truth consist in the correspondence with an objective realm, where the objective realm serves as the standard or prototype for the judgment, which is its ectype or copy. The language of prototype and ectype is even reminiscent of Plato. And not accidently. For there is a profound Platonic undercurrent in *Die Lehre vom Urteil*: Lask's objective realm turns out to consist in purely intelligible and indivisible archetypes (397–8).⁴¹ Lask's return to the pre-Kantian correspondence theory was deliberate and explicit (311, 389, 390). What motivated it? The Kantian theory of truth on its own, Lask realized, is still incomplete and cannot fully explain the concept of truth. Rickert was simply wrong to dissolve the concept of an object into nothing more than normativity. For assuming that truth does involve conformity to norms, we still have to explain why we adopt the norms in the first place. The norm states simply that one ought to affirm or assent to “S is P,” and it declares a judgment true when it complies with this norm by saying “S is P.” But this still leaves the question why we ought to assent to “S is P,” or why there should be such a norm in the first place. Ultimately, there must be something objective to make “S is P” true, which cannot be simply the judgment itself. Aristotle, a major influence on Lask, put the point very neatly: “It is not because we think truly that you are pale, that you *are* pale, but because you are pale we who say this have the truth.”⁴² Time and again Lask would put forward arguments to endorse Aristotle's point.⁴³

But how is this revival of the correspondence theory consistent with the Copernican Revolution, which Lask swore to uphold? On one common interpretation of that Revolution, it was Kant's great virtue to replace the correspondence theory of truth with a kind of coherence theory, according to which truth consists in the conformity of representations with rules rather than their correspondence with things in themselves. The alleged advantage of the Kantian theory is its *immanence*, i.e., that we do not *per impossible* have to go outside the realm of consciousness to see whether representations correspond to a thing-in-itself; rather, we can stay within this realm simply by

determining whether representations conform to subjectively created norms. *Prima facie* Lask is forfeiting this crucial advantage of the critical theory, recreating all the old problems of the correspondence theory. Such, at any rate, was the complaint of Rickert and Ernst Cassirer.⁴⁴

Aware of this very objection, Lask replies that his version of the correspondence theory still works within the general Kantian framework (356). His theory does not require the correspondence of a representation with the thing-in-itself, i.e., something that exists completely outside the sphere of the logical. All that it demands is a correspondence within the sphere of the logical, the agreement of a judgment with the objective realm of validity. In Lask's terms, the *pre*-Kantian tradition affirmed a correspondence between "the theoretical and *meta*-theoretical," but the Kantian tradition insists upon a correspondence that holds only between "*different forms* of the theoretical" (356). The *critical* correspondence theory assumes a distinction not between the objective and the theoretical as such, but between the objective and *one form* of the theoretical: namely, the realm of judgment. We must make a distinction between the objective realm of validity and the judgments which do or do not correspond with it. According to Lask's interpretation of the Copernican Revolution, then, the objective realm that exists independent of the subject does not consist in the thing-in-itself, a completely *meta*-theoretical object which exists independent of any theory about it. Rather, it consists in those *values* or *standards* that make judgments true or false independent of the judgments themselves. "The completely thought out and consistent Copernican doctrine," he writes, involves "the insertion of validity and value into the objects themselves" (389). Once we understand the objective realm in these terms it becomes possible to have a correspondence theory according to Kantian principles. We can still stay within the realm of the theoretical, which requires nothing more than knowledge of logic, and we never have to go outside it by assuming correspondence with a meta-theoretical thing-in-itself. Rickert's and Cassirer's objection is invalid, then, because it conflates the objective realm with the meta-logical or meta-theoretical thing-in-itself when it is really only the logical or theoretical realm of validity itself.

Prima facie Lask's interpretation of the Copernican Revolution is more revisionist than exegetical. Lask seems to be *revising* the critical philosophy, not interpreting it, because he is recommending how it should be reformed to explain objective validity. It does not seem to be an accurate account of Kant's historical intentions, because Lask is riding roughshod over one aspect of Kant: the subjectivist and nominalist aspect, according to which the transcendental subject creates the very standards of its knowledge. Lask makes the Kantian Revolution revolve around Platonic prototypes rather than the creative activity of the subject. On a closer reading, however, Lask was not so much revising Kant as stressing another aspect of him. For there was also in Kant a no

less deep Platonic strand, one which ran counter to his nominalism and subjectivism. It is well known that Kant repudiated the voluntarist theory according to which standards of value and truth depend on the will alone. Although his autonomous moral agent creates the laws by which it lives, its self-legislation has to comply with eternal standards of rationality. Never did Kant think that whatever the will decides is good or true simply because it decides it to be so. Lask's interpretation of Kant has the merit of focusing on these Platonic strands in Kant and thinking them through to the end. If we take them seriously, we realize how misleading it is to talk about the transcendental subject simply creating standards of truth. The problem with Rickert's and Cassirer's interpretation of Kant, Lask would say, is that it took this loose talk too literally and too far.

However defensible, Lask's Platonic reinterpretation of Kant raised problems all its own. It was Lask's central contention that we must distinguish sharply between the archetypical and ectypical realms, between the objective realm of value and that of judgment. He contended that the sphere of judgment is essentially artificial, the result of the activity of the knowing subject, whereas the objective sphere remains the same, having its value or validity independent of whether it is known or not.⁴⁵ Throughout chapter one he had argued that the attributes of judgment should not be predicated directly of the objective sphere itself. The sphere of judgment is one of opposition—such as that between truth and falsity, or affirmation and negation—and these are properties of how we judge the world, not the world itself.⁴⁶ The objective sphere, however, stood above all opposition, and indeed all the distinctions of discursive thought. The net result of this drastic dualism, however, is that it now seems impossible for judgments to correspond to the objective realm. The whole point of postulating the objective realm is to serve as a standard of judgment, to have some means of determining whether judgments are true or false independent of the judgments themselves. But now the question arises how it can serve in that capacity at all, given that it is so utterly incongruous with the sphere of judgment. The objective realm is perfectly intelligible, indivisible, oppositionless; the subjective realm of judgment is tainted with sensibility, divisibility and opposition. How, then, do these realms correspond with one another? All the old problems of the Kantian dualism between the noumenal and phenomenal return to haunt Lask, who had simply couched them in a new terminology.

Another allied problem with Lask's interpretation is how it is possible to know the archetypical world. If the human understanding is discursive, working according to the forms of judgment, how does it know an objective realm that is utterly unlike these discursive structures? The problem becomes all the more acute when we find Lask frequently arguing that, in knowing its object, the human intellect refashions and

transforms it (291, 363, 374).⁴⁷ Human subjectivity analyzes its object, which is indivisible, into parts; and it then puts them together again, but in an order that suits itself (418–20). Hence the world of human lived experience is self-enclosed, shut off from the transcendent realm of objective truth (415, 416–17). But if this is so, how does the human intellect know the objective realm? And what sense does it make to regard its judgments as somehow an ectype—an image or reproduction (*Nachbild*)—of the archetypal world? Kant could avoid this problem because of his nominalist and subjectivist side, which makes it a principle that the intellect knows whatever it creates. The Kantian subject could know its standards of truth for the simple reason that it makes them. But this, of course, is not a solution available to Lask, who stresses the independent status of the standard of truth.

So, although Lask in principle seems to leave open the possibility of knowledge of the objective realm by making it theoretical or logical, he in the end closes this door of opportunity. He is so convinced that the activity of the subject encloses it within its own artificial world that he is in danger of making a new unknowable thing-in-itself out of the objective realm. The paradoxical consequences of his position are most apparent in chapter 3, where Lask creates a new immanent world of *quasi*-transcendence where the subject believes that he is making truth claims about an objective world but is really only commenting on his own creations (427, 429, 441). The standards of truth of subjectivity are only relative to that subjective world, and are not really derived from any knowledge of the objective realm. Hence, in a manner reminiscent of Plato's *Republic*, Lask begins to write in chapter 3 about layers or levels of appearance, where each layer becomes progressively more removed from the truth.

Is there no path toward the sunlight? No way to escape the cave created by our own subjectivity? Ultimately, Lask is too much of a Platonist to allow such a dire conclusion. Toward the end of his second chapter he postulates a special kind of intuitive insight into the objective realm, an act of pure apprehension which somehow withholds or suspends its own activity, and which consists in a passive surrender to the object itself (396).⁴⁸ One is again reminded of Plato's *Republic*, particularly the spiritual vision of the forms described in Book VIII. Here Lask is at his least Kantian. For he is in effect denying the Kantian thesis that human knowledge must be discursive, i.e., limited to the concepts of the forms of judgment. It was one of Kant's most emphatic teachings that human beings are not in possession of powers of intuition beyond the discursive understanding.

Ultimately, then, Lask's theory of judgment ends in a desperate stratagem that betrays the critical heritage he was so eager to uphold. Perhaps, had he lived longer, he would have abandoned his fraying allegiance to the Kantian tradition and moved in a completely new direction. There are indications that this was already happening in the late lectures on logic.⁴⁹ But Lask's untimely death makes this all a matter of conjecture.

Notes:

(1) It is indicative of the state of scholarship that neither Willey nor Köhnke, the most extensive accounts of neo-Kantianism, discuss Lask. Hans-Ludwig Ollig's brief sketch in *Der Neukantianismus* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1979), pp. 66–71, is a step in the right direction. For the scholarship on Lask, see the bibliography below and Ollig, pp. 71–2.

(2) See Georg Simmel to Heinrich Rickert, June 17, 1906, in *Georg Simmel, Briefe 1880–1911*, ed. Klaus Köhnke, in *Gesamtausgabe* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2005), XXII, 546. Simmel, who knew Lask personally, singles him out as an example of a Jew who “*das Spezifische der jüdischen Geistigkeit nicht mehr besitzen.*”

(3) Emil Lask, *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Eugen Herrigel (Tübingen: Mohr, 1923), 3 vols. All references to Lask's writings are to this edition (abbreviated GS). There is now a new edition of Lask's *Sämtliche Werke* (Jena: Scheglmann, 2002), 2 vols. This does not contain Lask's *Nachlaß* but it does contain reviews and notices not published in the Herrigel edition.

(4) On Lask's final views, see Eugen Herrigel, “Emil Lask's Wertsystem,” *Logos* XII (1923–24), 100–22. Herrigel carefully reconstructs Lask's views from his last fragments and lecture notes.

(5) See Theodore Kisiel, *The Genesis of Heidegger's Being & Time* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), p. 25. See too his “Why Students of Heidegger will have to read Emil Lask,” in *Heidegger's Way of Thought* (New York: Continuum, 1992), pp. 101–36.

(6) *On Max Weber* (New York: Free Press, 1968), p. 18.

(7) Emil Lask, *Kant-Studien* XXII (1917–18), 349–70.

(8) To understand the thinking behind his enlistment one only has to read the final chapter of his dissertation, which sees Fichte's nationalism as his ultimate philosophical achievement. See his *Fichtes Idealismus und die Geschichte*, GS I, 265. Honigsheim's claim, *Max Weber*, pp. 18–19, that Weber convinced Lask to volunteer is false. Both Rickert and Marianne Weber stress that Lask enlisted out of personal conviction.

(9) As cited by Heinrich Rickert in his “Persönliches Geleitwort” in volume I of the *Gesammelte Schriften*, I, xiv.

(10) Marianne Weber, *Max Weber: Ein Lebensbild* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1926), p. 538. See her portrait of Lask, p. 537.

(11) For a recent attempt to discuss Lask in the light of contemporary epistemology, see Steven Crowell, “Transcendental Logic and Minimal Empiricism: Lask and McDowell on the Unboundedness of the Conceptual,” in *Neo-Kantianism in Contemporary Philosophy*, eds. Rudolf Makkreel and Sebastian Luft (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2010), pp. 150–74.

(12) *Gesammelte Schriften* I, 1–274. All references in parentheses are to this edition.

(13) See also Lask's “Selbstanzeige” of his dissertation in *Kant-Studien* VII (1902), 471–2. Here Lask describes it as a study of the *Individualitätsgedanke*”.

(14) See Weber's *Roscher und Knies und die logischen Probleme der historischen Nationalökonomie*, in *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Wissenschaftslehre*, ed. Johannes Winckelmann (Tübingen: Mohr, 1973), p. 16n1. Weber relies on Lask's distinction between the two approaches to the individuality problem; and, following Lask's arguments, he rejects the emanationist approach.

(15) See Fichte's 1804 *Wissenschaftslehre*, in *Werke*, ed. I.H. Fichte (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1971), X, 217.

(16) Rightly, Lask was proud of the originality of his interpretation and stressed the shortcomings of earlier Fichte scholarship. Though his work has proven simplistic in the light of later scholarship, Lask was the first to get beyond the

untenable rationalist interpretation of Fichte. Through his rigorous argumentation and exegesis, Lask raised the standards of Fichte scholarship. Along with Xavier Léon's *Fichte et son temps* (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1902), it marks the beginning of modern Fichte scholarship.

(17) Lask discusses Maimon on several occasions, showing a thorough and accurate knowledge of his thought. See GS I, 50–1, 57, 125–6. It is likely that Lask, who was a friend of Richard Kroner, was the stimulus for Kroner's study of Maimon. Kroner would later give a central place to Maimon in his *Von Kant bis Hegel* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1921), a crucial text in reviving Maimon's reputation and formative role in the development of German idealism.

(18) See Maimon, *Streifereien im Gebiete der Philosophie*, in *Maimon Gesammelte Werke*, ed. Valerio Verra (Hildesheim: Olms, 2003), IV 38.

(19) *Gesammelte Schriften* I, 275–331. The essay was first published in *Die Philosophie im Beginn des zwanzigsten Jahrhunderts. Festschrift für Kuno Fischer* (Heidelberg: Winter, 1905) II, 1–50. It was substantially revised for a second edition of this volume, which appeared in 1907. It was published separately in pamphlet form—*Rechtsphilosophie* (Heidelberg: Winter, 1905)—as Lask's Heidelberg *Habilitationsschrift*. This is the only writing of Lask to have been translated. See “Legal Philosophy,” translated by Kurt Wilk, in *The Legal Philosophies of Lask, Radbruch and Dabin*, ed. Edwin Patterson (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1950), pp. 3–42.

(20) See Hans-Ludwig Ollig, ed., *Neukantianismus. Texte der Marburger und der Südwestdeutschen Schule* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1982), pp. 182–226. In his introduction Ollig, p. 22, stresses the importance of the work in the Southwestern school.

(21) It was an important influence on Gustav Radbruch's *Rechtsphilosophie* (Leipzig: Quelle & Meyer, 1925), a much celebrated work during the Weimar republic. For a general discussion of the influence of Lask's work, see Rainer Friedrich's “Begleittext” to volume I of the *Werke*, “Emil Lasks Rechtsphilosophie,” pp. 347–53.

(22) Precisely when this happened is a matter of conjecture. In his December 25, 1910 letter to Husserl, Lask wrote that he had introduced his conception of validity into his lectures for the past five years. See Edmund Husserl, *Briefwechsel*, ed. Karl Schuhmann (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1994), V, 31. This means he would have to have read Husserl around or before 1905. Since Lask still endorsed the neo-Kantian conception in his dissertation, it would have to be after 1902.

(23) On Lask's relationship to Husserl, see Karl Schuhmann and Barry Smith, “Two Idealisms: Lask and Husserl,” *Kant-Studien* 84 (1993), 448–66; and Steven Crowell, “Husserl, Lask, and the Idea of Transcendental Logic,” in *Edmund Husserl and the Phenomenological Tradition*, ed. Robert Sokolowski (Washington, DC: Catholic University Press, 1988), pp. 63–85.

(24) In *Fichtes Idealismus und die Geschichte* Lask states that objectivity consists in “*eine Regel der Vorstellungsverbindung*,” “*eine Notwendigkeit des Urteilens*,” and that the *a priori* comprises transcendental generic concepts. See GS I, 33, 34.

(25) See Edmund Husserl, *Logische Untersuchungen* (Halle: Niemeyer, 1928), I, 157–8, 164–5.

(26) *Gesammelte Schriften* I, 347–56. This paper was originally published in *Bericht über den III. Internationalen Kongress für Philosophie zu Heidelberg, 1. Bis 5. September 1908*, ed. Theodor Elsenhaus (Heidelberg: Winter, 1909), pp. 671–9.

(27) Chapter 8, section 6. All references to Rickert's text are to the edition cited there.

(28) Their disagreements appear in their (unpublished) correspondence, and in several passages, footnotes and *Nachträge* to Lask's *Die Lehre vom Urteil*. See GS II, 420–1, 447–9, 359n, 426n. See also Lask's “System der Logik,” GS III, 103, 115, which does not mention Rickert by name though he surely was meant.

(29) GS II, 1–282. All references are to this edition.

(30) Roughly: “it is valid without having to exist.” I have been unable to find the precise source of this dictum, whose origins might lie in student lore. The proximate source is Lotze's *Logik*, where he uses phrases approximating it. See Hermann Lotze, *Logik* (Leipzig: Hirzel, 1874), §316, pp. 498–501.

(31) *Kant-Studien* XVI (1911), 355–6.

(32) Lask's loyalty to Kant in this respect appears in the very beginning of his *Kongreßvortrag*, where he declares that the decisive feat of modern philosophy came with the insight that “logic and epistemology is a critique of reason, a doctrine of *value*, a meditation over sense and meaning.” See GS I, 349; Lask's italics.

(33) See chapter 10, section 6.

(34) *Die Grenzen der naturwissenschaftlichen Begriffsbildung* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1913), Drittes Kap. Abschnitt II, pp. 214–34.

(35) *Ibid.*, p. 41.

(36) This has been the theme of two valuable articles on Lask: Hanspeter Sommerhäuser's “Emil Lask,” *Zeitschrift für philosophische Forschung* 21 (1967), 136–45; and Rudolf Malter's “Heinrich Rickert und Emil Lask,” *Zeitschrift für philosophische Forschung* 23 (1969), 86–97.

(37) All references are to *Gesammelte Schriften* II, 283–463.

(38) Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961), p. 2. My translation.

(39) GS II, 32, 92–4. See section 5 above.

(40) For Lask's critique of Kant's metaphysical deduction, see GS II, 346–7, 381, 407. For his critique of Rickert, see GS II, 410–12.

(41) In the *Kategorienlehre*, Lask credited Plato with the discovery of the non-sensible realm, though he believed he confused it with the metaphysical supersensible realm. GS II, 13–14, 224. Lask says that it was the great virtue of Plotinus to see the problem of applying the categories to the supersensible realm (234–5).

(42) Aristotle, *Metaphysics* Bk IX, ch. 9, 1051b (Ross translation). Lask refers explicitly to this text (317–18). Lask regarded Aristotle's theory of judgment as the greatest achievement in the field, having set a standard that subsequent efforts could not match (404).

(43) See, for example, GS II, 298, 309, 311, 317.

(44) See Rickert, *Der Gegenstand der Erkenntnis*, p. 284; and Cassirer, “Erkenntnistheorie nebst den Grenzfragen der Logik,” in *Jahrbücher der Philosophie* ((1913), 1–59, esp. 8–11.

(45) This is the contention of chapter three, section 1, GS II, 413–25.

(46) Here again the inspiration for Lask's argument is Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Book VI, chap. 3, 1027b: “... for falsity and truth are not in things—it is not as if the good were true, and the bad were in itself false—but in thought.” Lask stresses the importance of this text, GS II, 317–18, 404.

(47) This is in contrast with the *Kategorienlehre*. Sommerhäuser, “Emil Lask,” p. 143, notes that in his *Nachlaß* Lask began to return to the position of Rickert, who had stressed more the activity of the knowing subject. The return to subjectivity is already apparent, however, in the *Urteilslehre*.

(48) Lask had already argued for intuitive apprehension of the realm of validity in his *Kategorienlehre*, GS II, 189–202.

(49) “Zum System der Logik,” GS III, 91, 103, 115, 136. See also note 4 above.

Simmel's Early Historicism

1. Simmel and the historicist tradition

Another major figure in the historicist tradition, one of no less stature than Droysen or Dilthey, is *Georg Simmel* (1858–1918). Although Simmel's place in this tradition is firm and clear, it has been much less appreciated. This is not because Simmel is a neglected figure; indeed, his star has been steadily rising.¹ But it is because he has been usually, indeed almost entirely, seen as a sociologist. Simmel is best known today for his seminal role in the development of modern sociology. Along with Max Weber and Emile Durkheim, he is often taken to be one of the founding fathers of the discipline. Not surprisingly, then, almost all scholarship on Simmel has focused upon his contributions to sociology, whether that be his account of the method and foundations of sociology or his many studies of modernity.² Thus Simmel's place in the historicist tradition has been overshadowed by his reputation as a sociologist.

Lately, however, scholars have begun to discover that, besides the sociologist, there is another Georg Simmel.³ This is Georg Simmel the philosopher. Trained as such, and well versed in the arcana of Kant scholarship, Simmel was a philosopher from the very beginning to the very end of his career. He had interests in virtually every area of philosophy: epistemology, ethics, aesthetics, philosophy of science, social and political theory. Simmel's restless intellect and wide-ranging interests have often led to the charge of amateurism and dilettantism. But, to any philosopher, such diverse interests

are only different facets of a single profession. Like many philosophers, Simmel was simply engaging in the different areas of his discipline.

But Simmel is not as complicated as this might make him appear. For there are not two Georg Simmels: the moonlighting philosopher and the professional sociologist. There is really only one Georg Simmel: the philosopher. Somewhat to their chagrin, sociologists now recognize that Simmel was devoted to sociology only for a brief period of his career, essentially from the late 1890s until 1908.⁴ After that, he returned to his philosophical interests, even declining to be president of the *Soziologischer Verein*. Furthermore, Simmel's interest in sociology came from his broader philosophical interests, especially his concern with the foundations of the human sciences. We must beware, then, of letting the sociological tail wag the philosophical dog. Most telling of all, though, in determining Simmel's identity is his own self-conception, i.e., how he understood himself. We have the clearest statement from him that he saw himself first and foremost as a philosopher. He stressed the point in a revealing letter he wrote, December 13, 1899, to Céleste Bouglé, the student of Emile Durkheim:

It is to some extent painful to me that I am known abroad only as a sociologist—because I am a philosopher, and see my life's task in philosophy and I do sociology only as a sideline. When I have fulfilled my commitment to the latter, when I finally publish a comprehensive sociology—something I will do in the coming years—I will probably never again return to it.⁵

And so it was. Having published his *Soziologie* in 1908, Simmel never looked back. He returned to philosophy and stayed there until the end of his days.

Once we recognize Simmel as a philosopher, we can begin to do justice to the full range of his interests and writings. And not the least of these concern the philosophy of history. From his earliest to his latest years, Simmel discussed the methods and problems of history, especially the questions whether and how it could be a science. One of the major fruits of this interest was his *Die Probleme der Geschichtsphilosophie*,⁶ a rigorous and innovative account of historical knowledge that deserves to be placed alongside the best writings by Dilthey, Rickert and Weber. Here we find sketched—long before Collingwood—an idealist theory of history and a theory of understanding as re-enactment. Another fruit of Simmel's interest in history was his *Einleitung in die Moralwissenschaften*, the first systematic critique of ethics from an historicist point of view. Though anticipated by Nietzsche, Simmel goes well beyond him. Where Nietzsche offers us aperçus and aphorisms, Simmel gives us analysis and arguments.

Simmel's exact place in the historicist tradition is not easy to locate, partly because his position on the major issues is so subtle and nuanced, and partly because he does not

discuss the views of his predecessors and contemporaries. Though a very historical thinker, Simmel was not that reflective about his own place in history, which he left those with hindsight to define. There can be no doubt, however, that he occupies an important and unique place in the historicist tradition. This is so for several reasons.

First, anticipating Weber, Simmel is the first to push the historicist tradition in the direction of sociology. The project of sociology lay dormant in the tradition from the very beginning. We have seen how Möser, Herder and Humboldt had championed the idea of a science of man, which would attempt to understand human beings according to the general laws of history. They also advocated a social conception of human nature, according to which the identity of a human being depends on its precise place in society and history. When both these ideas are put together the result is sociology, which is what we get when we apply the science of man to a social conception of human nature. In developing his ideas for a science of sociology, Simmel returned to the old historicist project for a science of man, which had been repudiated in the nineteenth century by Ranke, Dilthey, Droysen and the neo-Kantians. Against them, Simmel will attempt to provide a new foundation for that project, a new basis for the possibility of historical laws. With Simmel, then, the historicist tradition goes full circle, returning to its roots in social anthropology.

Second, always his own man, Simmel is neither neo-Kantian, nor Marxist, nor positivist. Though he defends sociology and the possibility of historical laws, he did not endorse positivism or Marxism. The neo-Kantians had insisted that the only escape from these evils lay in their idiographic conception of history; Simmel escaped that dilemma by providing an idealist foundation for history that grants its principles and laws a strictly regulative status.

Third, Simmel was the most modern and radical of all the thinkers in the historicist tradition. He dared to push the historicist line of thinking to its limits, drawing conclusions that his predecessors and contemporaries were afraid to acknowledge. The constraints that the neo-Kantians placed on historicism are now cast aside. Relativism and pragmatism, which Dilthey and the neo-Kantians feared, are explicitly defended. Simmel was a relativist in two basic respects. First, he held that the decisive factor in determining one's theoretical commitments is the purpose or end of enquiry, which ultimately depends on our physical needs and our moral ideals. In his view, there could be equally legitimate opposing theories about the same subject matter, where which is correct depends simply upon our ends. Second, he accepted the existence of incompatible moral values. What is right or wrong, good or bad, ultimately depends upon choice. There is no higher criterion that can decide between the right or wrong of different, or even opposing, moral beliefs and practices. Again anticipating Weber, Simmel teaches that the modern world consists in a cultural and moral pluralism, that society now consists in people having conflicting moral beliefs, between which there is no rational decision.

Simmel got to these places from the Kantian starting point so common to his generation. Like Dilthey and the neo-Kantians, he began his philosophical apprenticeship

with Kant. His doctoral dissertation, which he completed under Dilthey, was on Kant's concept of matter. Kantian motifs constantly appear in all his writings: the fundamental role of the spontaneous subject in determining the criterion of knowledge; the dangers of hypostasis and the importance of reformulating constitutive principles in regulative form; the autonomy of the individual in determining the ends of life; and so on. Simmel's theory of history, and his sociology, are based on a Kantian foundation. Nevertheless, despite his Kantian origins and principles, Simmel went further than his predecessors and contemporaries in going beyond the limits of Kant's philosophy. He took Dilthey's critique of historical reason to its ultimate conclusion by denying the existence of an absolute *a priori*, by denying the autonomy of the intellectual, and by rejecting the distinction between theoretical and practical reason. Simmel's rejection of neo-Kantianism, as we shall soon see, brought him close to pragmatism, a doctrine he formulated, in all but name, before James and Dewey.

Like no one else before him, Simmel saw the coming modern world, and he refused to prevent its coming by clinging to the past. He set sail on its stormy seas, uncertain of his destination, but knowing that there could be no return to the shore. He accepted the complexity and moral pluralism of modern society, and recognized that in his secular age the old absolutes of philosophy and religion could be no more. He came to this point because he was more of an historicist than any of his contemporaries and predecessors, ready to accept the relativity of all values and principles in the flux of history.⁷

The central task of this chapter will be to assess Simmel's contribution to the historicist tradition; more specifically, to explain his position on the possibility of history as a science. This demands a careful examination of some of Simmel's early writings, especially those he wrote during the early 1890s, before his involvement with sociology. These writings include his 1890 *Über Sociale Differenzierung*, his 1892 *Die Probleme der Geschichtsphilosophie*, and his 1892–93 *Einleitung in die Moralwissenschaft*. For reasons of space, our account of Simmel will be limited to the seminal writings of his early years.

Before we turn to these writings, though, it is necessary to make sense of Simmel's historical context and background, which was largely determined by a long forgotten discipline: Moritz Lazarus's and Heymann Steinthal's *Völkerpsychologie*. This discipline is a forgotten but noteworthy episode in the historicist tradition and reveals its role in the creation of social anthropology and sociology.

2. Beginnings in Völkerpsychologie

On August 6, 1880, the young Georg Simmel sent his teacher Moritz Lazarus a copy of his prize-winning essay on Kant's philosophy of nature.⁸ Simmel was eager to gain the respect of that teacher to whom he felt most indebted. This was a good occasion to express his enormous gratitude for all Lazarus had done for him: "...in every turning point in my intellectual career I have the need to look back and I feel always gratitude toward you, who showed me the way, or at least first step, in which I must go."⁹

A touching tribute, to be sure, but also a very revealing one. Moritz Lazarus, and his colleague, Heymann Steinthal, were, according to Simmel himself,¹⁰ the most profound influences upon his intellectual development during his student years at the University of Berlin.¹¹ The intellectual nursery of the young Simmel, the starting point for all his reflections on the social sciences, came from an arcane and largely forgotten project created by Lazarus and Steinthal in the 1850s and 1860s: *Völkerpsychologie*.¹² Simmel's early views about the aims of social science, the task of moral philosophy, the foundational role of psychology, the phases of social and cultural development, and the relationship between individual and society, are all greatly indebted to Lazarus's and

Steinthal's project. It is indeed no accident that some of Simmel's first publications appeared in Lazarus's and Steinthal's common journal, *Zeitschrift für Völkerpsychologie und Sprachwissenschaft*.¹³

Still, for all his debts to *Völkerpsychologie*, Simmel was forced to go beyond it. There were fundamental weaknesses to *Völkerpsychologie*, whose conceptual foundations were weak and wobbly. Some of its basic concepts were ambiguous, viz., the *Volksgeist*, while some of its central presuppositions were undefended, viz., that psychology is a science. Lazarus and Steinthal were contemptuous of positivism; but they had failed to take it seriously and to marshal an effective reply to it.¹⁴ It was the fate of the young Simmel to address these weaknesses in *Völkerpsychologie* and to place it on a more secure foundation. But in the task of securing *Völkerpsychologie* Simmel would transform the discipline so that it became what he later called sociology.

Understanding Simmel's early intellectual development demands a basic account of Lazarus's and Steinthal's *Völkerpsychologie*. This is not least because of the prevalent misconceptions surrounding Simmel's relationship to this discipline. It is generally assumed that Simmel quickly turned away from *Völkerpsychologie* because he could not accept its "mystical" doctrine of a *Volksseele*. But Simmel never really abandoned *Völkerpsychologie*, nor is its doctrine of a *Volksseele* mystical. To avoid these kinds of misconceptions, we must go back in history. We must go back to the 1850s and 1860s, when Lazarus first formulated his conception of *Völkerpsychologie* in a series of brilliant essays.¹⁵ Lazarus's and Steinthal's *Völkerpsychologie* now seems little more than a quaint relic, another one of the many abortive new sciences of the nineteenth century. There are few, if any, contemporary sociologists, anthropologists or ethnologists who know of it, still less self-consciously attempt to fulfill its agenda. Seen from a broader historical perspective, however, *Völkerpsychologie* was an important ancestor of sociology and social psychology. It also marks a crucial stage in the development of historicism. Lazarus's and Steinthal's program for an empirical investigation into the psychology of social groups was the heir of Humboldt's and Herder's own historical anthropology. It

kept Herder's and Humboldt's empirical program alive after Fichte, Schelling and Hegel forced the philosophy of history into the straitjacket of an *a priori* methodology. Lazarus and Steinthal did for the social sciences what Ranke and Droysen had done for history: they liberated it from Hegelian hegemony by pushing it in the direction of empirical science.

In all his expository essays Lazarus defines *Völkerpsychologie* more through its subject matter than its method. The specific subject matter of *Völkerpsychologie*, he tells us, is the *Volksgeist*, the spirit or mind (*Geist*) of a nation or people (*Volk*). Each term, *Volk* and *Geist*, requires a little explanation. The *Volk* is a nation or people, which is partly defined by common descent and language; but more important than these factors, Lazarus insists, is a subjective one: self-consciousness. What constitutes a nation or people is its self-consciousness, its self-awareness of having a common language and history.¹⁶ This self-awareness embodies itself in certain leading ideas or principles. The *Geist* is the *idea* or *principle* behind the nation or people, what unites it into a single nation or people. Lazarus defines it more precisely as “what in inner activity is common to all individuals of a nation; or *what is common to all individuals in their inner activity*.”¹⁷

It would seem from Lazarus's initial account that *Völkerpsychologie* deals with the *Volksgeist* alone, the single unifying spirit behind a culture. But Lazarus never conceived his science so narrowly. The subject matter of *Völkerpsychologie*, he explained, was threefold: (1) the *Volksgeist* regarded as a unity, i.e., the society as a whole; (2) the relation between the individual and the *Volksgeist*; and (3) the relations between individuals themselves.¹⁸ In the first respect *Völkerpsychologie* is co-extensive with what some now call sociology; and in the last two respects it is co-extensive with social psychology. It is not surprising that in the late nineteenth century *Völkerpsychologie* virtually became synonymous with social psychology.¹⁹

It is a point of some importance for Lazarus that *Völkerpsychologie* be a branch of psychology. “It is imperative to know the essence of the *Volksgeistes psychologically*...,” he wrote.²⁰ *Völkerpsychologie* is psychology for the simple reason that it studies something psychic, namely, the psyche of social human beings or the psyche of society as such. Since the *Volksgeist* is defined by its self-consciousness, and since self-consciousness is distinctive of a subject as opposed to an object, the *Volksgeist* has to fall within the province of psychology. Lazarus gave such a pivotal role to psychology chiefly because of his general classification of the sciences. He distinguishes between two kinds of science corresponding to a basic metaphysical distinction between two kinds of being.²¹ There is nature, which is a realm of necessity; and there is mind or spirit, which

is a realm of freedom. Accordingly, there is natural science, which studies nature, and there is psychology, which studies the mind, psyche or spirit.

Lazarus is careful to distinguish *Völkerpsychologie* from two apparently closely related disciplines: anthropology and individual psychology. *Völkerpsychologie* differs from anthropology because it deals entirely with the realm of the psyche or spirit, whereas anthropology deals with the dependence of the psychic upon the physical realm, especially climate and the environment. *Völkerpsychologie* differs from individual psychology, which studies strictly the individual human being in abstraction from the group, or what human beings have in common apart from their membership in groups. The proper subject matter of *Völkerpsychologie* is the individual *insofar as* it is a social being, or the psyche of society as such.²²

It was of the utmost importance to Lazarus that *Völkerpsychologie* be an empirical science and that it restrict itself strictly to the investigation of facts. He went to great pains to distinguish the empirical methods of *Völkerpsychologie* from the philosophy of history of Fichte, Schelling and Hegel, which had employed an *a priori* method of "construction".²³ While the empirical methods of *Völkerpsychologie* are limited entirely to an account of appearances, the philosophy of history is more interested in the *ideas* behind these appearances. Psychology attempts to know only the regular laws governing appearances, whereas the philosophy of history wants to know the laws determined by the ideas themselves, i.e., the spiritual or intellectual *content* of history.

It would seem, however, that *Völkerpsychologie*, having the *Volksgeist* for its subject matter, is by its very nature metaphysical. Does not the concept of a *Volksgeist* seem to sweep us into a metaphysical wonderland? Are we not dealing on the same speculative level as Fichte, Schelling and Hegel? Worried to avoid such a misleading impression, Lazarus made a distinction between soul (*die Seele*) and spirit or psyche (*Geist*). The soul consists in the substance, subject or entity behind all mental activities, whereas the spirit or psyche consists in these activities alone, its characteristic and regular manners of acting.²⁴ While the soul is the special object of metaphysics, the spirit or psyche is the special subject matter of psychology, whose task is to know the spirit alone. Since psychology attempts to know the spirit strictly by observation, it makes no speculations about the substance of the soul but limits itself to its manifestations, its characteristic manners of acting. Through this simple distinction between soul and spirit Lazarus intended to establish a clear and firm borderline between metaphysics and science.

As a scientific discipline the task of *Völkerpsychologie* is to determine the *laws* of the activity of the *Volksgeist*. Lazarus was convinced that the *Volksgeist* acts in regular manners, and that it is possible to formulate them into general laws. But what kind of laws are these? Lazarus was explicit that he was not searching for dialectical or

teleological laws, as Fichte, Schelling and Hegel had done.²⁵ The laws characteristic of *Völkerpsychologie* were simple and straightforward causal laws which specified that an effect must follow a cause under certain definite conditions. He then made an important distinction between two kinds of laws: *ideal* laws, which are normative, and which tell us how we ought to think, or which develop the content of our concepts; and *real* laws, which simply determine what happens or the course of events. He insisted that *Völkerpsychologie* was limited to the discovery of real laws. In his view, the distinction between ideal and real laws had been confused by philosophers of history, like Hegel, who had sketched ideal laws covering intellectual content, which they had then confused with real laws about the course of events.

From Lazarus's insistence that the laws of psychology are like normal causal laws it might seem as if he had no objection to a complete naturalism. But this would be a mistake. Though Lazarus thinks that psychological laws are causal laws, he still thinks that they are different from those used in the natural sciences. Corresponding to his distinction between two forms of being, Lazarus distinguishes between two kinds of laws: laws of nature and of spirit.²⁶ While there is regularity in both the natural and spiritual realms, they are different kinds of regularity. In the natural realm not only do the same effects follow from the same causes, but the same causes recur constantly. In the spiritual realm too the same effects follow from the same causes; but the same causes do not always recur. This is because what is characteristic of spirit as opposed to mere nature is freedom, which consists in novelty and creativity. While there is constant repetition in nature, there is development or progress in the realm of spirit. The laws of spirit will therefore differ from the laws of nature in that they will be laws of development or progress. But just how the laws of the realm of spirit are compatible with its freedom, and just how, precisely, they differ from the laws of physics, were questions Lazarus did not pursue.

The first question that occurs to any reader of *Völkerpsychologie* concerns the ontological status of the *Volksgeist*. Despite his strictures against metaphysics, it still seems as if Lazarus has indulged in a form of metaphysics all his own by hypostasizing the concept of a national spirit. The *Volksgeist* seems to be little more than a metaphor gone wild: it is the concept of an individual mind enlarged to society or the nation as a whole. Lazarus's language does much to fuel this suspicion. He insists time and again, for example, that we should treat the *Volksgeist* on analogy with the individual psyche.²⁷ And one of his favorite metaphors is that individuals relate to the *Volksgeist*

as representations to the individual psyche.²⁸ There are indeed passages where the hypostasis seems palpable. Consider, for example, the following lines: "Is not a community like a moral and legal person? And does it not fulfill all the human, moral and political interests just like an individual, and in a manner indifferent to the particular people now belonging to it."²⁹

Despite such language, we do Lazarus a grave injustice if we accuse him of hypostasis. He was acutely aware of the problem, going to great lengths to avoid it. He stressed time and again that the *Volksgeist* is not a third new entity above and beyond the individuals who compose it.³⁰ The *Volksgeist* exists only in the minds of the individuals who participate in it. It has no subsistence apart from them, and it is only in virtue of its existing in and through them that it is the object of scientific study at all.³¹

But it seems we avoid hypostasis only to create another problem. For if the *Volksgeist* exists only in and through individuals, why is there a *Völkerpsychologie* at all? In that case, to study the psyche of the group is just to study all individuals who compose it, so that *Völkerpsychologie* evaporates into individual psychology. It is in response to this issue that Lazarus reveals the ultimate rationale for his *Völkerpsychologie*. First, he advances a non-reductivist thesis, which holds that the bonds of society or the nation are more than the sum of their parts, i.e., the individuals who compose them.³² The relations between individuals in society gives rise to new relations, events and creations which are not attributable to any sum of individuals. As he often puts it, these relations are *between* individuals, not merely *in* them. Second, Lazarus contends that these irreducible relations are fundamental to a human being as such, making them who they are. Human beings, Lazarus insists, are fundamentally and essentially social.³³ Their very identity depends on their place within society or the groups to which they belong. It is through their membership in various groups that each individual becomes who he is and what he should be. If this is so, *Völkerpsychologie* is not only possible but necessary to understand human beings. We would have a very weak understanding of them if, like individual psychology, we were to understand them in isolation from one another. A full understanding of human nature requires understanding its social dimension, which is precisely the task of *Völkerpsychologie*. So what makes *Völkerpsychologie* possible, indeed necessary, are two basic premises: that social relationships are not reducible to facts about individuals taken in isolation; and that human identity is the product of, or constituted by, these relations.

In his attempts to establish *Völkerpsychologie* Lazarus had to walk the fine line between two extremes: hypostasis and reductivism. The fine line is the contention,

not expressly formulated by him but presupposed by much of his argument, that the concept of a *Volksgeist* is not *logically* reducible to individual facts though it is *existentially* reducible to them. In other words, the individual has *ontological* priority since the *Volksgeist* exists only in it; but the *Volksgeist* has *logical* or *explanatory* priority because the individual is comprehensible only by its place within society. As we shall soon see, this was the fine line later walked by Simmel himself. Rather than rejecting Lazarus' solution to these problems, as so often assumed, Simmel closely followed it. Some of these issues Lazarus addressed in a later exposition of his theory, his 1865 "Einige synthetische Gedanken zur Völkerpsychologie."³⁴ Here he sketches his own theory of objective mind, which will become of great importance for the young Simmel. Lazarus explains that the realm of objective spirit arises when the activity of individuals creates a common objective content which becomes a norm, content or organ for their subjective activity.³⁵ There is a twofold aspect to the realm of objective mind: its subjective aspect, its existence only in particular individuals who create it; and its objective aspect, its status as a common norm, content or instrument for human activity. Its objective aspect has an intersubjective status which persists throughout the generations, and independent of any particular set of individuals who are governed by it. Lazarus gives many examples of this objective aspect: the rules of language; tools and instruments; writings; legal institutions. Although none of these exist apart from the consciousness of the individuals who are aware of them, or the activity of individuals who create them, they still have an intersubjective status in guiding human activity. Their ontological status is like that of intersubjective norms and meanings, which hold even when no one happens to be thinking of them or acting according to them. Already in the 1860s, then, Lazarus had discovered that strange and remarkable realm of intentionality and meaning which would later prove so important for Dilthey, Simmel, Rickert and Lask.

Lazarus's program for a *Völkerpsychologie*, especially his theory of objective mind, shows obvious debts to Hegel. Lazarus's *Volksgeist* is indeed the offspring of Hegel's, which had the same status vis-à-vis the individual (i.e., logical priority but existential posteriority). The affinity is not accidental, of course, since, as a student at the University of Berlin in the 1840s, Lazarus attended the lectures of Hegelians, specifically those of Georg Andreas Gabler and Karl Ludwig Michelet. The young Lazarus was, however, unhappy with the way in which Hegel had treated the *Volksgeist*. His quarrel with Hegel was basically methodological. Like Ranke, Lazarus believed that Hegel had followed the method of construction, creating an *a priori* schema into which all the facts of history had to fit. He complained that Hegel was more concerned to show how the facts fit into his dialectical schema than to study them for their own sake. In his objections to Hegel the young Lazarus was encouraged by the work of Johann Friedrich Herbart, who had attempted to establish psychology on a more

empirical basis.³⁶The ambition of the young Lazarus was to synthesize Hegel and Herbart: he would make the *Volksgeist* the object of empirical study.³⁷ His later writings remained remarkably true to that early ambition.

It should be clear from this sketch of *Völkerpsychologie* that it was far from obscurantist or mystical. Lazarus was a well-trained and careful philosopher, who had anticipated and answered many of the objections later made against him. Yet, that said, there were still grave philosophical weaknesses to the project. Lazarus did little to explain how there could be laws in history, or how psychology could be a science. While he went to great lengths to dispel doubts about his concept of a *Volksgeist*, he still had not fully explained it and left his entire project hanging upon it. It was Lazarus's great merit to point out an important field for empirical investigation. But he did not explicate or vindicate the philosophical presuppositions necessary for it. That would be the task of his most brilliant and promising student. We must now turn to the young Simmel's first reckoning with his intellectual forefathers.

3. First foundations of sociology

Simmel's first reflections on the aims and methods of the social sciences appear in the first chapter of his 1890 *Über soziale Differenzierung*, which is aptly titled "Zur Erkenntnistheorie der Socialwissenschaft."³⁸ This work was Simmel's first foray into sociology, and it was appropriate that he introduce it by epistemological reflections on the possibility of the discipline. Given Simmel's seminal role in the formation of sociology, this chapter has great historical interest and importance. The ideas sketched in it lay the foundations for much of his mature position.

Simmel's chapter sketches a new approach to sociology, one that attempts to secure its status as an autonomous science. Simmel takes issue with the *Völkerpsychologie* of Lazarus and Steinthal in two fundamental respects.³⁹ First, he questions their assumption that the characteristic subject matter of sociology is the *Volksgeist*. While Simmel accepts the holism of *Völkerpsychologie*, i.e., its thesis that the social whole precedes its parts, he attempts to purge it of its lingering metaphysical connotations. Second, he

challenges the very possibility of psychological laws, and so *a fortiori* sociological or historical laws based upon them. Yet Simmel questions these assumptions only to vindicate them in the end. He gives them a new foundation as regulative rather than constitutive principles; he defends them not on theoretical but practical grounds. Thus Simmel had placed *Völkerpsychologie* on a Kantian foundation.

Simmel begins his chapter by justifying his own epistemological reflections. He admits that such reflections are often sterile and premature. The logic and methods of a science are best understood *a posteriori*, after one has engaged in first-order investigation of its subject matter. There is a danger that one creates a methodology inappropriate for or inapplicable to its subject matter, so that one makes something like “a lawbook without subjects to obey it, or a rule without cases from which it is drawn” (116). Nevertheless, Simmel insists that, in the case of sociology, such reflections are a necessity. One reason is that sociology is more eclectic than the other sciences. It begins with the results of history, anthropology, statistics and psychology, and from them it creates wider generalizations and higher-level analyses. Sociology is, as it were, “a science to the second power,” i.e., it creates syntheses out of already formed ones (116). Hence its identity depends less on a specific subject matter than the specific *standpoint* it brings to bear upon it. Since the very identity of sociology depends on its distinctive standpoint, epistemological reflection is necessary to define that standpoint and to determine it in relation to the other sciences. Without such reflection, the very identity of sociology would be unclear. There is another reason epistemological reflection is especially important for sociology: it is by that means alone that one becomes aware of its *a priori* basis. “It hardly needs mentioning,” Simmel says, “that in the final analysis the content of no science consists in only objective facts, but that it also contains an interpretation and forming of them according to categories and norms which are *a priori* for the science, i.e., they are brought to the isolated facts by the apprehending mind.” (117). Since sociology has an especially large *a priori* element, and since the *a priori* has to be brought to light through reflection, sociology stands in special need of epistemological reflection (117). The rhetorical implications of Simmel's lines are noteworthy. In saying that “it hardly needs mentioning” that each science has an *a priori* component, Simmel was alluding to a neo-Kantian commonplace; but he was also firmly rebutting positivism, which naively believed that sociology could be a purely empirical science.

Sociology faces a formidable obstacle, Simmel thinks, because it has the most complex subject matter of all the sciences (118). The task of sociology is to describe the interrelations of human beings in groups, and of groups to one another. This is a challenging undertaking, however, because the human being, the basic unit of its subject matter, is already the most complex organism in all of nature. The complexity of the subject matter is then greatly magnified when the human being interacts with others in a group. Thus the subject matter of sociology consists in very complicated interactions of already very complicated units. Because of this complexity, sociology suffers from apparently interminable disputes. Like psychology and metaphysics, it is

prone to antinomies, i.e., for any theory about its subject matter, it is possible to find an equally plausible opposing theory (118–19). One can say with equal plausibility about love, for example, that it both grows and diminishes with separation. Such antinomies are the result of oversimplifications of a very complex subject matter. One theory takes a partial truth and stretches it into the full truth; from one observation one makes a too hasty conclusion about the whole (120).

Because of the complexity of human beings, Simmel thinks that it is impossible for psychology to establish laws in the same sense as the natural sciences (122–3). We can determine which psychic event is a cause and which is an effect only by an artificial abstraction, only by isolating one kind of event from another even though they are in constant interaction with one another. We cannot claim that one kind of psychic event is *the* cause of another because there are always other factors behind the working of the cause; the so-called cause is only one among many factors that create the effect. We focus upon one event as the cause only because it suits our purposes or interests. Since any particular psychic event is the result of a person's *complete* mental and physical condition, and since this condition rarely recurs, it becomes impossible to make generalizations about what always happens (122). These doubts about the scientific status of psychology put Simmel at odds not only with Lazarus and Steinthal but also with the Southwestern neo-Kantians, who had endorsed Helmholtz's attempt to make psychology into a natural science.

Having questioned the possibility of psychological laws, Simmel applies the same doubts to sociological ones. All the problems of establishing general laws in psychology apply *a fortiori* to sociology, he argues (123–6). Since the complexity of sociological subject matter is even greater than psychological, it is impossible to determine general laws of social development (125). Though he does not carefully distinguish them, Simmel really has two distinct arguments against the possibility of sociological laws. First, that the parts of a social whole form such a unity that each part is the effect of all the others. This means that it is impossible to isolate variables, to select one part as the sole sufficient cause of any other. Second, that the social whole is dynamic, so that its entire state at any one moment never recurs. This implies that we cannot make generalizations about what happens always. Though conflated in Simmel's exposition, these arguments are distinct because the first alone does not necessarily imply that the social whole is dynamic or constantly changing. Even if we assume it is static, there is a problem of isolating variables in a complex system. These arguments therefore point out two distinct problems: the first argument stresses the problem of isolating variables, while the second problem emphasizes the problem of generalizing from non-recurring cases.

Although these arguments are distinct, there is a single fundamental principle behind them, which Simmel expressly articulates. "We must accept as a regulative universal world principle," he writes, "that everything stands in interaction with everything else, that between any two points in the world there are powers and changing relations between them." (130). This principle means that the world is a complex and constantly

changing system, so that it is difficult to isolate variables *and* to generalize from one case to another. It is troubling, however, that these epistemic challenges apply as much to the natural as the social sciences. It would seem, therefore, as if Simmel's argument is too strong, forbidding the formulation of natural laws as much as social or psychological ones. Simmel could escape these troubling consequences, however, by stressing what decides against the possibility of social and psychological laws, but not natural ones, is simply the *degree* of complexity or interaction. Psychological and social laws are more difficult to formulate than natural laws simply because their subject matter is so much more complex.

No sooner does Simmel finish his arguments against the possibility of social and psychological laws than he suggests a strategy for defending them (130). From his regulative world principle he draws a remarkable conclusion: that it is possible to formulate such laws after all, *provided that we understand them in the proper sense*. Although everything is intimately interconnected with everything else, it is still permissible to select certain factors as essential or important and to regard them as the causes of others. If we see that the interaction between two roughly similar factors is strong and frequent enough to explain the interaction of others, we are justified in abstracting them from the flux of reality and generalizing from them. While this is not a law in the strict sense, which demands a universal and necessary connection, it is still a rule that justifies associating one factor with another. What justifies the formulation of such a rule, Simmel maintains, is not something in the nature of things but simply the interests or values behind our enquiry. Social and psychological laws are possible, then, provided that we understand them not as accurate pictures or copies of reality itself but only as useful regulative assumptions for achieving our ends. Here we find the foreshadowing of Simmel's later pragmatism.

Simmel's defense of social laws becomes more explicit as the argument unfolds. It turns out, however, that there must be some *ontological* warrant for sociological and psychological laws after all, i.e., something about the nature of things that justifies attributing them to reality. This warrant comes to the fore when Simmel makes a distinction between two different kinds of universal.⁴⁰ There is a *real* universal which really holds together many individuals, none of which exemplify it entirely but all of which do so to some degree; and there is an *ideal* universal constructed solely through the relational activity of the mind. Although it is "very well possible," Simmel wrote, to have an ideal universal without a real one, one should still accept as an heuristic maxim that there is a real one behind an ideal one, i.e., a common cause of similar phenomena (134). Thus Laplace deduced from the fact that the planets move collectively in one direction and in one plane that there must be some common cause of their motion; and Darwin assumed from the similarity between species that it is unlikely they have completely distinct origins. Simmel stated that the sociologist is justified in

making similar inferences. If there are similar social phenomena, the sociologist is warranted in seeking a common cause behind them. “So every similarity of a greater number of social members gives evidence for a common influencing cause, for a unity in which the effects and reciprocal effects of the totality have acquired a single body which now in turn acts upon all the members.” (134).

Having initially questioned but finally rescued general laws in sociology, Simmel turns to a basic objection against the possibility of sociology as a science (126). Lazarus had already discussed this objection in defending his *Völkerpsychologie*, and Simmel now treats it to defend sociology. According to this objection, sociology, as a science of society, is committed to the existence of abstract entities, and specifically to the existence of society as an entity over and above its individual members. For if society were to refer to nothing more than the sum of its members—if it were only a collection of all the individuals that compose it—it could not be the object of a specific science. To study society would be to study nothing more than the individuals who compose it, i.e., sociology would be nothing more than psychology. Hence this objection poses a dilemma for sociology: it must commit hypostasis or reduce itself to individual psychology.

Simmel admits the basic point behind this objection: that we must not hypostasize abstract concepts. He declares himself an opponent of “the mystical concept of society as an organic whole or individual.” For him, nominalism is a defining feature of his post-Kantian age. “One of the chief goals of modern education,” he writes, “is the recognition of universal concepts as only subjective structures and their resolution into the sum of their individual appearances.” (126). “The direction of modern intellectual life,” he adds, “lies in the reduction of the concept of the social soul into the sum of interactions of its participants.” (130). So rather than thinking of society as an organic whole whose unity makes possible all the individuals who compose it, we should do the very reverse: recognize that the concept of society is the name for the sum of all the interactions between individuals (131). Simmel's affirmation of nominalism here is often taken as a repudiation of *Völkerpsychologie*; but, as we have seen, Lazarus himself, even though he used misleading “mystical” language, warned against hypostasis.

Although Simmel readily admits the anti-Platonic strictures behind this objection, he refuses to accept its underlying “individualism”, i.e., the thesis that the individual is the ultimate unit of analysis, a simple given. If we pursue analysis to the end, he argues, we find that the individual is not the ultimate unit that it is assumed to be (127). The individual is not an independent entity whose identity depends on nothing outside itself. The more we examine the individual, the more we find that it is not simple but complex, “the sum and product of the most various factors.” Individualism, he contends, has failed to learn the lesson of “the developmental–historical world view” (127). According to this world view, the individual is not simple but complex, not eternal but historical, the product of generations. This point will later prove to be

foundational for Simmel's mature sociology.⁴¹ In making it Simmel was simply reaffirming and reapplying Lazarus's and Steinthal's teachings, which had always stressed the complex social–historical nature of human beings.⁴²

Thus far the result of Simmel's argument seems to be a dead end. We cannot accept the concept of society as an organic unity; but nor can we endorse a reductivism that would make the individual the ultimate unit of analysis. The old dilemma is still with us. The concept of society, it seems, is either an hypostasis or infinitely analyzable. Simmel's path out of this predicament is striking and innovative. It consists in—to use a slightly anachronistic term—“pragmatism”. The very pragmatism that rescued social and psychological laws now redeems the concept of society itself. We have to recognize, Simmel contends, that, though there are no ultimate unities, whether social or individual, we can still treat something as if it were one depending on the purposes of our enquiry. And so he writes: “The question how many and which real unities we have to collect together into a higher but only subjective unity, whose fate should form the object of a special science, is only a question of practice.” (129). The concept of society, like that of an individual, now becomes a regulative rather than a constitutive principle, i.e., we have to proceed in our enquiries *as if* there were a real unity, although we have no justification for its real existence.

Accepting these regulative strictures does not mean, Simmel is eager to add, that we can take *any* concept as the basis of our science. If we are not engaging in pure fiction, our concept of society must have some objective reference. What would justify forming one concept rather than another? Simmel's answer is simple and straightforward: the degree of interaction of its parts. The concept of society has at least a relative objective justification, he argues, because of the intimate interaction of its parts (129). We treat an object as a unity in direct proportion to the degree of interaction of its parts. Although society does not refer to a real unity, we are still justified in treating all its parts together into a whole because they work together as a unity and produce a common result. “From the sociological viewpoint everything comes down to ‘empirical atoms’—representations, individuals, groups—that act as unities, however much each of them is still further divisible in and of itself.” (131)

So in the end, however fashionably modern and respectably rigorous, Simmel admitted that he could not uphold the strict nominalist standpoint he so firmly advocated. Sustaining that standpoint meant defining a society entirely in terms of a collection of interactions between individuals. But that concept, Simmel realized, had counterintuitive results. It was so broad that one could regard two warring societies, or any two interacting individuals, as one society (132, 133). To give more intuitive results, the concept had to be narrowed. A more plausible definition would be when the interaction between individuals gives rise to a more objective structure having an independent status apart from the participating individuals (133). A true social union

would take place, for example, when there is public property, a common language, a moral and legal system, common values, all of which persist through the generations and for different collections of individuals and their particular interactions. In this case “there would be society where the interaction between individuals had consolidated into a body, a social body distinguished from that which disappears with the momentary existing individuals and their actions” (134). While this concept gives more intuitive results, Simmel admits that it reintroduces through the back door the more organic concept of society that he originally wanted to exclude (134). When all was said and done, it was necessary to recognize that the concept of society had a greater status than the mere sum of individual interactions within it. It had both an ideal and real status, because society was both independent of and dependent upon the individuals who composed it (135). Thus Lazarus's concept of objective spirit was vindicated after all.

The general result of Simmel's introductory chapter appears confused and ambivalent. Simmel rejects the possibility of social laws only to defend them. He denigrates the “mysticism” of the organic concept of society only to admit its necessity. So dense is Simmel's exposition that he says nothing to explain away these apparent tensions. They disappear, however, if the chapter is read closely and we make an all-too-common Kantian distinction, one that Simmel clearly endorses. Namely, while Simmel approves of social laws and the organic concept as *regulative* principles, he disapproves of them as *constitutive* principles. In other words, their justification is not theoretical—i.e., they do not depict or correspond to some independent reality; rather, their justification is practical—i.e., they are valuable heuristic tools in promoting the ends of enquiry. This pragmatic note in Simmel will become more pronounced in his later epistemological writings in the 1890s. We will have to consider it later in a little more detail.

4. An idealist philosophy of history

Simmel's major contribution to the historicist tradition is his *Die Probleme der Geschichtsphilosophie*, which was first published in 1892.⁴³ This work is the classic statement of the idealist theory of history, far surpassing in depth and sophistication its later Anglo-Saxon counterpart, Collingwood's *Idea of History*. Applying Kantian epistemology to problems of the philosophy of history, Simmel argues that history, no less than nature, is the creation of the knowing subject.⁴⁴ What Kant had demonstrated about physical nature in the first *Kritik*—that the understanding knows it only because it creates it—Simmel now tries to show for history. His work is therefore a criticism of what he calls “historical realism,” i.e., the theory that history is only a mirror image of a given reality.

Simmel's *Probleme* presents serious challenges to its readers. Apart from its dense style, the other chief difficulty is the discrepancies between its different editions.⁴⁵ There are three editions: 1892, 1905 and 1907. The 1907 edition differs only slightly from the 1905. It adds a few notes and makes stylistic corrections. But the 1892 edition differs drastically from the later two, so much so that it is virtually a separate book. The later editions are not only much longer than the first, but they also drop many passages; and those they retain are placed in a different context, so that they take on a completely different meaning. When Simmel sat down to rewrite the work in November 1904 he found that the first edition was often too vague, and that it failed to address fundamental issues.⁴⁶ And so, as he revised, he found himself writing a new work. After the 1907 edition, Simmel continued to rethink issues and finally realized that a completely new work was necessary. His plans to write a new book, however, were never realized.

To understand why Simmel made such drastic revisions we only have to keep in mind the remarkable developments between its editions. When Simmel wrote the first edition of *Probleme* in 1892 the philosophy of social science was still inchoate. Simmel was writing before Husserl's *Logische Untersuchungen* (1901), Dilthey's *Ideen über eine Beschreibende und Zergliedernde Psychologie* (1894) and Rickert's *Die Grenzen der naturwissenschaftlichen Begriffsbildung* (1902). One of the most important results of these works was the critique of psychologism and of Dilthey's theory of the *Geisteswissenschaften*. In revising his work Simmel began to take account of these developments. Using a fashionable phrase, he wrote Rickert in November 1904 that one of the most important changes in the new edition would be its "overcoming of psychologism."⁴⁷ The phrase was not entirely accurate, he stressed, because he was not so much abandoning psychology as developing a new conception of it. Just what this new conception was, we will soon have to consider.

Simmel's *Probleme* has often been read as the work of a Dilthey disciple, as if it did little more than develop the line of thought Dilthey began in his 1883 *Einleitung in die Geisteswissenschaften*.⁴⁸ There are indeed close similarities in their positions: both stress the importance of psychology for the human sciences; both are opposed to positivism; and both have a theory of internal understanding. Furthermore, Simmel was an admirer of Dilthey, and indeed dependent upon him for advancement in his academic career. Since 1882 Dilthey was Ordinarius in the Philosophy Faculty at Berlin, and in that capacity he had served on the committee for Simmel's Promotion in 1881 and

Habilitation in 1885.⁴⁹ It would be a mistake, however, to confuse Simmel's *academic* dependence as any reason for *intellectual* dependence. Even a quick comparison between Simmel's *Probleme* and Dilthey's *Einleitung* reveals basic divergences in their views. Rather than defending or developing Dilthey's position, Simmel takes issue with it in important respects. Thus Simmel questions the doctrine of the autonomy of history, which was vital to Dilthey; and he defends the philosophy of history, which Dilthey emphatically opposed in the *Einleitung*. The two respects in which Simmel and Dilthey seem closest—their emphasis on psychology and internal understanding—are more the result of coincidence than influence. For it was Lazarus, not Dilthey, who had convinced Simmel of the importance of psychology.⁵⁰ And Dilthey had barely stated his theory of understanding in his *Einleitung*; he would develop that theory only later in the 1890s, *after* the publication of the first edition of *Die Probleme*. If Dilthey influenced Simmel's *Probleme* in any way, it is more likely with regard to the later 1907 edition.

Although Simmel is firmly in the neo-Kantian tradition in attempting to extend the Copernican Revolution to the historical world, he also insists on drastically revising the Kantian architectonic. Like Windelband and Rickert, Simmel holds that Kant's architectonic was more appropriate for the natural than social sciences.⁵¹ Its successful application to the historical world requires its revision, and first and foremost the abandonment of Kant's sharp dualism between the *a priori* and the *a posteriori*. Simmel insists upon introducing a new form of the *a priori*—what he calls in the first edition “the relative *a priori*”—to stand between Kant's categories and the intuitions of sensibility (II, 304–8, 326–31).⁵² The Kantian division of the *a priori* into three kinds—that of sensibility, understanding and reason—is too narrow, he argues, to understand the subtle and complex logic of actual historical investigations. Besides the very general categories of the understanding, which apply to any possible content, the historian has to operate with a more specific set of presuppositions, which apply to a specific content (*viz.*, human actions). These presuppositions are specific instances of the general categories, the specific ways they are applied to history (II, 326–7). However, they are not simply empirical, because they determine the conditions for empirical enquiry. The historian presupposes, for example, that actions are the effects of mental causes; without this assumption, his enquiry would not even begin. He cannot confirm this belief by experience, however, because it is a necessary assumption for investigating it (IX, 240, 242). It is necessary to postulate, therefore, a new kind of *a priori*, the relative *a priori*, for those assumptions necessary for empirical enquiry in history. These assumptions are “*a priori*” in the sense that they are necessary for enquiry

yet not verifiable by experience. They are “relative” in the sense that their validity depends on the specific purposes they serve, and in the sense that they could be seen as very general abstractions from experience. Simmel stresses that there is no method to provide us with a complete and closed system of all *a priori* concepts, and no clear border lines between them (II, 305). Whether a principle is *a priori* or not depends on our perspective and the use to which we put it (IX, 238). Simmel's revision of Kant is even more radical than it first appears. For Simmel is not simply introducing a third set of relative principles between Kant's categories and sense intuitions; he is also making Kant's categories relative, so that ultimately there are no absolute *a priori* principles at all. Hence, in both editions, Simmel insists that there is only a distinction of degree between the *a priori* and empirical (II, 305; IX, 238). The Kantian categories of the understanding are only the upper end of a scale of generality whose lower end consists in sensation. Like Dilthey, Simmel held that we must extend the notion of experience, so that it comprises not only what we sense but also what we feel and desire. The more we extend the concept of experience upwards, however, the more we have to extend the concept of the *a priori* downwards, so that it assumes more content (IX, 238). In introducing this scale Simmel was effectively making the most general *a priori* principles relative, open to revision in the light of experience. Like Dilthey, he was historicizing reason itself, making the most general principles of the mind the result of experience and history. This conclusion, though only implicit in *Probleme*, is perfectly explicit in Simmel's later Kant lectures, where he insists that we should see the structure of the mind in the flux of historical development (IX, 44).

In both the 1892 and 1907 editions Simmel begins with a Diltheyian definition of history. He finds the subject matter of history in inner experience. History is fundamentally about the mental life of human agents. “If history is not be a puppet play,” he writes, “then it is the history of *psychic events (psychischer Vorgänge)*...” (II, 303) All external events—be they political or social, economic or religious, legal or technical—would not interest us, or be comprehensible to us, if they did not proceed from, or call forth, “movements of the soul” (*Seelenbewegungen*). Both the starting and end point of any account of historical events is “the character of their innerness” (*Charakter der Innerlichkeit*) (II, 304). The materialist theory of history does not invalidate this definition, Simmel argues, because even if they are ultimately material, mental processes remain the chief interest in history. The nature of the climate and soil on earth would interest us as much as the climate and soil of Sirius if it did not have an effect on our inner life (303–4). Hunger would never set world history into motion if we did not feel it.

Since Simmel thinks that history is about mental life, he stresses, like Lazarus and Dilthey before him, the importance of psychology for history. History turns out to be simply a form of psychology. Thus Simmel writes in the 1892 edition: “If psychology were a science of laws, the science of history would be...applied psychology, just as astronomy is for mathematics.” (II, 304) This statement reappears in the 1907 edition, but it now undergoes an important qualification (IX, 236–7). It turns out that the

historian investigates different aspects of mental life than the psychologist. The historian is more interested in the *content* of mental acts than the psychologist, who is especially concerned with their *occurrence*, "the dynamic of their coming and going." But the historian is not interested *solely* in the content of mental acts; he too, like the psychologist, studies their occurrence. More precisely, the historian takes a middle position between the purely logical and purely psychological approach to mental life. While the logical approach considers only the content of mental acts, and while the psychological approach treats only their occurrence, the historian treats the content in its motion and development (IX, 236). History, Simmel explained later, has two different aspects. We can treat an historical event from the standpoint of individual agents or from the standpoint of its content (IX, 285). The history of art, for example, can be treated from the standpoint of the artists or from the standpoint of style or the artworks themselves. Every good history contains both aspects, which are inextricably intertwined though logically distinct.

Granted that history is about inner life, how is it that we understand it? Simmel's answer is firmly in the hermeneutical tradition of Dilthey and Droysen. The first condition of such understanding, Simmel writes, is that we reproduce (*nachbilden*) the person's mental acts within ourselves, that we, so to speak, "place ourselves in the soul of the person" (II, 317). We understand a sentence, for example, when the mental events of the speaker, which are expressed in certain words, arouse the same mental events in the listener. Simmel admits that this condition is rarely fully satisfied. A direct and whole reproduction of the other person's mental state happens only for statements having a theoretical or intellectual content. In these cases the individual character or personality of the speaker or writer is indifferent to the content of what is said, so that it is easier for the listener to reproduce it. It is more difficult to understand inner life or experience, however, when personality comes into play, when its content depends on the speaker's intentions, desires or feelings. We fully understand someone's desires or feelings only when we desire or feel with them, only when we have had similar desires or feelings ourselves (II, 318). Whoever has not loved cannot understand love; the weakling cannot understand the hero, the choleric the phlegmatic (II, 318).

The loose and general language Simmel used to expound his theory in the first edition created problems for him, making changes and clarifications necessary in the later editions. In talking about the listener *reproducing* the mental acts of the speaker Simmel seemed to be employing the language of the historical realist, who assumes that cognition simply mirrors its given object. To address this possible misunderstanding, Simmel stressed more in the later editions the active role of the listener in creating the object of understanding. More problematically, in the first edition Simmel does not make a clear distinction between mental acts and content. He writes as if understanding were a matter of reproducing a similar mental act, so that the listener simply has a psychological state that is similar to the speaker. This is questionable, however, because understanding someone's speech is more a matter of reproducing the content or what they say rather than the mental act of saying it. Seeing this mistake, Simmel stressed in

the second edition the distinction between act and content. This greater emphasis upon mental content in the later editions reflects the direction of Dilthey's own thinking later in the 1890s.⁵³

For all his debts to the hermeneutical tradition, Simmel denies one of its most cherished assumptions: that thinking beings know themselves better than external nature. It was often held in this tradition—by Vico, Humboldt and Dilthey, for example—that thinking beings know one another in themselves or in their inner nature while they know nature only as an appearance. Realism seemed more plausible in the case of historical knowledge, because the object and subject of knowledge were the same; the object was only another subject like myself. Simmel, however, disputes this assumption, because it attempts to justify a lingering element of realism in the hermeneutical tradition. Whether we know other conscious beings or external nature, the object of knowledge is not simply given to us but in need of reconstruction. In other words, the innerness of events is not read *from* them, as if it were an empirical datum, but it is read *into* them (II, 308). In the historical as in the natural world, the correspondence between subject and object is made by the *a priori* conditions of cognition (II, 324). While the mere affinity between thinking beings—the simple fact that they are generically alike—is a *necessary* condition of the possibility of understanding, it is not a *sufficient* condition, because on its own this affinity cannot explain a single action (II, 321). An immediate understanding between two people on the basis of their general affinity as thinking beings, Simmel says, would be something like telepathy; it would presuppose a pre-established harmony no less miraculous than that of Leibniz (II, 319). “Upon such a thin pillar [as mere affinity] no bridge between the I and the not-I can be built.” (II, 319). What we must recognize, Simmel insists, is that understanding another person, like all understanding, involves the intellectual activity of the understander, so that the act by which I understand recreates the content of what I understand (319).

Simmel's critique of historical realism in the 1892 edition underwent, however, an important qualification in the 1907 edition. He later had to admit that there is a greater difference between historical and natural knowledge than he originally realized. Historical knowledge differs from natural knowledge, he now sees, because the historical object is, to some extent, already preconceptualized for the knower; the consciousness the knower attempts to understand has already used concepts to make sense of its experience (260). So Simmel now realizes that historical realism is more defensible than he first thought. Although history is still not the reproduction of a simply given object, the historian's conceptualization is only the more clear, explicit and systematic form of the conceptualization contained in its object. However, having made this important concession, Simmel still insists that it does not warrant a full-blown historical realism. Though the material is partly preconceptualized, it is still

given in a fragmentary and half-digested form; the historian still has to reconstruct and systematize it, forming it into a coherent whole.

Simmel's small concession to historical realism in the 1907 edition did not stop him from engaging in a sustained polemic against it. Indeed, the 1907 refines and elaborates the sharp critique of Ranke in the 1892 edition.⁵⁴ Unjustly, Simmel regards Ranke as the chief protagonist of historical realism.⁵⁵ Accordingly, some of Ranke's most famous dicta become the target of criticism. When Ranke expressed the wish to extinguish his own ego to let the facts speak for themselves, the very fulfillment of such a wish would have defeated his ends, Simmel argues, for if the ego were to extinguish itself there would be nothing left to comprehend the facts (II, 321). Simmel is careful to explain that by the "ego" here he does not simply mean the transcendental ego, the subject in general, as if all he were saying is that the object of knowledge must have a subject. Ranke, he rightly notes, would never have disputed this. His point against Ranke is that the historian must keep intact his own *individual* ego, and that it is precisely his individual characteristics that permit him to understand another individual. The strength and depth of the individual personality is the precondition for the strength and depth of an historical portrait; the historian takes out of his material only what he brings into it.

Simmel's emphasis on the creative role of the historian led him—ironically, just like Ranke—to stress the close affinity between history and art (II, 322–3; IX, 297–300). The historian acts like an artist not only in the style of his exposition, he writes, but also in his manner of comprehending his material. The historian has to exercise the same powers of imagination as the artist to comprehend his material; the only difference between him and the artist is that he has to restrict himself to given facts. But once the artist has taken account of these facts, he has to form them into a meaningful whole, and in doing so all his creativity has to come into play. While the artist is free in the beginning, in the first act of creation, he is a slave thereafter, because he has to follow the idea behind his inspiration. For the historian, however, it is just the opposite: he is a slave in the first act (i.e., taking account of the facts) but free thereafter. Having drawn this close analogy between art and history, Simmel introduces the category of genius, which he finds as appropriate in history as in art (II, 328–9; IX, 302). It is genius which gives the historian the power to imagine the lives of others who are very different from our own.

In the 1907 edition Simmel provides an account of the historian's method that accentuates its artistic status. The historian's method turns out to be more like that of the artist than the logician or psychologist. When the historian attempts to understand a particular personality or culture, he attempts to form all its disparate elements into a unity or coherent whole. The crucial question is then: What connects these elements together? The connection is not entirely logical, as if it concerned their content alone;

but nor is entirely psychological, as if it were only a matter of the causal connections between them. The historian has to take into account both the logical and psychological elements; but they are still not sufficient to construct the peculiar kind of unity necessary to understand a unique individual. What guides the historian, Simmel finds, is something like an aesthetic intuition, “a feeling of necessity” in tracing the transition from one element to another. Simmel likens this feeling of necessity to what we feel upon reading a good lyric poem. We feel that all the elements somehow belong together into a whole, even though the connection between them is neither logical nor psychological (IX, 267). It is the same feeling of necessity, Simmel suggests, that the historian follows in trying to understand a unique historical personality or epoch. Applying Kant's account of aesthetic judgment in the *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, Simmel says that the unity we construct in history is communicable but not purely logical or universal.

Given that the historian, like the artist, has to recreate his object, what ensures him that it is accurate? What justifies him in attributing to another historical individual his own reconstructions, which are the creation of his own individuality? This question is inescapable for the historian, who, unlike the artist, has to claim that his portraits are literally historically true. Simmel was greatly bothered by this problem, and wrestled with it in both editions. The puzzle of historical knowledge, he wrote, is that we attribute to others something that we create within ourselves (II, 320; IX, 266). The simple solution is that what I think, feel and desire I attribute by analogy to others on the basis of their similar words, actions and behavior. Simmel realizes, however, that this explanation works only so far (IX, 239–40, 300–1). When we understand historical personalities, who have often lived under very different circumstances from ourselves, we cannot claim to have had similar experiences to them. Indeed, historical explanation demands an effort of imagination, so that we attempt to understand the experiences of people which we never really could have had ourselves. Such a power of imagination is the attribute of genius. But invoking the concept of genius only throws the question back another step: For what gives the genius such a power? And with what right does he attribute his creations to others? To explain this, Simmel resorts to a remarkable biological hypothesis. We can understand experiences we have not had ourselves, he conjectures, because we have inherited them from past generations. We inherit the experiences of past generations and, upon the appropriate stimulus, we remember them, so that understanding is a form of recollection, just as Plato says (IX, 303). Simmel lays no great weight upon this theory, however, which he admits is best regarded as a fiction (IX, 304). With that fiction, his account of the basis of understanding comes to a close.

5. Laws of history

One of Simmel's central concerns in *Die Probleme der Geschichtsphilosophie* is the classical question whether there can be laws of history. In *Über soziale Differenzierung* he had

examined the issue whether there can be psychological and sociological laws. Now in chapter 2 of *Probleme* he considers the question whether there are historical laws. New problems arise for historical laws, which turn out to be much more complicated than the others.

It is often stated in secondary literature that Simmel simply denies the possibility of historical laws.⁵⁶The very opposite is true. Simmel's chief purpose is really to defend their possibility. Just as he defended psychological laws in *Über soziale Differenzierung*, so he does the same for historical laws in *Die Problem der Geschichtsphilosophie*. Here again it is important to be clear about Simmel's intentions and context. He attacks not historical laws *per se* but the realist or positivist conception of them, according to which they mirror reality and are directly verifiable from experience. Simmel's defense of causal laws in history is in stark contrast to the teaching of the Southwestern neo-Kantians, who, as we have seen, had insisted that history is especially concerned with the individual. All the more reason, then, to suspect the common conflation of Simmel with this school.

The discussion of causal laws in *Die Probleme der Geschichtsphilosophie* is more focused and precise than that in *Über soziale Differenzierung*. Simmel begins by defining a law as a proposition according to which one state of affairs always has another for its consequence. This proposition states that when one state of affairs occurs, the other also occurs always and everywhere (IX, 310; II, 339). The problem is that historical phenomena are even more singular and complex than psychological ones, so that that we can never be certain which factors stand in these kinds of law-like relations with one another. Historical laws would be between whole groups (*viz.*, nations, armies) or general phenomena (*viz.*, governments, forces of production), each of which is analyzable into many particular factors. We can say that there is a law between such whole groups or general phenomena only if we know that *all* their particular factors co-vary with one another. The statement of a law-like connection between A and B presupposes that all the factors of A (a1, a2, a3) co-vary with all the factors of B (b1, b2, b3), so that whenever A recurs and is followed by B, a1, a2 and a3 recur and are followed by b1, b2 and b3. The problem is that the co-occurrence of all these precise factors is unique, *i.e.*, they do not recur. It is never exactly a1, a2 and a3 that recur; there is always something new about them, so that on another occasion we have a1', a2' and a3', and so on. Hence it is impossible to establish whether any of them really do co-vary with one another (IX, 311; II, 341). Regarding the truth conditions of historical laws, Simmel again adopts a strict methodological nominalism, just as he had done in *Über soziale Differenzierung*. According to this nominalism, the connections between whole groups and general phenomena exist only in the particular things that instantiate them. Hence Simmel warns against an hypostasis of general laws, as if they somehow *determine* the relations between their particular factors (IX, 321). Since

historical laws are between whole groups or general phenomena, their law-like status ultimately depends on the more specific connections between their particular factors (IX, 322). They are not so much laws themselves but mere generalizations, the result of the working of the particular laws between their constituent parts. This means that historical laws should be ultimately reducible to psychological ones about the relationships between individuals (IX, 321).

Simmel's methodological nominalism makes it seem as if he endorses reductivism about historical laws. The reductivist holds that individuals are the ultimate units of analysis, so that statements about whole groups or general phenomena should be reduced to statements about the individuals who compose them, and more specifically their psychological states. The battle of Marathon, for example, should be reducible to the experiences of all the individual Greek and Persian soldiers who fought in it (IX, 325). Though Simmel is sympathetic toward reductivism, he still refuses to embrace it. It suffers from a fatal difficulty, one pointed out to him long ago by Lazarus.⁵⁷ The individual, the ultimate unit of analysis, is really not that ultimate after all. It is not a simple, self-sufficient being, whose experience is completely intelligible in itself; rather, it is highly complex, the product of social and cultural forces (IX, 326). The naïveté of reductivism is that it believes in absolute units, ultimate limits of analysis, when there are *no a priori* limits to enquiry. Analysis can and should proceed *ad infinitum*. This crucial anti-reductivist argument is ignored by those who read Simmel as a reductivist or atomist.⁵⁸

Having countered reductivism, Simmel introduces a strong pragmatic note into his argument, just as he had done in *Über soziale Differenzierung*. What we regard as the ultimate unit of analysis, he contends, really depends on the purpose of our enquiry. The ultimate unit is that point we reach when we have achieved the end of our investigation; but there is no right or wrong about what these ends should be. If our interest is in psychology, we will want to reduce general historical laws down to the psychic states between individuals. That is perfectly legitimate. But we might very well have very different interests, which are equally legitimate. We might be interested in the more abstract relationships between whole groups and general phenomena, quite apart from the relationships between the individuals that compose them. We might be interested in, say, the Greek nation, not the Greek who compose it. In that case we will not bother to analyze these relationships into the particular relationships between their parts. Simmel then draws an important general conclusion from his pragmatism. Namely, if there is no such thing as absolute unity, we cannot conclude that historical laws are impossible simply because of their complexity. Although there cannot be an absolute or final reduction of their complexity, there is no *a priori* reason why we have to do a reduction at all (IX, 324).

Simmel explains that there are two attitudes we can take toward the general laws of history. On the one hand, we can accept these laws on their own terms, if our interest is only in determining very general relationships between social and historical phenomena (IX, 344–8). We might be interested in knowing, for example, that the suicide rate is always 3% of the general death rate, even if that tells us nothing about why particular persons commit suicide. On the other hand, however, we might insist on reducing these general laws down to their elements because we are interested in more detailed empirical research. Even in this case, however, we should not dismiss the general laws as worthless, because they are still useful preliminary generalizations which can serve as a starting point of enquiry (IX, 329–31). They will at least have an heuristic value in guiding more detailed empirical research, even if that research should falsify them.

Such, then, was Simmel's defense of the possibility of historical laws. Its spirit was entirely pragmatic, just as his defense of psychological laws. The rationale for either defense was its utility, the ends of enquiry. If our interests are in society and history in general, the laws are acceptable on their terms. If, however, our interests are in more detailed empirical research, they are at least useful preliminary sketches. It all depends on our interests, the goals of our enquiry. In defending the possibility of historical laws, Simmel's aim was to detach history, and ultimately sociology too, from the positivist program, which wanted to model historical and sociological laws on those of the natural sciences. Since that program proves unworkable, because it presupposes a kind of final reduction of historical laws to natural ones, the positivist has to conclude that history, and by implication sociology, cannot be a science. Simmel's pragmatic defense of historical laws made this conclusion unnecessary.

Although much of Simmel's argument is directed against positivism, it would be a mistake to think that he is defending historicism. One of the most striking aspects of *Die Probleme der Geschichtsphilosophie* is Simmel's penetrating critique of the concept of the autonomy of history, a cardinal doctrine of faith of Ranke, Droysen, Dilthey and the Southwestern neo-Kantians.⁵⁹ Simmel sees the concept of historical autonomy as another false absolute. The more one attributes autonomy to a specific field of investigation, he argues, the more one can be sure that one is stuck in a preliminary stage of knowledge (IX, 333). In attempting to make history autonomous, the historicist makes two false abstractions: he separates history from other co-ordinate realms (nature) and from the ultimate units of which it is composed (individuals). The more enquiry progresses, Simmel argues, the more we find that these abstractions are artificial and arbitrary. We see that the whole of history is only one part of the wider whole of nature, and that the individuals who compose it depend on even more ultimate factors (viz., an individual's psychology and physiology). There is a double tendency of enquiry: toward greater universality and toward greater individuality or concreteness. The first tendency makes history part of a wider whole, one part of the

cosmos; the second tendency dissolves its parts (individuals) into even more ultimate ones (physiological mechanisms) (333–4). The progress of enquiry eventually forces us to recognize, Simmel argues, that history is not a self-enclosed realm but an integral part of nature as a whole, so that it develops according to the same general movements of nature (334). We cannot see history as a “self-sufficient development,” as if everything that happens were determined solely by the past, because this abstracts from all other forces working on it in the present (335). We can talk about *sui generis* historical laws only if all other cosmic factors were held constant, which never happens (336). And so Simmel concludes that the demand that history become a science of laws ultimately leads to the dissolution of history itself (337). The more we universalize and individuate in our enquiries, the more history proves itself to be an arbitrary and artificial abstraction. As he neatly puts it: “...the further differentiation and reduction of historical *laws* destroys their character *ahistorical laws*...” (337). Yet Simmel's concessions to the positivist are really only apparent, as the rest of his argument quickly reveals. Assuming *per impossible* that our enquiries came to an end, and that we knew all the general laws of the cosmos, on both a macroscopic and microscopic level, it would still not follow that we would have a complete science (IX, 337–8). The positivist ideal of science as a system of laws is still insufficient, Simmel insists. Why? One reason is that laws are by their nature *hypothetical*, and so they have to presuppose the existence of the material to which they apply. Another reason is that laws are by their very nature *universal*, and so cannot derive the individual characteristics of everything to which they apply. Hence even if we dissolve the entire realm of history into the totality of natural laws that would not be the end of history understood as a distinct kind of enquiry. There would still be a need for some investigation that considers the existence and individuality of things. This means that there could still be legitimate historical enquiry in the traditional sense. We can deny the title of science to such an investigation, Simmel says, but doing that is really only to play with words (341). What we now call history has just as much legitimacy as any positivist ideal. In the end, it all depends on the ends of enquiry.

6. Reappraising the philosophy of history

Chapter Three of *Die Probleme der Geschichtsphilosophie* is a defense of the philosophy of history. Such an enterprise was still untimely and unfashionable when Simmel first wrote this chapter in the early 1890s. After the critique of Ranke, Droysen and Dilthey, the philosophy of history had suffered under a cloud of suspicion: its grand speculations and *a priori* method seemed to violate the spirit of empirical science. Early in the 1900s the late Dilthey and the neo-Kantians would do much to rehabilitate the philosophy of history, which they began to see as the only remedy for relativism and the aporias of *Wertphilosophie*; but their efforts were more than a decade later. So when Simmel first wrote his chapter he had very much set on a course of his own. While he did not intend to rehabilitate the speculations and *a priori* procedure of past philosophy

of history, Simmel felt that positivist mistrust had thrown the baby out with the bath water. The great value of the philosophy of history, he believed, is that it treats important issues about the meaning of life and significance of history as a whole. Simmel was determined to show that, though it cannot meet the standards of empirical science, the philosophy of history is still valuable and indispensable. Here again his pragmatism would guide him: his main defense of the philosophy of history is its value for the conduct of life and enquiry.

Simmel begins by defining the aims and domain of the philosophy of history (II, 380). The philosophy of history, we learn, deals with much more than laws of history. It concerns the *purpose* and *meaning* of history, and its questions therefore lie entirely outside the realm of empirical falsifiability (381). Even if we knew all the facts of history, and even if we established all the laws about physical atoms and mental representations, we would still not have a solution to the fundamental metaphysical issues about history. Whether there is a divine force guiding history, whether there is progress in history, whether history is a self-sufficient realm having no transcendent dimension, whether there is a purpose behind the chaos of all its individual events, whether each generation should labor for itself or for future generations—all these kinds of questions cannot be resolved by purely factual enquiry. There are two different kinds of questions involved in the philosophy of history, Simmel explains. The first concerns whether there is an absolute reality behind all the events of history, viz., whether it is a pantheistic substance, God or matter. The second concerns the meaning and significance of events *within* history, viz., whether they form a unity, whether they have a purpose, or whether they have a value (382–5). While these latter questions do not go outside the entire realm of experience to consider its transcendent cause, they still concern issues for which there is no straightforward empirical answer. The same facts and laws are interpretable according to different, even incompatible, metaphysical theories (382).

Simmel's sharp distinction between empirical and metaphysical questions was highly strategic for his general argument. On the one hand, it allowed him to defend the autonomy of historical laws, their independence from any specific metaphysics. On the other hand, it let him defend metaphysics itself, which, *pace* the positivists, is not a kind of primitive science. Here Simmel completely subverts the positivist view of metaphysics. It does not lie on a stage *below* science, as if it were speculation about occult forces. Rather, it is a stage *above* science, treating questions about value and significance that lie beyond empirical investigation. However strategic, the distinction also raised questions of consistency. For Simmel's doctrine of the relative *a priori* undermines any sharp distinction between the *a priori* and empirical, and it envisages instead a continuum between them.

After considering the various forms of philosophy of history, Simmel raises explicitly—only in the 1892 edition—the fundamental question behind his chapter: What scientific value does the philosophy of history have? What justification is there for all its speculations about the ultimate purpose and value of history? (II, 388). Its

justification would have to be a defense against the two most common objections against it. The first objection states that the philosophy of history contaminates, distorts or diverts us from historical research. The second is that its questions are empty or unanswerable. Both objections are positivist in spirit.

Regarding the first objection, Simmel's first line of response is to fall back on his earlier distinction between empirical and metaphysical questions. This distinction means that, at least in principle, metaphysics need or should not interfere with empirical research. There is no dependence in *content* of empirical concepts upon metaphysical ones (389). We can therefore determine whether claims about facts or laws are true or false independent of our metaphysical commitments.

Simmel concedes that in the past metaphysics and empirical research were closely intermingled; but he is confident that the trend toward specialization in modern science is working to keeping these domains separate. The process of differentiation at work in society also applies to the intellectual realm, so that metaphysical or philosophical questions are gradually separated from empirical ones (389).

There is a problem, however, with the argument so far. While applying this distinction clears metaphysics of the charge of interference or contamination, it does so only by making it irrelevant or dispensable. After all, if empirical questions about historical facts and laws can be settled without the philosophy of history, why bother with it at all?

It is precisely here, however, that Simmel introduces a new argument regarding the value of metaphysics and the philosophy of history. Although metaphysics is not necessary for the truth or falsity of empirical claims, it proves to be necessary to conduct empirical investigation in the first place. Even if all the facts and laws are determinable apart from metaphysics, there is still the question why one should study these facts and laws to begin with. It is in just this respect that metaphysics is crucial for the conduct of empirical science. Metaphysics concerns our ultimate values and commitments, that which gives our lives meaning and significance. If it were not for metaphysics, we would not bother to investigate history at all; its mass of facts and laws would remain indifferent to us. Hence it is ultimately metaphysics that gives us the motivation to study history. It determines the goals of our enquiry, and indeed the subject matter of investigation. In the infinite breadth and depth of historical reality, the historian has to decide which aspects to investigate and which to ignore. What makes him focus on one aspect rather than another is that it seems meaningful and significant, i.e., it seems to bear on those ultimate values and commitments which are usually reflected in metaphysics.

Regarding the second objection, Simmel admitted that the major concepts of the philosophy of history were not verifiable by experience (II, 402). But, contrary to the positivist, he did not allow verifiability to be the criterion of intellectual worth. Applying an economic analogy, Simmel proposes that we measure intellectual worth according to two variables: certainty and interest (II, 407). Just as the value of a commodity is the product of its scarcity and utility, so the intellectual value

of a form of discourse is the product of its certainty and interest. Normally, the product is the same if the decrease of one factor is compensated proportionally by the increase of the other. But if one factor is 0, the end result is 0. Hence air has no economic value because, though it has great utility for life, it has no scarcity. This seems to apply to metaphysics because, though there is the greatest interest in the truth of its theories, we cannot know if any of them is true or false. So it would seem their intellectual worth should be set at 0, nothing more or less. Simmel notes, however, that this analogy works only if we measure each theory in absolute terms on its own. While we cannot know for certain whether each theory is true or false, it is still possible to assign it a degree of certainty when we consider it in relation to all other theories (II, 409). There are only so many metaphysical theories about history, only so many possible combinations of its central concepts. Although we cannot be sure of the truth of any individual theory, one among the whole set of theories must be true. We can then assign a degree of certainty to any particular theory by comparing it with the totality of all the others. Certainty is not an all-or-nothing matter but permits degrees of more or less. If it has even some degree of truth, no matter how small, the product of the equation will not be 0 after all.

7. An early pragmatist

We have already seen how Simmel, in his major writings of the early 1890s, appealed time and again to a pragmatic criterion of truth to address basic methodological problems. Yet for all the importance this criterion had for him, Simmel did not formulate the general theory of truth behind it. He finally filled that gap in an important 1895 essay, "Ueber die Beziehung der Selectionslehre zur Erkenntnistheorie."⁶⁰ Here we find clearly stated *avant la lettre* the central conceptions behind the pragmatic theory of truth.⁶¹ For this reason Simmel has sometimes been described as a founder of pragmatism.⁶²

Simmel begins his reflections by outlining the standard view of the relationship between theory and practice (62–3). According to this view, there is an objective truth whose content is independent of our practical interests. We attempt to know this truth because that proves useful for us, helping us to adapt to reality. This view, Simmel says,

is common to both realism and idealism. Realism assumes that the truth consists in some object independent of our cognition, which our cognition passively receives and resembles or mirrors. Idealism assumes that the truth consists in coherence with the basic *a priori* elements of our knowledge, where these elements are like first principles and our knowledge like conclusions from them. Common to both realism and idealism are the assumptions that truth is independent of practice and the condition for its success. Both presuppose, therefore, a sharp distinction between our vital needs on the one hand and objective truth on the other hand.

Having outlined these opposing views, Simmel begins to expound his own by asking whether there is a common root behind the two factors, i.e., our needs and objective reality or truth, which are separated in the common view. He admits that we can determine whether any *single* representation is true or false by seeing whether it meets basic theoretical criteria, such as coherence and empirical verification (63). But the crucial question remains, he insists, of the truth of the *whole* of our representations, i.e., the entire system of which they are a part. Since we measure truth or falsity *within* this whole or system, we cannot measure the truth or falsity of the whole itself, at least not by theoretical means (63–4, 68). To determine the truth or falsity of the whole, he proposes, we should ask whether acting on it proves useful. We should call those representations true “that have proven themselves to be a motive for purposive, life-promoting action” (64). Once we make this move, Simmel argues, we remove the dualism the standard view postulates between our needs and objective reality. The truth of the whole of our representations no longer depends on their correspondence with some independent reality but with “that quality of representations that make them the cause of desired actions” (64). The concept of truth now means “the rule governed, practically effective consequence of thinking” (64). The common view of the relationship between truth and utility has now been reversed: our basic representations are useful not because they are true but they are true because they are useful.

To explain why acting on some of our representations is successful, Simmel argues that we do not have to accept the old realist assumption that they somehow resemble or correspond with an external reality. The common view assumes that the representations that are the causes of our actions have some kind of morphological similarity with their effects (64). But there is no evidence for such an assumption. The immediate effects of my acting are nerve and muscle movements, which have no resemblance to the content of the representations that cause them. There is no more resemblance between my representations and their effects or objects in the external world than there is between the symbols of the telegram machine and the words that translate it (66). The success of our representations does not depend on their content but on the energy or force that they give to our actions. In general, we must distinguish the content of a representation from its dynamic sense, which consists in the results of acting upon it (67).

Despite his Kantian leanings, Simmel's article is as much a critique of idealism as realism. The idealist finds truth in the coherence of representations among themselves,

and more specifically with their conformity with certain general principles. While this criterion is fine for single representations, it begs the question of the truth of the system of representations itself. For why adopt these general principles rather than others? (67). Kant's dualism between the realms of theoretical and practical reason has reintroduced a mystery as great as Descartes' dualism between mind and body, Simmel claims (70). How do such realms correspond with one another if they are so heterogeneous? We have no reason for assuming that the standards of practical reason apply to the realm of appearances, which is the domain of theoretical reason. We can remove this mystery, Simmel argues, only if we realize that our theoretical standards are ultimately dictated by our practical ones. The understanding is then no longer an autonomous function to which our practical ends somehow mysteriously correspond; instead, the activities of the understanding are functions of the needs of an organism.

Granted that the truth of our representations depends on their utility, the question remains what is the measure of utility? Simmel's answer derives from his general evolutionary perspective. The utility of a system of representations, a whole way of cognizing the world, depends on whether it helps a species survive. We accept a system of representations because it helps us to adapt to the world. Determining truth and falsity is therefore part of the general process of natural selection. We adopt a system of representations or way of thinking not because it corresponds with things but because acting on it brings the desired consequences: namely, survival (71–2).

Such was the sum and substance of Simmel's 1895 article. It was a remarkable synthesis of Simmel's Kantianism and Darwinianism. Simmel continued to stress the creative role of the Kantian subject, its decisive importance in constituting the object of experience; but he had naturalized that subject, making its activities part of the general struggle for existence in nature as a whole. Such a naturalistic reformulation of the Kantian subject put a profound distance between Simmel and the Southwestern neo-Kantians, who always insisted upon the autonomy of the intellectual realm. Despite his great debts to Kant, Simmel was ultimately much closer to the *Lebensphilosophie* of Nietzsche and Bergson than the neo-Kantianism of Windelband and Rickert.

There is some question whether Simmel remained true to the pragmatism of his 1895 article. In his later years he reacted against what he now called "pragmatism" because it seemed to deprive the intellectual realm of all independent standards. In a lecture given in January 1918, "Der Konflikt der modernen Kultur,"⁶³ Simmel was highly critical of the new *Lebensphilosophie* which was so appealing to German youth. The most regrettable side of this *Lebensphilosophie*, he lamented, was its attempt to demote the independent validity of the realm of forms. Pragmatism, especially its American variety, was one manifestation of this new philosophy of life, which would make the very criteria of truth depend upon the needs of life. It is remarkable

that the account Simmel then gives of the rationale behind pragmatism is very much like that of his earlier 1895 article (197).

Was Simmel, having finally understood its radical consequences, abandoning or renouncing his own earlier position? Or was he only distancing himself from an excessive and extreme form of it? Scholars differ on the question, for which there is no simple answer.⁶⁴ Arguably, only the latter was the case. Simmel had a rather crude understanding of American pragmatism, which he equated with an extreme individualism and subjectivism; and in his earlier article he had insisted that there are still objective standards of truth within a given system of representations, even if the system itself had to be decided by utility. On the other hand, however, the independent status Simmel gives to the realm of forms in his later essay—its freedom from all practical interest and need—was scarcely compatible with his earlier position. Further investigation of these issues will take us far from our chief concern here, which is only an understanding of the early Simmel.

8. Critique of ethics

The crowning work of Simmel's early years was his *Einleitung in die Moralwissenschaft*, which appeared in two volumes, the first in February 1892, the second in October 1893. Although the entire work appeared after *Über soziale Differenzierung* and the first edition of *Die Probleme der Geschichtsphilosophie*, Simmel began writing it well before them. The composition of the *Einleitung* dates back to the mid-1880s when Simmel began working on ethics. Apparently, he already had the full conception of the work in mind by the summer of 1886.⁶⁵

Seen from a broad historical perspective, Simmel's *Einleitung in die Moralwissenschaft* marks an important stage in the development of historicism. Now the historicist spirit and method enters into the once sacred domain of ethics.

The *Einleitung* is the first systematic historicist ethics, the first work to apply historical methods and reasoning to the whole range of ethical concepts. Simmel calls his method the “psychological–historical” or “socio-historical” because it would trace the historical and psychological origins of ethical concepts and explain them by their social function. He stresses the central role of the historical method in his work when he writes in the forward to the first volume that the “main point” (*die Hauptsache*) behind its discussion of ethical concepts will be “historical analysis” (III, 10). Of course, Simmel's work was not the first

to apply the historical method to ethics. There was the precedent of Lazarus "Ueber den Ursprung der Sitten," whose influence on Simmel is apparent everywhere.⁶⁶ There was also the precedent of Nietzsche's *Menschliches, Allzumenschliches* (1878) and *Zur Genealogie der Moral* (1887), works which Simmel had absorbed, though their impact on him is less apparent and less important.⁶⁷ Still, despite these precedents, Simmel's work is more systematic than its predecessors, pushing the historicist viewpoint into every corner of ethics. It is also scarcely less radical than Nietzsche. For here one finds clearly stated and formidably defended the very doctrine the neo-Kantians dreaded: a complete ethical relativism. In the remarkable final chapter of the work Simmel argues that the modern world is characterized by a tragic and irresolvable conflict of values. There is no single fundamental principle of ethics that can resolve this conflict, no simple algorithm that can reduce all values down to some common denominator. There is a conflict of values in the modern world corresponding to its many different groups and its long history. It is the tragedy of the modern individual that he internalizes this conflict, suffers from it and struggles to resolve it, though all his efforts are in vain. Though it is rarely read today, even by Simmel scholars, the *Einleitung in die Moralwissenschaft* has a strong claim to be the most important work of the young Simmel.⁶⁸ It encapsulates many of his early views and anticipates many of his later ones. The young Simmel rested great hopes upon it. He devoted enormous time and energy to its composition, which lasted for years. Although we do not normally think of Simmel as a moral philosopher, ethics had been his chief preoccupation throughout the late 1880s. Most of his early lectures were on topics in moral philosophy, and most of his early book reviews are on works on ethics. The *Einleitung* finally brought all these efforts and interests to fruition.

For all its importance, Simmel's book suffered a harsh fate. The early English and German reviewers passed harsh sentences upon it.⁶⁹ While praising the book for its logical acumen and astute observations, they failed to find any unifying purpose or conception behind it. They missed any positive doctrine and were taken aback by its destructive aims. "But this is not so much a theory of Ethics as a theory of its impossibility," wrote John Mackenzie, one early English reviewer.⁷⁰ Given such a reception, it is not surprising that the book was not a success. Only 500 copies were

printed, and these did not sell quickly. Disappointed, Simmel later disowned the work, which he dubbed a “*Jugendsünde*”. He even refused to publish a second edition, claiming that his own views had moved so far beyond it that a completely new work would be necessary.⁷¹ As it happened, the book was reprinted twice, in 1904 and 1911, though it underwent no significant revisions.

No one has done more to restore the importance of Simmel's early work on ethics than Klaus Köhnke, who devotes much of his *Der junge Simmel* to a detailed account of its origins, reception and context. Because of its penetrating account of a wealth of historical detail, Köhnke's study is an invaluable resource for the study of Simmel's work. It is disappointing, however, that Köhnke's general estimate of the work is so heavily influenced by its early reviewers. Köhnke too denies that there is any underlying unity to the work, and argues that the concept of moral science, which appears in its title, was really only a *post facto* device to give the work the semblance of unity.⁷² Accordingly, Köhnke develops a “patchwork theory” about the composition of the work, according to which it was stitched together from separate fragments composed in distant intervals.⁷³ He claims that Simmel begins to expound his own standpoint only at the close of chapter 4 of volume I; but the exposition is then interrupted by chapters 5 and 6 of volume II, which play no crucial role in the whole; only in chapter 7, at the end of the book, does Simmel finally resume the exposition of his own standpoint.

Is Simmel guilty as charged? Is the *Einleitung* really a pastiche, lacking unity and purpose? Any close reader of the work can sympathize with such complaints. Simmel's exposition gives the reader little idea of his aims and methods. Rarely does Simmel state his general position, seldom does he explain why he discusses a topic, and never does he reveal the book's general structure. So quickly and deeply does he delve into details that the reader soon loses the forest for the trees. Another challenging feature of the book is its complete lack of references, which makes it difficult to locate Simmel's position vis-à-vis his contemporaries. Simmel often takes issue with others, though he never mentions them by name. The book is a virtual palimpsest, written over a hidden polemic against neo-Kantians, neo-Darwinians and positivists; to see this subtext, however, requires careful reconstruction of Simmel's context.

I wish to argue here that, despite its opacity, Simmel's work has unity and purpose after all. It has a single plan and method, which he follows throughout. Furthermore, it has a coherent general position on virtually every important question in ethics. While this position is left implicit, its basic themes reappear in chapter after chapter.

To understand the coherence of Simmel's work, it is important that we keep in mind his intentions in writing it. We must not judge Simmel by goals he did not aim to achieve. Fortunately, he gives a good account of his intentions in several places: at the close of the work, in the prefaces to the first and second volumes, and in a publicity announcement.⁷⁴ All these statements reveal that he conceived his work as a *prolegomena* to moral science, not as a work in moral science itself. His work is meant as an introduction not in the sense that it would provide the foundation for moral science, but in the sense that it would be a *preparation* for such a foundation. In true Kantian fashion, Simmel understands his prolegomena as a *critique* rather than a *doctrine*. As a critique its task is essentially negative and preparatory: to examine the basic concepts of ethics, viz., egoism and altruism, merit and desert, freedom and responsibility, happiness and rationality, personality and character, and to clear away the confusion and fallacies involved in their use. Ethics needs such a critique, Simmel argues, because it is now at a crucial turning point, a stage where it stands between philosophy, which deals *a priori* with general concepts, and actual empirical science, which provides the observation and description of moral life (IV, 11). The task of critique is to aid ethics in its transition from philosophy to moral science. It does so through revealing the fallacies and simplifications involved in the basic concepts of traditional ethics. These concepts are too abstract and general to do justice to the rich experience of moral life. They are derived from many different sources, and they have a very heterogeneous content, so that there are endless disputes about their real meaning. The most various phenomena are explained according to the same principle, the same phenomena according to very different principles (IV, 9). The only way to end this dire predicament, Simmel believes, is through thoroughgoing critique.

There can be no question that Simmel keeps to this critical plan throughout the entire book. In chapter after chapter, he critically examines the fundamental concepts of ethics. Some reviewers complained that Simmel's book was more negative than positive, more destructive than constructive; but that was only in keeping with his critical purpose. Though he does not develop the concept of moral science in any detail, that is partly because it is not his intention to do so, and partly because he believed that that had already been done by Lazarus.

In his prefaces Simmel also provides a clear account of his conception of moral science. The method of moral science proceeds in the opposite direction from traditional ethics. Rather than beginning with the most general concepts, it starts from the description and analysis of moral phenomena and develops its concepts from them (IV, 387). Ethics, whenever it becomes a science, will cease to be a single discipline and will divide into several special disciplines. It will be in part psychology, in part sociology, and in part history. As psychology, its task is to analyze an individual's acts of feeling, will and judgment; as sociology, its business is to explain the forms and

content of social life; and as history, it determines the psychological and social origins of basic moral ideas (III, 10). Since Simmel conceives of moral science as a conglomeration of several disciplines, Köhnke argues that was not for him really a discipline at all but only the name for a program for the dissolution of ethics.⁷⁵ It is not least for this reason that he thinks “introduction to moral science” is a misleading description of the contents of his work. Still, though not the name for a distinct discipline, “moral science” does have a definite content for Simmel: it designates a specific *way* or *method* of pursuing traditional ethical questions. Whether it is found in several disciplines or only one is irrelevant to its meaning. It is important to see, however, that the method of moral science is not that pursued by Simmel in his book. That is because the book intends to pave the way for the use of that method, but it does not apply it itself. Throughout the work Simmel does provide many observations from history, anthropology and biology; but since his chief aim is to provide a critique of ethical concepts, he deals on the same *a priori* level as traditional ethics itself. It is a mistake, therefore, to complain that he does not use a new methodology but simply engages in traditional ethics.

Although Simmel never summarizes his general views for the reader, there is running throughout the two volumes of *Einleitung in die Moralwissenschaft* a coherent general standpoint, an overall philosophical perspective, which consists in three interlocking themes: anti-rationalism, nominalism and relativism.⁷⁶ While these themes are to some extent distinct, they are also closely intertwined. Together, they form a remarkably bleak and negative outlook, though one entirely consistent with Simmel's critical agenda. We will now consider each of these themes and some of their interconnections.

Of these three themes, anti-rationalism is the most powerful and persistent. It announces itself immediately in the first chapter, “*Das Sollen*,” where Simmel develops his theory of moral obligation. According to his theory, the moral ought (*das Sollen*) indicates nothing more than an indefinable and indemonstrable feeling, a feeling of constraint that we ought to do, like or approve something (III, 22, 25). Simmel insists that the “ought” does not describe any state of affairs or have any kind of cognitive content; it is not derivable from any specific content because it is applicable to any possible content. We can prove the “oughtness” of a content from some more basic content which we approve or like; but we cannot prove that we ought to approve or

like this basic content itself (27). “The last thing that we can explain,” as Simmel nicely puts it, “is only the next to the last” (*das Letzte, das wir erklären können, ist das Vorletzte*). In the very first chapter, then, Simmel establishes a clear distinction between “ought” and “is”, according to which “ought” is compatible with any possible state of affairs. For Simmel, like Hume, there is nothing logically absurd in demanding the destruction of the entire world rather than enduring a scratch on one's finger. It is on the basis of this distinction that Simmel then insists—again like Hume—that reason cannot determine the ends but only the means for actions. Reason is for Simmel an essentially theoretical power which determines what is or is not the case. It has no capacity, therefore, to determine what ought to be case. What ought to be the case, the ends of human actions, are determinable by the will or feeling alone (III, 307). We can say that the means toward ends are rational or irrational, according to whether they are, or are not, effective strategies for achieving them; but we cannot say that the ends themselves are rational, because it is possible for us to will or desire anything without contradiction (III, 106). For this reason Simmel stresses—flatly contrary to Windelband and the neo-Kantians—that ethics cannot be a normative science. If ethics is a science at all, it has to confine itself to what is the case; it has no business in telling us what ought to be the case. The whole distinction between a normative and explanatory science is bogus, Simmel argues, for the simple reason that there really cannot be any such thing as a normative science. When we lay down norms we are in the business of willing, approving or liking something. The ethicist can talk about and analyze these actions; but it is not his business to engage in them himself (III, 308).

Simmel's anti-rationalism is especially apparent in the fifth chapter, “*Der kategorische Imperativ*.” This chapter has been regarded as an unnecessary disfiguring addition which plays no role in the book's ground plan.⁷⁷ It is difficult to see, however, how Simmel could sustain his irrationalism without a critical discussion of Kant's categorical imperative, the most famous and typical form of ethical rationalism. It is indeed in Simmel's many objections against Kant's categorical imperative that we can see the basis for his own skepticism about ethical rationalism. Simmel contends, like many later critics of Kant, that the concept of the categorical imperative, understood in its universal law formulation, is an insufficient basis to determine our duties since the universalizability test can be satisfied by opposing maxims (III, 33). The only way in which Kant derives any specific content from his criterion, Simmel alleges, is by covertly smuggling in considerations of consequences, i.e., by imagining what harm would result if everyone acted in the same manner (III, 39–40, 71). What Kant means by “what I could will as a universal law” is not what I could will psychologically but what I could will consistently or logically. But if the test is only a matter of consistency, Simmel contends, it is too easy to satisfy it. There is a contradiction only if I will both X and –X; but there is no reason that I have to will X in the first place (75). For example, if I am entrusted

with a deposit and value the institution of deposit keeping, I should restore the deposit, even if I were to suffer bad consequences in doing so; yet there is no necessity that I value the institution of promise keeping in the first place. Simmel also shows in great detail that whether a maxim fails or passes the universalizability test depends on its precise formulation (III, 45–53). If a maxim is formulated in a very general way, neglecting to take into account specific circumstances, it might seem immoral; but then we end with an implausible absolutism or rigorism that never allows us to lie, take human life, and so on. If, however, the maxim is formulated in a more specific manner, it seems to pass the test; but then it loses all generality. The irony is that the criterion of universalizability works best when it takes into account more specific circumstances, i.e., when it becomes less universal and more individual (III, 53).

The most troubling aspect of Simmel's anti-rationalism emerges in the final chapter of the book, chapter 7, "*Einheit und Widerstreit der Zwecke*." Here Simmel puts forward his famous doctrine of the irresolvable conflict of values. According to this doctrine, there is no single ultimate end of all human actions, a highest good, and there is no single principle that governs or encapsulates all values (IV, 286–7). Simmel's target here is in part the recent idealist ethic of Windelband and Steinthal, which portrayed society as an organic whole or cultural unity, and which made it the duty of the individual to contribute to that whole.⁷⁸ Simmel traces the belief in a single ultimate end of human action back to the natural law tradition (IV, 315–17). If all moral values are natural laws, then one is inclined to assume they should form a systematic unity like that of nature itself. Against this belief, Simmel wields his Humean fork, i.e., his "is–ought" distinction. We can come to accept the reality of incommensurable and conflicting values, he argues, once we realize that values have their origin in the will, and that their status is really something subjective (IV, 317–20). Given that there is no rational test for values like the categorical imperative, we have no recourse but to accept the fact that there can be, at least in principle, conflicting values. Simmel does not leave his argument here, however, but explains in detail all the different kinds of conflict in value. These conflicts can be logical (because the same value is affirmed and denied) or they can be material or practical (because circumstances allow us to act on only one) (IV, 352). They can take place in the following ways: "next to one another" (*nebeneinander*), when different groups represent opposing interests (viz., political parties); "after one another" (*nacheinander*), when persisting values of a past epoch contradict more recent values (viz., the conflict between conservatism and progress); or "over one another" (*übereinander*), when one circle of values encloses others and overrules them (viz., the duty to humanity versus that of the state, or the duty to the state as opposed to that of the family) (IV, 367). The most striking and disturbing feature of Simmel's argument, however, is how he relates the conflict of values to the tendencies of modern society. Rather than moving toward a resolution of these conflicts, modern

society is moving in the direction of their intensification. Modern society is characterized by differentiation, the growth of a plurality of groups. Where the individual in the past belonged to a few groups (the local community and family), he is now released into civil society which comprises groups of all kinds. This gives extraordinary freedom to the modern individual; but at the same time it makes him the victim of the conflict between these groups. The individual internalizes the norms of the group, and so the conflicts in their values become internal. It is impossible for him to resolve these conflicts on his own because they take place on a group level and are resistant to all the powers of rational thinking. Even when he decides for one value over another, the demands of the subordinate value still nag and trouble him (IV, 384). The conflict of values makes for the tragedy of modern life, and it is simple blindness on the part of philosophy not to recognize it, and foolishness to provide the comforting illusion that somehow there is some rational means of deciding between these conflicts (IV, 373).

Running alongside and fitting hand-in-glove with Simmel's anti-rationalism is his nominalism, his belief that general terms are only names. This venerable doctrine plays a powerful, though little noticed, role in his thinking. He was perfectly aware of the doctrine's history, stressed its contribution to modern science, and duly swore his allegiance to it.⁷⁹ Nominalism makes its explicit appearance in chapter 5 when he outlines what he calls "sociological nominalism" (IV, 121–4). This version of nominalism, which he calls "sociological" only because it is applied to groups, affirms the classic doctrine of nominalism according to which general terms are not names for general entities but only marks to calculate with (122–3). All unity in things is the result of the synthesis of the mind, Simmel writes, explicitly reaffirming Kant's own nominalist tendencies (124). In Simmel's hands, as in those of nominalists past, this doctrine becomes a potent critical weapon. Simmel uses it to expose what he regards as the chief fallacy of past ethical thinking: what he calls "*Begriffsrealismus*", i.e., hypostasis, the often tacit assumption that general concepts designate abstract entities. For Kant, hypostasis was the chief fallacy of pure reason, and Simmel, true to his Kantian roots, makes this a *leitmotif* of his critique of ethics past. Simmel finds hypostasis lurking everywhere in traditional ethics: in the belief that the good will has a value apart from its consequences (III, 229); in the assumption that character designates a kind of person, or that the ego refers to a kind of entity, above and beyond a person's actions and dispositions (III, 264–6; IV, 331–48); in the idea of freedom as a faculty that exists independent of the social institutions of punishment (IV, 209–10, 228); in the doctrine of a *Volksseele* where one believes in the reality of a whole prior to the interactions between individuals (IV, 122); in the traditional doctrine that there is a single goal or end behind all values (IV, 206, 286); in the common belief that human beings have an intrinsic value apart from society (III, 185–7); and, finally, in the idea of property as a kind of thing independent of the state of mind of the possessor (III, 243–5). Last but not

least, Simmel finds hypostasis where one might least expect it: in the work of that great critic of hypostasis, Kant himself (IV, 80–1). Kant relapsed into this fallacy, Simmel argues, when he held that only certain values are in accord with reason. If he were true to his voluntarism and nominalism, he would have to admit that anything, in principle, can be a value. Here we see clearly how Simmel's nominalism and anti-rationalism work together.

Closely allied with Simmel's anti-rationalism and nominalism is his relativism. Though Simmel would call his doctrine "relativism" only much later,⁸⁰ the doctrine was already fully developed in the *Einleitung*, especially in his "relational" theory of truth (III, 17–19). In the opening passages of chapter 1 he declares that truth is a "relational concept," meaning that truth depends on the *relation* of a representation to the majority of representations in consciousness. We regard a representation as true only because it coheres with other representations, not because it conforms to some independent object. The pragmatism already announced itself in earlier works also appears in the *Einleitung*, though now it becomes an explicit part of Simmel's relativism. True representations, he informs us, are simply those that give the results that we desire when we act upon them; and given that there is no reason to prefer one ultimate desire over another, there will be different conceptions of truth itself (III, 18).

Simmel's relativism in the *Einleitung* applies not only on the theoretical or epistemological, but also the practical or ethical level. His ethical relativism appears, of course, in his theory of the irresolvable conflict in values, as we have just seen. But it is also closely intertwined with his voluntarism, i.e., his thesis that the will alone is the source and sanction of value.⁸¹ Of course, voluntarism alone does not entail relativism, because one can still hold that the desires and emotions behind values are universal constants of human nature; it was in this way that Hutcheson and Hume had tempered their voluntarism to avoid the relativism of Hobbes and Mandeville. But it is noteworthy that Simmel chose not to follow this path. For he argues that desires and feelings are the result of historical conditioning, i.e., that the chief forces behind human development are inheritance, tradition and example (III, 31). The belief in a single human nature that somehow persists behind all the different forms of historical and cultural conditioning is for him only an illusion (III, 92, 122).

Such, in crude summary, is Simmel's general outlook in *Einleitung in die Moralwissenschaften*. It scarcely does justice to the breadth and depth of his treatise, and even less to the subtlety and sophistication of its argument. But it should be enough to make the case for the unity and coherence of Simmel's general project and its importance for the historicist tradition. At the very least it should be plain that no serious student of Simmel can afford to ignore this sin of his youth.

Notes:

- (1) For a critical treatment of Simmel's current reception in Germany, see Peter-Ernst Schnabel, "Positivismus, Ästhetizismus, Impressionismus, Hegelianismus, Simmel-Renaissance in der Sackgasse?," in *Georg Simmel und die Moderne*, ed. Ottheim Rammstedt (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1984), pp. 282–317.
- (2) For discussions of the foundations of Simmel's sociology, see Nicholas Spykman, *The Social Theory of Georg Simmel* (New York, NY: Atherton, 1966) (first published 1925); Theodore Abel, *Systematic Sociology in Germany* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1929); Peter-Ernst Schnabel, *Die soziologische Gesamtkonzeption Georg Simmels* (Stuttgart: Gustav Fischer Verlag, 1974); Heribert Becher, *Georg Simmel: Die Grundlagen seiner Soziologie*. (Stuttgart: Ferdinand Enke Verlag, 1971); Heinz-Jürgen Dahme, *Soziologie als exakte Wissenschaft: Georg Simmels Ansatz und seine Bedeutung in der gegenwärtigen Soziologie* (Stuttgart: Enke, 1981); and the anthology, *Georg Simmel and Contemporary Sociology*, eds. M. Kaern, B. Phillips and R. Cohen (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1990). One exception to the preoccupation with Simmel's sociology is Robert Weingartner's illuminating *The Philosophy of Georg Simmel* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1962), which examines Simmel from the standpoint of his later philosophy of life.
- (3) This is primarily due to the work of Klaus Köhnke, *Der junge Simmel* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1996), and David Frisby, *Georg Simmel* (London: Routledge, 2002) and *Simmel and Since* (London: Routledge, 1992).
- (4) Frisby, *Simmel*, p. 25.
- (5) See *Georg Simmel, Briefe 1880–1911*, in *Georg Simmel Gesamtausgabe*, ed. Ottheim Rammstedt (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1995–2005), XXII, 342. All references to Simmel's writings will be to this edition, designated by the standard abbreviation GSG.
- (6) Fortunately, this is one of the few works of Simmel to be translated. See *The Problems of the Philosophy of History*, trans. Guy Oakes (New York, NY: The Free Press, 1977).
- (7) This picture of Simmel as a radical historicist contradicts one common interpretation of his thought, which regards him as an a-historical thinker. See, for example, the statements cited in Frisby, *Simmel*, pp. 58–9; and the essay by Friedrich Tönnies, "Simmel as Sociologist," in *Georg Simmel*, ed. Lewis Coser (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1965), p. 51. The evidence for this interpretation comes mainly from Simmel's later sociology, whose foundation seems very ahistorical. When Simmel defined the subject matter of sociology in his celebrated 1894 article "Das Problem der Sociologie," GSG V, 52–61, he seemed to purge the discipline of historical content. Sociology, he proposed, is about the *forms* of socialization, independent of their *content*, i.e., the specific interests or goals of people at a specific time and place (V, 54). While these interests and goals vary with history, these forms remain the same in different societies. For these reasons it has been said that Simmel's sociology lacks the "historical approach" of Weber's (see Frisby, *Simmel*, p. 58). But, even if this interpretation were true of Simmel's sociology, it would hold for only one aspect of his later thought. And it is questionable even as an interpretation of his later sociology. In an important 1959 article F.H. Tenbruck argued that Simmel's "forms of socialization" had been misunderstood as generic concepts, and that they should be read instead as those intersubjective levels of social phenomena that are irreducible to the interactions between individuals. See his "Formal Sociology," in *Georg Simmel 1858–1918*, ed. Kurt Wolff (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1959), pp. 61–99. Tenbruck's interpretation is essentially correct; it is only necessary to add that for Simmel these forms have an essentially historical dimension. What makes them intersubjective, irreducible to individual interactions, is the fact that they have a history, that they are the work of past generations who have invested them with a meaning that transcends the mental activities of individuals in this generation. In this regard it is important to stress that Simmel was deeply influenced by Moritz Lazarus's theory of "historical condensation" (*Verdichtung*), according to which the forms of social life are rich in intersubjective meaning precisely because they accumulate and embody a culture's history. See Moritz Lazarus, "Verdichtung des Denkens in der Geschichte. Ein Fragment," in *Zeitschrift für Völkerpsychologie und*

Sprachwissenschaft II (1862), 54–62. Simmel expressed his admiration for this doctrine in his 1885 review of Heymann Steinthal's *Allgemeine Ethik*, GSG I, 193–210, esp. 208.

(8) Simmel's "Preisschrift" bore the title "Darstellung und Beurtheilung von Kants verschiedenen Ansichten über das Wesen der Materie." Though the whole essay has been lost, part one was made into Simmel's doctoral dissertation and published as *Das Wesen der Materie nach Kants Physischer Monadologie* (Berlin: Norddeutschen Buchdruckerei, 1881), reprinted in GSG I, 11–39.

(9) GSG XXII, 9.

(10) According to the testimony of Hans Simmel, "Auszüge aus den Lebenserinnerungen," in H. Böhringer and K. Gründer, eds., *Ästhetik und Soziologie um die Jahrhundertwende: Georg Simmel* (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1978), p. 249.

(11) On Lazarus and Steinthal, see Ingrid Belke's valuable "Einleitung" to *Mortiz Lazarus und Heymann Steinthal: Die Begründer der Völkerpsychologie in ihren Briefen* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1971).

(12) The importance of *Völkerpsychologie* for the young Simmel has been emphasized by both Frisby, *Simmel*, pp. 47–8, 69–71, and Köhnke, *Der junge Simmel*, pp. 337–55.

(13) Simmel, "Psychologische und ethnologische Studien über Musik," *Zeitschrift für Völkerpsychologie und Sprachwissenschaft* XIII (1882) 261–305; "Dantes Psychologie," *ibid*, XV (1885), 18–69, 239–76; "Zur Psychologie der Frauen," *ibid*, XX (1890), 6–46.

(14) Both were aware of positivism from its early stages. See Steinthal to Lazarus, September 12, 1852, in Belke, *Briefen*, pp. 266–8.

(15) The first programmatic essay was Lazarus's "Über den Begriff und Möglichkeit einer Völkerpsychologie," *Deutsches Museum Jahrgang I* (1851), 112–26. These ideas were then developed in the opening manifesto, co-authored with Steinthal, for the *Zeitschrift für Völkerpsychologie und Sprachwissenschaft*, "Einleitende Gedanken über Völkerpsychologie," Volume I (1860), 1–73. Also important are "Ueber das Verhältniß des Einzelnen zur Gesamtheit," a lecture first delivered in January 1861 and then published in 1883 in *Das Leben der Seele* (Berlin: Dümmler, 1883), I, 321–411; and "Einige synthetische Gedanken zur Völkerpsychologie," in *Zeitschrift für Völkerpsychologie und Sprachwissenschaft* III (1865), 1–94. All these essays, with the exception of the "Einleitende Gedanken," have been republished by Klaus Köhnke under the title Mortiz Lazarus, *Grundzüge der Völkerpsychologie und Kulturwissenschaft* (Hamburg: Meiner, 2003). For a complete bibliography of Lazarus's writings, see Belke, *Lazarus und Steinthal*, pp. 394–9.

(16) "Einleitende Gedanken," p. 35. Cf. "Ueber das Verhältniß," I, 371.

(17) "Einleitende Gedanken," p. 29. Lazarus's italics.

(18) *Ibid*, p. 11.

(19) See Köhnke, *Der junge Simmel*, p. 351n30.

(20) "Ueber das Verhältniß," I, 337. Lazarus' italics.

(21) "Einleitende Gedanken," p. 15.

(22) "Ueber das Verhältniß," I, 335.

(23) "Einleitende Gedanken," p. 20. Cf. "Begriff und Möglichkeit," p. 113.

(24) "Einleitende Gedanken," p. 28; and "Ueber den Begriff," p. 117.

(25) "Einige synthetische Gedanken" (Köhnke edition), p. 227.

(26) "Einleitende Gedanken," pp. 18–20. Lazarus seems to think differently about this issue in his later "Einige synthetische Gedanken," p. 208n1. There he states in a footnote that psychological laws do not differ in kind from natural ones. In both causes we determine the causes for an event, such that given the causes the event must occur. He dismisses the objection that the same causes do not recur in the social or historical world because its events are unique. If this were true, he argues, both history and psychology would also not be possible as sciences. In general, Lazarus did not think through the issue whether general laws are possible in the social sciences as in the natural sciences. This unfinished business would be handed down to Simmel.

(27) "Einige Synthetische Gedanken," p. 137.

(28) Ibid, p. 138.

(29) "Ueber das Verhältniß," I, 343.

(30) "Einige synthetische Gedanken," p. 136, 190; "Ueber das Verhältniß," I, 381.

(31) "Einige synthetische Gedanken," p. 136.

(32) "Einleitende Gedanken," p. 5; "Ueber das Verhältniß," pp. 334, 358, 364.

(33) "Einige synthetische Gedanken," pp. 148–9; "Einleitende Gedanken," pp. 4–5.

(34) See above, note 20.

(35) "Einige synthetische Gedanken," p. 176.

(36) See J.F. Herbart, *Psychologie als Wissenschaft* (Königsberg: Unzer, 1824). Reproduced in *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. Karl Kehrbach (Langensalza: Beyer & Söhne, 1890), vols, V–VI.

(37) See Lazarus to Thomas Krüger, December 14, 1846, in Belke, *Moritz und Steinthal*, p. 23.

(38) GSG II, 115–38. All references in parentheses are to this text.

(39) According to Köhnke, in this chapter Simmel is defending *Völkerpsychologie* against the criticism of Dilthey in *Einleitung in die Geisteswissenschaften*. See his *Der junge Simmel*, pp. 380–97. I find, however, Köhnke's thesis very problematic, and on two grounds. First, it involves attributing an individualism to Dilthey which he never held (pp. 383–4). If Simmel were criticizing Dilthey on these grounds, it would be a wildly inaccurate criticism. Second, Köhnke assumes that the young Simmel had no interest at all in hermeneutics, which is completely false, given the theory of interpretation outlined in chapter one of the 1892 interpretation of *Die Probleme der Geschichtsphilosophie*. Köhnke also attributes to Dilthey a more developed hermeneutical standpoint in the *Einleitung*, when Dilthey there barely stated his views and developed them only later in the 1890s. In general, Köhnke's reading is anachronistic, reading Simmel's later troubled relationship with Dilthey into his earlier work.

(40) The distinction is reminiscent of Lazarus's distinction between real and ideal laws. See "Synthetische Gedanken zur Völkerpsychologie," §25, pp. 227–38.

(41) Simmel, *Soziologie*, GSG XI, 15.

(42) Simmel's argument about the fictitious unity of the individual appears explicitly in Lazarus. See "Ueber das Verhältniß des Einzelnen zur Gesammtheit," in *Das Leben der Seele* I, 339–40.

(43) GA II, 297–421.

(44) Simmel makes his central thesis clear in the “Vorwort” to the 1907 edition, GA IX, 229–31.

(45) The following account compares the 1892 with the 1907 edition, which is in GA IX, 227–419. The edition cited is marked by the Roman numerals for their respective volume numbers (i.e., II for the 1892 and IX for the 1907 edition).

(46) See Simmel's November 4, 1904, letter to Rickert, GA IX, 424–5.

(47) GA IX, 425.

(48) Thus Horst Jürgen Helle, *Soziologie und Erkenntnistheorie* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1988) pp. 41, 44; and Ralph Leck, *Georg Simmel and Avant-Garde Sociology* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 2000), pp. 64–9.

(49) On Dilthey's role in these capacities, see Köhnke, *Der junge Simmel*, pp. 51–77. After his Habilitation, Simmel began to see Dilthey as the chief obstacle to his ambitions for a professorship in Berlin. On this development, see again Köhnke, pp. 355–79.

(50) See Simmel to Lazarus, August 4, 1880, GSG XXII, 9.

(51) This theme is more explicit in the 1907 edition than the 1892. It is more explicit in his Kant lectures, GA IX, 45.

(52) Cf. GA IX, 237–42.

(53) See above, chapter 8, section 3.

(54) The polemic against Ranke is clearer in the 1907 edition. Cf. GA II, 321 with IX, 295–6.

(55) See chapter 6, sections 5 and 6.

(56) For example, Frisby, *Simmel*, pp. 58, 76; and Leck, *Simmel*, p. 67.

(57) See section 2.

(58) See, for example, J.S. Mackenzie's review of the *Einleitung in die Moralwissenschaft*, *Mind* I (1892), 554–61; reproduced in *Simmel: Critical Assessments*, ed. David Frisby (London: Routledge, 1994), I, 123–8.

(59) This critique shows how false it is to assimilate Simmel's position to Dilthey's. Seen more accurately, it is rather a critique of Dilthey's.

(60) GSG V, 62–74. This article was first published in the *Archiv für systematische Philosophie* I (1895), 34–45.

(61) James gave currency to the name “pragmatism” in his 1907 book of that name, *Pragmatism, A New Name for some Old Ways of Thinking* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1907). Arguably, James was moving toward his pragmatism before Simmel. See his “The Function of Cognition,” which was read before the Aristotelian Society in December 1884. However, James himself admitted that this article, retaining a realist view of truth, was still not his mature theory. According to James himself (*Pragmatism*, p. 47), he first announced his mature theory in a lecture he gave in 1898 in the University of California, his “Philosophical Conceptions and Practical Results.” See *Collected Essays and Reviews* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1920), 406–37. In this case Simmel developed his own pragmatic theory three years before James.

(62) Simmel's affinity with pragmatism was first brought out by Wilhelm Jerusalem, “Zur Weiterentwicklung des Pragmatismus,” *Deutsche Literaturzeitung* 34 (1913), Spalte 3205–26.

(63) GSG XVI, 183–207.

(64) Wilhelm Jerusalem maintained that Simmel had altered his views. See his “Zur Weiterentwicklung des Pragmatismus,” Sp. 3223. Helle has argued that case for continuity and consistency. See his *Soziologie und Erkenntnistheorie*, pp. 60–77. Helle's argument, however, is seriously flawed, because he maintains (p. 64) that Simmel's original thesis is about knowledge of the truth rather than the truth itself. But Simmel's text flatly belies any such interpretation. In many passages Simmel clearly defines truth, and not simply knowledge of it, in terms of utility. See, for example, the sentences beginning “Dieses Wunder...,” pp. 70–1, “Denn damit...,” p. 64, “Damit wäre...” p. 64, “Ich meine also dies...,” p. 67.

(65) Köhnke, *Der junge Simmel*, p. 204.

(66) “Ueber den Ursprung der Sitten,” in *Zeitschrift für Völkerpsychologie und Sprachwissenschaft* I (1860), 437–77. This article was first given as a lecture, March 23, 1860, at the University of Bern. Lazarus anticipates Simmel in several ways: in deriving morality from feelings; in criticizing ethical egoism and atomism; in demanding a psychological and historical approach to ethical phenomena; and in demanding a critique of the basic ethical concepts.

(67) Simmel makes no explicit references to Nietzsche's works. It is revealing, however, that in chapter 2 he adopts Nietzsche's theory in *Zur Genealogie der Moral* that the early words for moral excellence designated the rich, beautiful and fortunate. See GSG III, 99.

(68) This is also the judgment of Köhnke, *Der junge Simmel*, p. 167.

(69) For some of the early English reviews, see Frisby, *Critical Assessments* I, 117–28. For a conspectus of the German and English reviews, see Köhnke, *Der junge Simmel*, pp. 170–89.

(70) As cited in Köhnke, p. 177.

(71) See Simmel to Wilhelm Hertz, February 2, 1901, GSG XXII, 366–7. See also Simmel to Rickert, May 28, 1901, GSG XXII, 393–4.

(72) *Der junge Simmel*, pp. 179, 189, 205, 208.

(73) Hence Köhnke claims here that the work presents “*ein durch zahllose Einschübe weitgehend entstelltes, geradezu kollagenhaftes Gebilde.*” See *Der junge Simmel*, p. 205.

(74) See GSG III, 10–11; IV, 7–11, 386–9; XXII, 389.

(75) Köhnke, *Der junge Simmel*, p. 283.

(76) Köhnke sees the general standpoint of the book as that of “naturalism,” and regards Simmel's program to dissolve ethics into natural science as essentially positivist. See *Der junge Simmel*, pp. 243–65, 284. This, however, is a misleading conception of Simmel's enterprise. Simmel was far too skeptical of the positivist program to regard his position as naturalistic. In chapter VI he raises many objections against the positivist attempt to explain psychology according to mechanical laws. See GSG IV, 265–83. As we have seen, this skepticism is all the more apparent in the other early works of the 1890s, especially *Über sozialen Differenzierung* and *Die Probleme der Geschichtsphilosophie*. For the same reason it is misleading to represent Simmel as a proponent of the explanatory and constructive psychology criticized by Dilthey. See Köhnke, p. 281. Simmel's position on social explanation in *Die Probleme* is in fact very similar to Dilthey.

(77) Köhnke, *Der junge Simmel*, p. 189.

(78) See Simmel's early review of Steinthal's *Allgemeine Ethik*, GSG I, 209–10. Simmel is probably also taking aim at Windelband's ethics as expounded in “Vom Prinzip der Moral,” *Präludien* II, 161–94.

(79) *Über soziale Differenzierung*, GSG II, 126, 130. Cf. *Einleitung in die Moralwissenschaften* GSG IV, 121–4.

(⁸⁰) See *Philosophie des Geldes*, GSG VI, 117–18.

(⁸¹) Simmel endorses this theory in its classical formulation, GSG IV, 326.

Max Weber and the End of the Historicist Tradition

1. Weber in context

The historicist tradition in Germany reached its culmination, and came to its close, in the work of Max Weber (1864–1920). It is difficult to exaggerate Weber's contribution to the historicist tradition. He revised the theory of *Verstehen* of Dilthey and Simmel; he reformed the theory of ideas of Humboldt and Ranke; and he resolved the Ranke–Droysen dispute about historical objectivity. The epistemology of Windelband, Rickert and Lask found its ultimate fulfillment in Weber's methodology, whose theory of ideal types and postulate of value-freedom bear the stamp of their neo-Kantianism. Yet, despite its greatness, Weber's achievement would not endure. The very culture that gave birth to his work, and that could appreciate its value, faded into history. The world war—the slaughter of its heirs in the trenches—dealt it mortal blows. Of course, Weber's name is now among the pantheon of the founders of sociology; but the Weber of contemporary sociology has little to do with the Weber of history, which is the Weber of the historicist tradition.¹

Although Weber is best known today as a father of modern sociology, one should bear in mind his intellectual roots. Weber was raised in the historicist tradition, specifically in the “historical school of political economics,” which had dominated German economic thought in the second half of the nineteenth century. Weber had studied history and political economy at Heidelberg, where he read the works of Wilhelm Roscher and attended the lectures of Karl Knies, two leaders of the historical school. His first academic post was as a professor of political economy in Freiburg, and in his *Antrittsrede* he counts himself among “the youth of the German historical school.”² Even late in his life he would continue, despite many disagreements, to

regard himself as “a child” or “epigone” of this school.³ But Weber's roots in the historicist tradition extend well beyond the confines of political economy. He was an admirer of Ranke, whom he had read in Heidelberg; and he closely followed the work of Dilthey, which he greatly respected. Simmel, whom he knew personally, would be a major influence on his work. Close friends of Rickert and Lask, he would study intensely their writings, which were a major influence upon him. From the Southwestern neo-Kantians he would acquire most of his philosophical principles, though, it should be added, he had already imbibed Kant from a tender age.⁴ So, through all these channels, Weber had thoroughly assimilated the major problems, concerns and lessons of the historicist tradition.

Placing Weber so firmly and squarely in the historicist tradition, as I have just done, is a hazardous business. Scholars have been greatly divided about Weber's role in this tradition. Some maintain that he reformed it,⁵ others that he radicalized it,⁶ and still others that he did not belong to it at all. Chief among this last group of scholars are H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, who contend that Weber, properly understood, really belongs to the competing positivist tradition. Although they fully recognize that Weber was schooled in the historicist tradition, they insist that he later broke with it fundamentally, whether by intention or implication. In the introduction to their influential *From Max Weber*, still the most popular English translation of Weber's writings, Gerth and Mills argue that Weber's “basic style of thought” is that of “Western positivism.”⁷ Fundamental to his whole outlook, they say, was “the impulse of Comte's positivism,” which is “to fashion tools that would yield hindights serviceable to foresights: *savoir pour prévoir, prévoir pour pouvoir*.” They see Weber “in opposition to the tradition of Hegel and Ranke” because of Weber's “methodological nominalism,” which sees the individual rather than the whole as the sole source of action (56). The historicist tradition saw interpretation as holistic explanation, whereas Weber's aim was “to restrict the understanding and interpretation of meaning to the subjective intentions of the actor” (58). Weber's alleged “attachment to Western positivist thought” appears in his “scorn for any “philosophical” or “metaphysical”

elements in the social sciences,” and in his wanting to give these sciences “the same matter of fact approach with which the natural sciences approach nature” (59). Gerth and Mills note how Weber incorporated the theory of understanding into his sociology, but they stress that he transformed that theory through his “methodological individualism” (56). With historical hindsight, the intention behind Gerth and Mills interpretation is plain: in an age dominated by positivism, they wanted to make Weber respectable to an Anglophone public; hence they had to stress his break with the “metaphysics” of the historicist tradition and the affinity of his methods with those of the natural sciences. With Gerth and Mills we get a sanitized and spiffy Max Weber, one purged of all obscurantist and mystical Teutonic associations, and one presentable to an academy beholden to a very narrow conception of science. The image lives on.

There are fatal problems with the Gerth–Mills interpretation. It does not take into account Weber's own comments on the positivist tradition, which were scarcely favorable.⁸ It also underrates the basic respects in which he departs from that tradition. First, Weber endorses the neo-Kantian distinction between history and natural science as heterogeneous forms of enquiry. Second, Weber thinks that human actions have a meaning that cannot be reduced to, or explained entirely by, naturalistic paradigms of explanation. Third, although Weber rejects holism as a constitutive or metaphysical principle, he recommends it as a regulative or heuristic one, such that it is a goal of enquiry to study all the aspects of a culture in their unity, and such that one factor alone should never be isolated as if it were essential. And, fourth, Weber's neo-Kantian principles were completely at odds with the naive realism and empiricism characteristic of the positivist tradition. When we consider all these points, which we will demonstrate in later sections, it becomes necessary to qualify the Gerth–Mills reading, to say the least. But their interpretation contains other untenable assumptions, not least a caricature of the historicist tradition. Gerth and Mills assume that this tradition is burdened with metaphysics, and so they lump together Ranke with Hegel. They do not seem to realize that the historicist tradition from Ranke to Dilthey grew out of a reaction against Hegelian metaphysics and that it endorsed a strictly empiricist methodology. What has led Gerth and Mills astray here is that Weber was critical of a lingering organicism in the political economy of Wilhelm Roscher. It is important to see, however, that Weber felt Roscher was not true to his own intellectual roots in clinging to such a metaphysics, and that his own empiricist principles should have kept him from his organicism.⁹ That can be taken as a paradigmatic historicist argument. So to make Roscher into the paradigm of the historicist tradition for Weber is to make a very small Hegelian tail wag a very big anti-Hegelian dog.

Though one-sided, the Gerth–Mills interpretation also contains an element of truth. Though schooled in the historicist tradition and loyal to some of its defining doctrines, Weber was critical of it, and some of his criticisms brought him closer to the positivist

camp. In two fundamental respects he allied himself with the positivists. (1) Like any good positivist, Weber insisted that all human actions are explicable in principle according to natural laws; and he made no distinction between reasons and causes: reasons are the ends of an action, where an end is the representation of an effect of which the representation is a cause. (2) More significantly, Weber agreed with the positivist tradition about the need for complete objectivity and the need to remove values from scientific study. Although he believed that values are necessary in determining the ends and limits of enquiry, he insisted that enquiry be bound by strict logical norms. Weber's insistence on value-freedom in the natural sciences would later lead to a quarrel with the historical school, which held that political economy must, and indeed should, serve political and ethical ends.

So, in the end, Weber proves to be a hard figure to classify. Strictly or entirely he is neither positivist nor historicist; he is better understood as the synthesis of both. His thinking combines in a subtle and sophisticated manner the theory of *Verstehen* with naturalism, positivist objectivity with neo-Kantian value-orientation, historicist holism with positivist individualism. In Weber the great dispute between positivism and historicism, which had troubled the nineteenth century from Droysen to Simmel, came to a close, culminating in a grand reconciliatory synthesis, which preserved the justified claims, and censured the groundless pretensions, of both extremes. If this sounds too grand to be true—and too Hegelian to be Weberian—it was also Weber's intention. He was determined to find the *via medi* between the factions and disputes that troubled sociology and economics, and to stake out a position that could combine the strengths, and avoid the weaknesses, of opposing extremes. Whether he was successful in this ambitious endeavor is, of course, another matter.

While not a professional philosopher—he disavowed any such title—Weber could still be remarkably cogent and compelling in thinking philosophically. In peerless fashion he combined the historical breadth of Dilthey with the philosophical depth of Rickert. The position Weber arrived at by 1914 was indeed well ahead of its time. Collingwood, whose knowledge of the German tradition was meager and distorted by Croce, arrived at a position close to Weber's only in the 1940s; but then it had all the weaknesses of the early formulations of the doctrine of *Verstehen* that Weber had already seen and eliminated by the early 1900s.¹⁰ The rational core of Collingwood's theory was rescued in the 1960s and 1970s by Anglophone philosophers—Alan Donagan, William Dray and Rex Martin—by using normative concepts akin to those Weber had already proposed in 1914.¹¹

If Weber's achievement has not been properly appreciated, the problem lies partly in ignorance of his historical context, and partly in the density of his methodological writings. These writings were *pièces d'occasion*, composed in response to forgotten controversies, and their cramped style makes for heavy reading. There are three major essays: the 1904 "Die 'Objektivität' sozialwissenschaftlicher und sozialpolitischer Erkenntnis," which discusses the question of objectivity in the social sciences; the 1906 "Kritische Studien auf dem Gebiet der kulturwissenschaftlichen Logik," which deals with historical methodology; and the 1914 "Der Sinn der 'Wertfreiheit' der soziologischen und ökonomischen Wissenschaften," which defends the postulate of value-freedom.¹² In addition, there are two substantial polemical writings: *Roscher und Knies und die logischen Probleme der historischen Nationalökonomie*, where Weber settles accounts with two figures from traditional political economy; and *R. Stammlers 'Ueberwindung' der materialistischen Geschichtsauffassung*, which discusses the concept of normativity in the social sciences.¹³ Also fundamental for Weber's methodological views is the first chapter of his unfinished *magnus opus*, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*, "Soziologische Grundbegriffe."¹⁴ Unfortunately, there is no single writing that serves as an epitome of Weber's thinking as a whole. The student has to piece together his teaching from all these scattered sources.

The contemporary Weber scholar faces a formidable task: the reconstruction of the logic of his arguments from their original historical context. We are fortunate that, in the last decades, great steps have been undertaken in this direction. The old anachronistic image of Weber as the founder of modern sociology is gradually giving way to a more nuanced picture of him as a subtle and sophisticated thinker in the historicist tradition. The work of Friedrich Tenbruck and Wilhelm Hennis has been invaluable in revealing Weber's place within the tradition of political economy;¹⁵ and the studies of Thomas Burger, Rainer Prewo, Karl-Heinz Nusser and Guy Oakes have shed much light on his debt to neo-Kantianism.¹⁶ The work undertaken in this chapter, though it sometimes take issue with these scholars, attempts to carry on in the

path they have already cleared. It departs from them, however, in one significant respect: it attempts to broaden our perspective, so that Weber is seen not simply within the tradition of political economy but also within the historicist tradition as a whole. It is important to recognize that Weber was taking issue not only with local disputes in political economics, with Schmoller and Menger, but also with the historicist tradition as a whole, with Ranke, Humboldt, Dilthey, Rickert and Simmel. If we unduly restrict Weber's historical horizons, we easily lose sight of the broader significance of his ideas.

So much by way of preliminary orientation. We will now attempt to explain Weber's philosophical position in its historical context. But the reader should be warned: *Achtung!* we now enter the Weber sector! Its land is mined, its borders well-guarded. This newcomer into the Weberian sector has been astounded by its many quarrels, their intensity and intemperance. Nothing in Weber scholarship should be taken for granted. Nothing is uncontroversial. We will proceed therefore with caution.

2. Weber's intentions

The dictum that nothing in Weber scholarship is uncontroversial is especially true of his methodological writings, and it holds for even the most basic questions about them. There is an old controversy, which still simmers today, about why Weber wrote them in the first place. Some scholars have argued that Weber was passionately concerned about methodological problems, and that he intended to provide nothing less than a general foundation for the social sciences. Others, however, have contended just the opposite: that Weber had a deep aversion to methodological reflection, and that he never intended to provide anything so grand as a foundation for the social sciences. Where does the truth lie between these extremes? To find out, we should examine each view in more detail.

The classical statement of the first interpretation is Alexander von Schelting's *Max Webers Wissenschaftslehre*, which was first published in 1934.¹⁷ This was the first major study of Weber's methodological writings, and it was to have a lasting influence on Talcott Parsons and ultimately on Weber reception in the United States.¹⁸ According to von Schelting, Weber was passionately involved in, and deeply committed to, the study of methodological issues, and he was so for two reasons.¹⁹ First, he saw an investigation into the powers and limits of historical knowledge as the only means of

resolving the crisis of values at the close of the nineteenth century. Weber shared the general skepticism of his age toward metaphysics, which had failed to provide a rational foundation for our most basic beliefs and values; so as a substitute he turned toward epistemology or “logic”. Schelting implies that Weber was a classical neo-Kantian, and that he reasoned in the standard neo-Kantian fashion: since philosophy cannot provide us with *first-order* knowledge of the world, it should turn toward a *second-order* knowledge of the limits of knowledge. Second, Weber's personal ethic of responsibility demanded knowledge of (1) the consequences of actions and (2) the most effective means toward ends; hence, for moral reasons, such knowledge had to be placed on a secure foundation. So Weber's neo-Kantian heritage, combined with his ethic of responsibility, made it necessary for him to devote himself to methodological issues. On Schelting's reading, Weber was very much in the historicist tradition, and was concerned with the same fundamental issue as Ranke, Droysen, Dilthey, Simmel and Rickert: How is historical knowledge possible?²⁰

Though based on a thorough study of Weber's writings, Schelting's interpretation is not entirely convincing. Schelting fails to explain why Weber's ethic of responsibility requires him to develop something so elaborate and sophisticated as an epistemology of the social sciences. Why does knowledge of all the options and their consequences, and the most effective means toward one's ends, require such an epistemology? This seems a rather long way around the barn. These needs would seem better served by first-order ethical reflection and empirical investigation than a second-order epistemology. A central argument of Weber's “Wertfreiheit” essay is that we can determine the most effective means toward ends, if not the ends themselves, by empirical methods alone, so that there is no need to resort to metaphysics or religion, still less epistemology or logic.²¹ Furthermore, Schelting fails to consider Weber's many forceful disclaimers about methodological reflection in the preface to his “Kritische Studien”: that it is not necessary for empirical research; that one can be a good researcher and a poor methodologist and conversely; that good methodological principles derive from empirical practice rather than precede it.²² If all this is so, Weber should have been able to satisfy his ethical commitments without methodological reflection. Finally, Schelting has difficulty in accounting for some of Marianne Weber's testimony that Max resorted to methodological reflection only with the utmost reluctance, as the result of external commissions, and that he considered it to be only a painful distraction from the task of proper empirical research.²³ Her

testimony makes it hard to take at face value Schelting's description of Weber's "*passionate*" devotion to the topic. Despite its obvious problems, Schelting's interpretation, largely because of Parsons' friendly reception of it, became reigning orthodoxy. It was the guiding assumption behind Weber scholarship for generations that Weber intended to provide a methodological foundation for the social sciences. In the United States Weber acquired his reputation as the founding father of sociology not only because of his empirical research but also because of his methodology. The theory of ideal types, of value-neutrality, and the categories of social action were regarded as virtual prerequisites of the discipline. Finch and Shils translation of the methodological writings, Gerth and Mills translation of the essays, and Parsons' translation of the first part of *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*, all contributed to Weber's sterling reputation as the founding father of sociology.²⁴

There was, however, a "voice crying in the wilderness." In 1959 Friedrich Tenbruck published a brilliant article that questioned the general consensus.²⁵ Through a thorough study of the genesis and historical context of the methodological essays, Tenbruck succeeded in casting doubt on the assumption that Weber intended to provide a methodological foundation for the social sciences. This article of faith is completely at odds with Weber's real intentions, he argued, which were only to stake out his own position in the *Methodenstreit* of the 1890s. This arcane and archaic debate, Tenbruck implied, had little to do with modern sociology, and it had meaning only within the context of German political economy; it would be placing an absurd burden on Weber's methodological writings, which were mere *pièces d'occasion*, to expect them to support the methods and interests of modern sociology. According to Tenbruck, Weber had no special interest in methodological issues that transcended this particular debate. He disavowed any real expertise in "logic" or epistemology, and he was content simply to apply the theories of professional philosophers, especially the work of Rickert and Simmel. When we survey the whole of Weber's methodological writings, Tenbruck insisted, we find that they are essentially limited to the years 1904–6, and that what appears after that is merely vestigial. Weber never wrote these essays to satisfy some inner need, but only because he was compelled by some commission or editorial duty. Abhorring partisan debate about sterile methodological problems, Weber wrote these essays only with the greatest reluctance, and he quickly turned away from them to return to more substantive issues. Tenbruck concluded his

article with a remarkable reading of the “Objektivität” essay, which he regards as the culmination of Weber's methodological writings. He makes much of Weber's statement denying the possibility of objectivity in the cultural sciences. If Weber does not think that there can be objectivity in these sciences, Tenbruck asks, in what sense could he be attempting to provide a foundation for them? For Tenbruck, Weber's negative conclusion about the possibility of objectivity was his exit strategy, his escape from the arid and boring discussions about methodology. These discussions had been based on an illusion: the aspiration to achieve an impossible ideal of objectivity. Why, then, bother with them? Altogether, Tenbruck's article was a *tour de force*. Filled with lucid points about Weber's texts and a masterly knowledge of their context, it forced a complete reevaluation of Weber's intentions. Not surprisingly, it has its admirers and adherents.²⁶

But is Tenbruck's thesis correct? Was it never Weber's intention to provide a methodology for the cultural sciences? Was Schelting so wrong after all? For all its brilliance, Tenbruck's argument suffers from fatal flaws. One of them is the simple confusion of the *quid facti?* and *quid juris?*, an ironic lapse given Weber's frequent warnings about this fallacy. Even if Weber never intended his work to be foundationalist, it does not follow that his ideas cannot be seen in that logical role. However *historically* inaccurate, a foundationalist interpretation could be *logically* accurate, bringing out all the correct implications and relevance of Weber's ideas. But falling back on this purely logical point would be to concede too much to Tenbruck, whose chief weaknesses lie in his own chosen field: history. The weakest point in Tenbruck's argument is his bizarre chronology, his desperate attempt to confine Weber's methodological interests to the years 1904–6. This not only ignores Weber's earlier concerns about foundationalist issues, which are well attested by Marianne Weber,²⁷ but it also underplays the significance of his reflections on political economy in his 1895 Freiburg Address.²⁸ Even worse, it neglects Weber's longstanding commitment to rigorous standards in sociology, which was his chief motivation for founding the *Deutsche Soziologische Gesellschaft* in 1909. It should be clear that Weber's commitment to these standards meant that he had to take methodological issues extremely seriously; for, without having a clear and consistent position on these issues, such commitment would remain ungrounded and unguided. Sure enough, Weber's attempt to defend these standards led to his famous essay on “Wertfreiheit,” which was published in 1917.²⁹ But the most telling evidence against Tenbruck's chronology is two of Weber's later writings: “Ueber einige Kategorien der verstehende Soziologie,” which was

published in 1913,³⁰ and “Soziologische Grundbegriffe,” a late unpublished essay that eventually became the basis for the first chapter of *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*.³¹ As their very titles indicate, these essays have a foundationalist concern: their aim is to provide the central categories or basic concepts of a discipline. The “Grundbegriffe” essay is indeed systematic in structure, beginning with definitions and making divisions and subdivisions of concepts. This is a striking hole in Tenbruck's argument, because it is largely on the evidence of these essays that Weber's work has been regarded as foundationalist. Tenbruck's way of dealing with such obvious evidence against him is to resort to verbal gerrymandering: he claims that the main concern of these essays is not “methodological” but “theoretical,” i.e., they deal with concepts rather than methods.³² But this is a very narrow sense of “methodological,” to say the least; and it ignores their foundationalist intention.

What about Tenbruck's point that Weber intends to undermine methodological concerns by advancing relativism? It is best understood as a trick that Tenbruck plays on himself. Assuming that Weber does want to advance relativism, it scarcely allows him to escape methodological reflection. For how does one demonstrate relativism except through such reflection? Indeed, in the very beginning of this essay, Weber explains his need to ponder methodological issues precisely because the possibility of objectivity is such a problem (GAW 147–8; FS 50–1). It is in any case questionable, as we shall soon see, that Weber wants to undermine objectivity in the social sciences. Although he declares that there can be no absolute objectivity in the sense of a standpoint independent of all values and interests, he goes to great lengths to show that this does not mean that “everything is subjective” and that there are still standards for rigor and precision. The problem is then to explain what these standards are, how they can be upheld, and how they relate to the role of values in the social sciences. As Weber knew, the only solution to this problem is more methodological reflection.

In the face of all these problems with both Schelting and Tenbruck, what can be reliably said about Weber's intentions in writing his methodological essays? Who better to ask than Max Weber himself? There can be no substitute for a close look at Weber's own statements about methodological issues, which appear in the introductions to the “Objektivität” and “Kritische Studien” essays.³³ These statements support neither Schelting nor Tenbruck. They do not demonstrate Schelting's view that Weber was looking for a firm foothold to appraise morals and politics, still less that he engaged in these issues because of any sense of moral responsibility. They also do not support Tenbruck's thesis that Weber had little interest in methodological issues. They show that, though he indeed went into these issues with self-doubt and reluctance, he

nonetheless firmly believed there could be no escaping them. In both essays Weber states that, even if methodological reflection does not necessarily improve substantive research, it is a sheer necessity in a discipline which is in a state of crisis. Such a crisis occurs, he explains, whenever there are conflicting views about the ends and methods of a discipline, so that the researcher becomes unsure of himself and the direction of his own work. Weber makes it very clear that his own age is living through just such a crisis, and that the only remedy lies in methodological reflection. In the beginning of “Kritische Studien” Weber applies a revealing metaphor to his methodological writings: he likens them to a “*Krankheitsbericht*” written by the patient himself (GAW 215; FS 113). They are written by a patient and not a doctor because he is a practitioner in the field, not a professional “logician”. Nevertheless, it is telling that Weber acknowledges that he, as a practicing political economist, is sick, and that he has to cure himself through methodological reflection. What is the source of this illness? It seems that one source was the so-called *Methodenstreit* of political economy, which we will examine below. In the “Kritische Studien” Weber alludes to it when he says that the relationship between the theory and practice of history has been problematic for the past 25 years (GAW 217; FS 115). It seems that another source was the *Werturteilsstreit*, which we will also consider below. In the “Objektivität” essay Weber refers to it when he states he wants to investigate whether there can be objective standards in the cultural sciences, and whether it is possible to make value-judgments in them (GAW 147; FS 50–1). Both controversies made methodological reflection unavoidable, a disagreeable necessity. So, in the end, we have to locate Weber’s intentions somewhere between the extremes of passionate devotion and contemptuous aversion: the sobering recognition of necessity, the need to tread water amid crisis.

3. Methodenstreit

If Weber wrote his methodological essays in response to contemporary controversies, we do well to return to those controversies to understand them. The point and meaning of his theories become clear only when we *individuate* them, i.e., determine how they differ from the competing theories of his predecessors and contemporaries. Weber’s theories were parts of conversations, and to understand them requires reconstructing the role they played within them. This is no easy matter, however, because those conversations have been so forgotten.

One of the more heated of those conversations was the “*Methodenstreit*”, the dispute between Carl Menger (1840–1921), the head of the Austrian school of economics, and Gustav Schmoller (1838–1917), the leader of the so-called “younger historical school,” about the proper method for economics. This bitter dispute, which lasted for decades, divided the world of political economy into two warring camps.³⁴ The battle lines

began to form in 1883 when Menger attacked the methodology of the “older historical school,” whose main spokesmen were Wilhelm Roscher, Karl Knies and Bruno Hildebrand. The immediate issue at dispute concerned the powers and limits of theory in economics. Should economics follow a strict method of induction, remaining firmly within the limits of experience? Or should it also formulate universal laws and conceptual models for which there is no direct empirical confirmation? The older school of historians had insisted upon following a rigorous empirical method, according to which the economist should collect masses of inductive evidence from surveys and statistics before hazarding generalizations.³⁵ They held that the method of economics should be essentially the same as that of history, because economic phenomena are historical and, like all historical phenomena, individual and unique, so that it is necessary to understand them within their specific cultural context. Menger, however, believed that the method of economics could be the same as that of the natural sciences, and that economists could construct general laws and conceptual models that go beyond inductive evidence. Although the *Methodenstreit* focused mainly on the limits of theory in economics, one lingering source of tension was the old war between positivism and historicism. Since Menger saw no difference between the methods of economic theory and those of natural science, he seemed intent on bringing naturalism into the domain of social science. Hence the historians' resistance against him. The *Methodenstreit* was different, however, from other battles in this long war. This time positivism found itself on the defensive. Everyone agreed that the methods of history are distinct from but equal to those of natural science;³⁶ they disagreed solely over the question whether economics could *also* have an “exact” method like that of the natural sciences.

The opening salvo in the *Methodenstreit* was Menger's brilliant, if erratic, *Untersuchungen über die Methode der Sozialwissenschaften*.³⁷ Menger's work was essentially a defense of the rights of economic theory and an attack upon the hegemony of the

historical method. The historians' narrow and dogmatic insistence on historical research as the sole form of economic enquiry, Menger believed, had retarded the development of economic theory in Germany and Austria. Because of his solid reputation as an economic theorist, Menger's was a voice to be reckoned with. Menger was famous for his theory of marginal utility, which states that under certain conditions of exchange (e.g. both parties know their best interests) the price of a product varies in direct proportion to need.³⁸ Since this law was very exact and had proven so successful in making predictions, one would assume that the methods used in its formulation would be taken into account by economists. But it was precisely this method, Menger believed, that the prevailing historical school, to its lasting discredit, could neither comprehend nor allow. Hence in the *Untersuchungen* Menger's task was to explain and defend the method that allows economics to formulate such exact laws. In this respect he sees no fundamental difference between the method of the social scientist and natural scientist.³⁹ Both isolate "fundamental factors" from the phenomena and then find the precise relationships between them. In determining these factors and their relationships, the scientist does not simply generalize from experience or limit himself to inductions made from observations, because experience never provides perfect illustrations of them. Using a redolent terminology, Menger calls these concepts "types" and the relationships between them "laws" or "typical relationships." Attempting to eliminate the need for exhaustive induction, Menger then formulates the basic principle of theory construction as follows: "...*whatever is observed in a single case, must reappear under exactly the same objective conditions.*"⁴⁰ Hence Menger stresses that the theorist's constructions are purely hypothetical: they state that *if* A and B, then C, where it is possible that A and B never occur at all, or at least never in a pure state. Now given that these laws are hypothetical, it is completely beside the point to demand empirical verification for them. If the only generalizations allowed were those arrived at by enumerative induction, *all* laws would be impossible, not only in the social sciences but in the natural sciences too. All laws are universal, exceeding the evidence experience can provide, and they are never precisely applicable to experience, because they hold only under precise circumstances that never appear in reality. Here indeed was one of Menger's most telling points against the historians: that all their arguments against exact laws in the social sciences applied equally well against the natural sciences. Menger reminded the historians that there cannot be direct empirical verification for the most basic laws of mechanics, whose very formulation presupposes certain fictions, e.g. frictionless planes.⁴¹ After insisting on these basic points, Menger came to

the damning conclusion that the historians' rejection of abstract theory rests upon complete ignorance of the basic rules of scientific method.⁴²

Both the message and tone of Menger's book were sheer provocation. A response was sure to come soon. And, sure enough, Gustav Schmoller, a rising star of the new generation of historians, was quick to write a substantial review.⁴³ Schmoller went right to the heart of the methodological issues. He admitted that theory construction was a major weakness of the historical school; but he insisted that it was only the reverse side of its chief strength: careful examination of facts in their historical context. On no account did Schmoller want to reject the value of theory, or to underrate the role of abstraction in forming generalizations. He insisted that deduction was as important as induction in formulating and testing a theory.⁴⁴ However, Schmoller was convinced that Menger had not addressed some of the chief dangers involved in theory construction. He had begged the fundamental question: How does the social scientist determine the *fundamental* factors involved in any phenomena? Which factors should we isolate, and which are fundamental? We can determine them only *after* thorough empirical study, Schmoller insisted. If we attempt to determine them from a single instance, we would be like a chemist who dares to announce a general law after doing one experiment. So it was necessary to be more cautious, formulating laws on the basis of wider inductions. The chief danger of hasty theorizing, of constructing a theory before thorough empirical study, is that the theory has no application to experience. The whole purpose of a theory is to help us to understand the given, the particular, and not to play with abstractions for their own sake. Schmoller then pressed home his message about the danger of generalization with one final point, a favorite of the historical school: that Menger had to admit that his generalizations are not universal laws but are true for only one epoch and culture; not heeding this point is to commit the venial sin of all classical economics: the naive assumption that the laws of our culture and epoch are the laws for all cultures and epochs. In his defense of theory-construction, Menger had failed to recall the main reason why the historical school developed in the first place: it was a reaction against the excesses of abstract theory-building. So it was Menger and his allies, not the historians, who were hindering the development of science; they wanted to return to the age of scholasticism, where abstractions and *a priori* constructions ruled, rather than the hard work of empirical research. Schmoller's closing assessment of Menger was a stinging rebuke:

Menger is an acute dialectician, a logical head, an uncommon scholar, but in the same measure he lacks a universal philosophical and historical culture which allows him...to see things from all sides. He was right on many of the points he made against the historical school of German

national economics; and his investigations will be read with interest and profit by everyone who concerns himself with these things...But as a reformer he will fail; he is rather an epigone, who, schooled on Mills logic and the older abstract dogmatic economics, sees a small corner of his discipline as the whole building. We do not maintain that his corner has no place but only that from there one cannot fully see the whole; we do not take exception to him defending himself but to his schoolmasterly complacency, which takes the switch in hand and strikes everyone on the fingers who does not agree with him.⁴⁵

When Weber entered this undignified fray in 1904 the *Methodenstreit* was already decades old. However, its echoes were hardly faint. In the "Objektivität" essay Weber jokes about "the two sciences of economics" that correspond to the two sides in the dispute, and he announces his intention of resolving the main problem behind it (GAW 161; FS 63). Weber would settle his accounts with the historical school in his "Roscher und Knies," but it is primarily in the "Objektivität" essay that he most directly addresses the issues behind the *Methodenstreit*. Weber's discussion of the dispute is implicit and indirect: he never mentions the names of the disputants or refers to their works. Nevertheless, the allusions to Menger and Schmoller are unmistakable; and much of his argument makes sense only if we keep in mind specific passages from Menger's work and Schmoller's review.⁴⁶ Throughout his analysis of the dispute, Weber is intent on finding a middle path, a conciliatory position, to bring together the warring parties. If he defends Menger, he also chides him; and if he corrects Schmoller, he also commends him. Praise and blame are accorded in equal measure. We can only reconstruct Weber's position when we see how he agrees and disagrees with both parties.

While Weber attempts to find a balance, the most salient note in his discussion is struck on behalf of Menger. On one fundamental issue he sides firmly with Menger against the historians: the necessity of general theory in the social sciences. Menger was profoundly correct, he argues, to defend the rights of theory against the historians. He was right to insist that the social scientist not only can but must construct theories that go beyond the data of enumerative induction and that do more than simply describe experience. Following Menger's usage, Weber calls the theorist's general concepts and laws "ideal types." Ideal types are an indispensable tool for the social scientist, Weber tells us time and again. Without them the social scientist cannot simplify, and therefore understand, the infinite complexity of the empirical manifold. All understanding demands that we isolate fundamental factors, and that we attempt to determine the connections between them, and these factors and connections are never simply given to us in experience. There is no *a priori* guarantee that we isolate the essential factors, or

that our constructions are not empty abstractions; but simply to limit ourselves to the description of individual cases, to careful induction without generalization, leaves us with a mere multitude of data that makes all understanding impossible. Although historians are suspicious of general concepts, the problem is that they cannot avoid them; and if they are not careful about how they use them, they abuse them and wallow in vagueness (195; 94). There is no substitute for clear definitions, for precise concepts, in the social sciences, just as in the natural sciences. Throughout Weber's advocacy of Menger there lies a crucial but implicit neo-Kantian leitmotif: that to understand is to synthesize according to concepts. But if Menger was right to advocate theory, he had a false conception of it, Weber argues. Menger has a much too crude conception of ideal types, and he makes two mistakes about them. First, he assumes that ideal types are copies of things when they are really only constructions bearing no resemblance to the original.⁴⁷ Menger makes this assumption when he argues that if we put together *all* the correct theories about any phenomenon we will be able to represent that phenomenon just as it is given to us in experience. It is as if concepts were partial pictures, like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, and that if we only put them all together we would get a perfect resemblance to the object, just as it is given to us. Second, by conceiving ideal types as natural laws, Menger, no less than the Marxists and the classical economists, hypostasizes them.⁴⁸ For Weber, ideal types do not correspond to natural laws, still less to laws of history, because they are only instruments, heuristic fictions, that allow us to understand phenomena. Noting these points is of the utmost importance. We miss what is characteristic of Weber's thought, and bring him too close to naturalism and positivism, if we think that his ideal types were inspired by Menger.⁴⁹ The basic differences are clear. While Menger understood types as copies or natural laws, Weber took them to be limiting concepts or heuristic fictions, which means, in Kantian terms, they have a strictly regulative validity.

In siding with Menger on behalf of theory, Weber was, of course, correcting the historical school. This becomes perfectly apparent at the close of the essay when Weber explicitly mentions his differences with "the outstanding representatives of the historical school" (GAW 208; FS 106). His tone is respectful, and he even calls himself one of the "children" of this school; nevertheless, he is outspoken in his belief that the school now belongs to history, the relic of an "ancient-scholastic epistemology." The chief error of this old epistemology, Weber explains, is that it conceives concepts as images of things, as if truth were the resemblance between a concept and thing. It is for this

reason that they cannot accept Menger's theorizing: his concepts are so abstract and artificial that they are no longer like direct copies of things. But the historian's own ideal—the complete faithful reproduction of individual reality—is for Weber a forlorn hope, a sheer impossibility, because we cannot ever completely depict anything in its full reality. The historians, he says, have still failed to learn the chief lesson of Kant's epistemology: that concepts are not images but simply instruments for the mastery of empirical data. If they only accept this point, Weber implies, they will lose their resistance to abstract theory.

Hence it was Weber's neo-Kantian epistemology that allowed him to keep a critical distance from both Menger and the historians. He found his middle path between these dangerous extremes by pointing out their faulty common premise: that concepts are images that somehow resemble reality. If the historians and theorists only dropped this assumption—if they only became converts to Kant—peace would prevail. The historians would cease to complain about Menger's artificial abstractions; and Menger would cease to flirt with naturalism, the source of all the historians' animus against him.

If Weber strikes his most salient note on behalf of Menger, he also strikes several more muted ones on behalf of the historians. If these notes are less pronounced, they are unmistakable all the same. As if to quell the historians' unease about the dangers of abstract theorizing, Weber stresses on three occasions that the purpose of constructing ideal types is only to understand empirical reality, to explain the individual actions and characters of history (GAW 193, 202, 214; FS 92, 101, 111). He insists that constructing ideal types is never an end in itself, but only a means for the understanding of the individual, which is the ultimate end of all historical enquiry. When theory is done for its own sake, he warns, it can degenerate into a scholastic exercise, mere "*Spielerei*" (193; 92). These points are crucial for understanding Weber's general intellectual position, for they show his abiding loyalty to the historical tradition. In effect, Weber was taking issue with Menger's contention that there are two equal and independent interests in economic enquiry: the understanding of the particular in history and of the general in theory. Like a true historian, Weber was giving priority to the understanding of the individual. Here, more clearly than elsewhere, he announces his membership in the historicist tradition and shows why he still calls himself one of its "children".

On one final point Weber sides with the historians, and it concerns a decisive motif of his work as a whole. In their polemics against the classical economists, the historians would often argue that it is a false abstraction to treat self-interest as the sole motive for economic conduct, and that it is also a false abstraction to treat the economy as a self-sufficient realm, enclosed from all cultural influences; they insisted that all the other values of a culture went into economic conduct, which was inseparable from a culture as a whole.⁵⁰ In his polemic against Menger Schmoller reiterated this

point.⁵¹ And here Weber sides with Schmoller. We find him in the “Objektivität” essay stressing, in the classical historicist manner, the interdependence of all aspects of a culture (GAW 169–70; FS 70–71). No single factor within a culture could be set forth as *the* essential one, as the one upon which all others depend; a culture is an integral whole, all of whose aspects are interdependent. Weber made this point explicitly against the Marxists; but it was also an old historicist trope against the classical economists, with which Weber was in full agreement. This meant that self-interest as an economic motive could be mixed with the most profound religious and moral convictions. This was, of course, one of the central motifs of Weber's *Die protestantische Ethik und Geist des Kapitalismus*. This work was as much a polemic against the classical economists as the Marxists; it was indeed a conspicuous application of one of the oldest teachings of the historical school: that all aspects of a culture are interwoven.

4. Defining the cultural sciences

Like all his predecessors in the historicist tradition, Weber faced the problem of defining the cultural sciences and how they differ from the natural sciences. In the course of his reflections on this problem he gave several definitions of the cultural sciences. Since these definitions are not synonymous or even co-extensive, and since Weber does not explain their interconnections, they pose the question whether Weber had a single coherent theory about the identity of the cultural sciences.

Weber's most sustained effort at solving this problem appears in his essay “Soziologische Grundbegriffe,” which later became the first section of *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*.⁵² Weber attempts to define specifically the subject matter of sociology, though his analysis is intended to apply to other cultural sciences as well, especially history. In the very first sentence he flatly declares that sociology is “a science that attempts an interpretative understanding of social action so that it can causally explain it in its course and consequences.” (GAW 542). According to this definition, the subject matter of sociology is “social action” (*soziales Handeln*). A *social* action is simply defined as one that is oriented toward other people. Action as such Weber defines as human behavior (*menschliches Verhalten*) to which a person attaches a “subjective meaning” (*subjektiven Sinn*). What does Weber mean by a “subjective meaning”? There is no more important concept to understand his concept of the cultural sciences. Unfortunately, he does not provide an explicit definition of it. The careful reader has to reconstruct his meaning from its context and other texts.

One illuminating example of what Weber means by subjective meaning appears in an interesting passage from his earlier 1907 article “Stammlers ‘Ueberwindung’ der

materialistische Geschichtsauffassung” (GAW 331–2; O2 109–12). Although Weber's exposition is skewed by his intemperate polemic against Stammler, this passage is among the very few in Weber's methodological writings where he directly addresses the question of meaning. It illustrates well, if only in a merely suggestive way, his general view about the fundamental role of meaning in the cultural sciences. He invites his reader to be an anthropologist in darkest Africa who observes the first encounter between a European and an African, during which they exchange goods. It should be evident, Weber thinks, that we cannot understand this exchange simply through describing its observable qualities, i.e., the facial gestures, the uttering of sounds, the movement of muscles. The essence of the exchange consists not in its physical or empirical properties but in the meaning that the actors ascribe to it. What is this meaning? Weber thinks that, on a strictly logical level, we as observers can understand its meaning in terms of some “idea” (*Idee*) that we attribute to it, where this idea has to be explained in terms of its implications or some system of thought (333; 112). But Weber insists that the meaning also has to be understood on the level of the actors themselves; *they* have to be aware of this idea and to act according to it. From their point of view, we can explain the meaning of the action in two senses: in terms of the norms that the actors impose upon themselves; and in terms of the purpose behind the exchange (334; 113–14). Judging from this example, the *meaning* of an action would be the purpose behind it or the norm that governs it; and the *subjective* meaning would be the purpose or norm that the agent ascribes to himself in contrast to that which is ascribed to it from some third-person point of view.

Another important clue about Weber's concept of subjective meaning comes from the second part of his article “Roscher und Knies und die logischen Probleme der historischen Nationalökonomie” (GAW 93; O1 152). While commenting on Simmel's theory of understanding,⁵³ Weber notes that he makes a distinction between two kinds of understanding: the understanding of a sentence or expression; and the understanding of a motive. In the first case, Weber says, we understand what is said, and in the second we understand the speaker. With some minor qualifications, Weber approves of Simmel's distinction, which resurfaces in a somewhat different context in *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*.⁵⁴ Simmel's distinction between kinds of understanding is important, Weber thinks, because it permits us to see a corresponding distinction between kinds of meaning. Since the objects of understanding are meaning, there should be different kinds of meaning according to the different kinds of understanding. Hence there is the meaning involved in a sentence or expression, and the meaning involved in someone's motives or reasons for action. So, fitting Simmel's distinction, there are two kinds of subjective meaning: *linguistic*, what a person says; and *purposive*, what a person aims to do. Both kind of meaning are the objects of interpretation, and therefore appropriate subject matter for Weber's science of “interpretative understanding.”

In his commentary to the English translation of *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*, Talcott Parsons interprets “subjective meaning” to be “the content of subjective states of mind or of symbolic systems which are ultimately referable to such states of mind.”⁵⁵ On Parsons' reading, subjective meaning is essentially mental content, i.e., intentional objects, whatever we think about or whatever we intend to do. *Subjective* meaning is therefore meaning insofar as it is the object of someone's thinking or willing and is not taken in complete abstraction from it, as in the meaning of a symbolic system, i.e., it is meaning insofar as a user or agent could be self-aware of it. If we interpret Weber's subjective meaning along these lines, then his general view would seem to be this: that the specific subject matter of the cultural sciences is *intentionality*, i.e., whatever a person intends to say or do. Since what a person intends to say or do requires interpretation, this would explain why Weber thinks that the cultural sciences have an “interpretative” methodology, i.e., one whose purpose is to understand meaning. Parsons' interpretation is attractive because it is broad enough to fit Weber's view that the objects of understanding are either sentences or motives. After all, an intentional object can be what people mean to say or what they intend to say or do.⁵⁶

While Parsons' reading is attractive, it also carries the risk of confusion. The problem is that it seems to attribute to Weber something like Brentano's thesis—widespread in the late nineteenth century—that the distinguishing feature of mentality is intentionality, i.e., the direction of consciousness toward an object, whether actual or possible, whether thought, felt or desired.⁵⁷ This would then commit Weber to Brentano's view that intentionality is the irreducible characteristic of the mental, so that he should then hold the doctrine that the cultural sciences, insofar as they deal with intentionality, have the mental rather than the physical as their object. The cultural and natural sciences would then be distinguished according to different realms of being: the cultural sciences would deal with the inner life of the mind, while the natural sciences would treat the external realm of nature. This was just the conclusion that Dilthey drew from Brentano's principle. So someone might infer from Parsons' reading that Weber should follow Dilthey in making the cultural sciences specific forms of psychology.

But as plausible as this inference appears, it would be a serious mistake to attribute it to Weber. While it is accurate to explain his concept of subjective meaning in terms of intentionality, Weber rejects Brentano's thesis that intentionality is the distinctive feature of the mind. Although Weber makes no explicit comments on Brentano, he

would almost certainly regard his intentionality thesis as a mistake, at best an unnecessary excursion into metaphysics, at worst a crude form of psychologism. Following Rickert, Weber thinks that it is a mistake to equate the realm of meaning or intentionality with that of the mental, as if intentionality should be the concern of psychology. In his view, the subject matter of psychology consists in mental *acts* or *events*, what someone does with their mind or what happens within it; but it does not deal with the *content* of these acts or events. Content is not a mental act or event; rather, it is what these acts or events are about. Such objects are peculiar because they are neither mental nor physical; it makes no sense to ascribe mental or physical properties to them. The proposition " $2 \times 2 = 4$ ", for example, does not think or get angry; nor does it have a weight, height or length. Rickert drew the distinction between meaning and the mental along the following lines: the meaning of a proposition, e.g., $2 \times 2 = 4$, is *intersubjective*, because it is the same for everyone who thinks of it; and it is also *eternal*, because it never changes and remains the same whenever we think about it. Mental acts or events, however, are *subjective*, because they are different in each person; and they are *temporal* because they are constantly changing, coming into being and passing away.⁵⁸ Because Weber, following Rickert, refuses to equate the realm of meaning with the mental, he refuses to endorse Brentano's thesis, and for the same reason he rejects Dilthey's view that psychology is the master science of the cultural sciences. As a result he also repudiates in clear and decisive terms any distinction between the cultural and natural sciences that formulates it in terms of an ontological distinction between the mental and physical, or the inner and outer. "The *logical* peculiarity of 'historical' knowledge in contrast to 'natural scientific' in the *logical* sense," Weber wrote in "Roscher und Knies," "has absolutely nothing to do with the separation between the 'psychic' and the 'physical,' between 'personality' and 'action' on the one hand and 'natural objects' and 'mechanical causality' on the other hand." (GAW 126; O1 185). For Weber, the ultimate problem with Brentano's thesis and Dilthey's psychology is that they are guilty of psychologism, i.e., they conflate the question of the origin of our beliefs with the question of their validity.⁵⁹ When we deal with the realm of meaning we are not concerned with its origins, the causal genesis of a belief in the mind, but with its validity, whether it is true or false, good or bad, beautiful or ugly. Firmly and explicitly, Weber would often affirm Windelband's and Rickert's distinction between the *quid facti?* and *quid juris?*⁶⁰ Thus Weber's subjective meaning definition of the cultural sciences would seem to make their characteristic subject matter the realm of intentionality, more specifically intentional objects rather than intentional acts. Whatever the problems with this

definition, it was not Weber's only one. He has two other definitions that also play an important role in his thought.

One of these appears in Weber's 1904 "Objektivität" essay where Weber states flatly: "The concept of culture is a value concept." (GAW 175; FS 76). Empirical reality has a cultural meaning for us, he explains, insofar as we set it in relation to some value. An object having cultural meaning is the embodiment or expression of value, whereas an object in nature is indifferent to value. So the distinction between natural and cultural science now runs parallel to that between facts and values: while the natural sciences examine facts, the cultural sciences investigate values. This formulation has clear Rickertian origins, appearing explicitly in Rickert's *Kulturwissenschaft und Naturwissenschaft*.⁶¹

Unfortunately, Weber does not explicitly connect this formulation with his subjective-meaning formulation. It is not difficult, however, to see a connection: because they are objects of judgment and will, values are a form of subjective meaning. They are one kind of intentional object, whatever we judge true or false, or whatever we desire or hate. Still, the formulations are not co-extensive, let alone synonymous, because values are not the sole form of subjective meaning, the sole kind of intentional object. Another form of subjective meaning, which is not reducible to values, at least in any straightforward sense, is linguistic meaning, i.e., those intentional objects that have to be explained in terms of propositions. Hence, the value formulation is much narrower than the subjective-meaning formulation. There is another more technical or systematic reason these formulations should not be regarded as equivalent. It is noteworthy that Rickert, whom Weber seems to follow on this point,⁶² distinguishes values from meanings. According to Rickert, meaning indicates or refers to value but it is not value itself.⁶³ Alternatively, we ascribe values to meanings; but values are not the same as the objects that have them.⁶⁴

Apart from the lack of consistency, Weber's second formulation suffers from another serious difficulty. When Weber states that the cultural sciences are about values he does not mean that cultural scientists, unlike natural scientists, make value-judgments, but only that they study phenomena that relate to values. Although Weber famously insists that the historian and sociologist must refrain from making value-judgments themselves, he also contends that the distinguishing characteristic of the phenomena they study is that it involves some relation to values. Weber thinks that he can in all consistency hold both doctrines, because, following Rickert, he distinguishes between having a relation to values (*Wertbeziehung*) and making value-judgments (*Werturteile*).⁶⁵ Such a distinction is pivotal for Weber, because it is only with it that he can maintain

both that the cultural sciences are value-free and that they study values. Unfortunately, however, the issue is more complicated than this. For in the “Objektivität” essay Weber argues at length that the cultural sciences concern values because the historian, sociologist or economist must *apply* values in selecting and defining his subject matter, and in setting the ends and limits of his enquiry (GAW 175–8). Without values, they cannot determine what, amidst the extensive and intensive infinitude of reality, is significant or worth studying. While this point is correct, Weber is going beyond the simple distinction between making value-judgments and relating things to values; for, in applying values to define his subject matter, the historian or sociologist is in effect making a value-judgment. We will examine in a later section how Weber intends to combine these two doctrines.

Weber's second distinction between the cultural and natural sciences has been sometimes criticized on the grounds that it postulates a false distinction between the cultural and natural sciences.⁶⁶ It appears to imply, quite falsely, that the natural sciences are completely objective, as if the natural scientist does not have to apply values in defining his subject matter and in determining the ends of his enquiry. While Weber does sometimes attribute an exaggerated objectivity to the natural sciences,⁶⁷ his second distinction can still be salvaged if we make it into a distinction between kinds of subject matter rather than enquiry. What Weber then means is simple: that the social sciences study values while the natural sciences do not. This is a perfectly plausible point, though it is often lost in the confusion. The source of the muddle is that the concept of “value-relation” is ambiguous. Sometimes it means simply studying values rather than making value-judgments, i.e., mentioning rather than using value-judgments. Sometimes, however, it also means applying values to determine the subject matter of investigation, i.e., whatever is worth studying. This latter sense is the opposite of the former because in applying values the social scientist uses them, i.e., he makes a value-judgment. It is astonishing that the concept of value-relation, which was introduced by Windelband and Rickert to avoid the use-mention confusion, has become the source of so much confusion itself. But both Weber and Rickert were themselves guilty of muddying the waters because they use the concept in both senses.⁶⁸ To avoid the confusion, we will here use the concept of value-relation (*Wertbeziehung*) to refer to the first sense, the concept of value-orientation (*Wertorientierung*) to refer to the second.

Weber's third formulation goes back to Windelband's classical distinction between the idiographic and the nomothetic sciences.⁶⁹ According to this distinction, the cultural sciences are idiographic because their chief concern is the study of the individual, while the natural sciences are nomothetic because their main interest is in

discovering universal laws. In “Roscher und Knies” Weber explicitly endorses this distinction (GAW 6–7; O1 58); and in his “Objektivität” essay he applies it on several occasions, virtually equating historical phenomena with “what is significant in its individuality”; there he argues in classical Rickertian fashion that in the social sciences general laws are not the ends but only the means to comprehend something individual (GAW 177–8; FS 79). This interest in the individual means for Weber, as it did for Rickert, that the cultural sciences are closer to concrete reality than the natural sciences. With their concern to find more comprehensive universal laws, the natural sciences become abstract, and so remove themselves from the concrete and determinate. Hence Weber, like Rickert, dubs social science a “science of reality” (*Wirklichkeitswissenschaft*) because it attempts to understand the characteristic uniqueness of reality (170; 72). The premise behind this view is Weber's firm commitment to nominalism, which is usually implicit but which surfaces in a revealing phrase from “Kritische Studien”: “...reality belongs to only the concrete and individual” (230; 129).

Although Weber adopts Windelband's view about the idiographic methods of the cultural sciences, he does not accept it at its face value and goes on to investigate the assumptions behind it. In his “Kritische Studien” he asks: What is it about individuals that makes them of special interest to the cultural sciences? Weber rejects the view, implied by Windelband, that the individual *as such* is the object of study. There is no special interest in individuals simply because they are individuals. It is impossible not only to give a complete description of any individual but also to provide an accurate account of how it differs from anything else. More significantly, it is not even *desirable* to provide such an account, Weber argues, because the most unique features of an individual are not necessarily the most important or interesting. If we were to consider the most singular traits of Bismarck, for example, we would have to focus upon his thumbprint (GAW 231; FS 129). There must be something more about the individual that makes it of interest to the cultural sciences, something that makes it significant and so worthy of study. What is this? Weber's answer falls back on his second formulation of the distinction between the sciences. What makes the individual significant, he argues, is its relation to values (231; 129–30). From the infinite richness of the manifold, we focus upon those traits that answer to our interests, which are ultimately guided by our values. Here, then, Weber's third formulation falls back upon his second.

In defending this view Weber rejects the competing theory of Eduard Meyer, according to which the significance of an historical individual rests upon its causal potency, the consequences of its actions upon history as a whole. This is a far too narrow conception of historical importance, in Weber's view. It is possible to have an interest in someone completely forgotten, someone who played no powerful role in the course of history, simply because he or she illustrates some more general truth. Weber complains that Meyer fails to observe an important distinction between two senses of the historically significant. Something can be historically significant because of its consequences, its effects in the causal chain of history, just as Meyer assumes. But it

can also be significant because, even though it has no such consequences, it still gives us *knowledge* of general facts. A pot shard, for example, is insignificant in terms of its consequences, though it can be very significant if it reveals important facts about a culture. Similarly, we might be very interested in the ancient Aztecs, whose culture has had no direct influence on our own, just because they provide a valuable comparison with our own culture. Weber explains that there are two fundamental questions to ask about any historical individual: What values does it embody? And what are its causes and effects? He insists that the first question takes priority over the second: before we bother tracing its causes or effects, we have to regard the individual as significant. Here again, then, Weber was falling back on his second formulation.

5. Critique of intuitionism

In his efforts to formulate an interpretative sociology, Weber had to do battle against two extreme doctrines, both of them still prevalent around the turn of the century when he began his methodological reflections. One extreme was positivism, which held that there is no basic difference in method between the natural and cultural sciences, and that human actions and mental life had to be explained on the basis of general laws like any event in nature. The other extreme was (for lack of a better word) "intuitionism", which claimed that there is a fundamental difference in method between the natural and cultural sciences, and that the only way to grasp the distinctive features of human action is through intuition or empathy. Both extremes had their advantages and disadvantages. The positivist upheld the importance of intellectual standards, demanding that the cultural sciences meet the same demands of rigor, precision and verification as the natural sciences; but his paradigm of explanation, the universal laws of the natural sciences, was notoriously reductionist, apparently doing no justice to the characteristic features of mental life. By insisting that we relive the mental life of others, the intuitionist seemed to account for just these features; but, given that empathy eludes conceptual precision and public verification, he failed to meet basic intellectual standards. The challenge facing Weber was to find a middle path between these extremes. Somehow, he had to establish a method of explanation that could do justice to the distinctive qualities of mental life and human action yet still uphold scientific standards.

We will consider in the next section how Weber dealt with positivism. We now need to look at his response to intuitionism. His main treatment of intuitionism is in sections II and III of "Roscher und Knies."⁷⁰ In these sections Weber passed in critical review the theories of Wundt, Münsterberg, Lipps, Croce, Gottl and Knies, who were all, in one form or another, intuitionists. Their theory of understanding consists in two basic premises: (1) that to understand a human action means to grasp it from within, to

see it from the standpoint of the agent, and that (2) we can do so only when we relive or empathize with the agent's experience. In Weber's opinion, the best exponent of this theory was Georg Simmel.⁷¹

What, for Weber, is wrong with intuitionism? He could accept neither its ontology nor its epistemology: its dualistic ontology was crude, its intuitionist epistemology naive. Still, there was, Weber believed, something profoundly right about intuitionism: namely, its recognition that human actions have to be understood from within, according to the standpoint of the agent. An interpretative sociology would have to build on this insight. The basic problem with intuitionism is that it formulated and defended this point with questionable epistemological and metaphysical means. Recognizing and building on this point ultimately does not require, Weber believed, either a dualistic metaphysics or an intuitionist epistemology. Since intuitionism resorted to metaphysics and appealed to intuition, it ultimately jeopardized rather than secured its main insight.

To uphold the basic insight of intuitionism, Weber embarks upon a sustained polemic against its epistemology and metaphysics. While this polemic is rather dreary and weary, a dutiful passing-in-review of all the latest versions of intuitionism, it is still penetrating and illuminating from a philosophical standpoint. Weber succeeds in pointing out some of the most telling problems in the intuitionist position; and, in doing so, he reveals some of the most important premises behind his own sociology. The precedent for Weber's polemic are two classics from the idealist tradition: Kant's critique of Schlosser in *Von einem neuerdings erhobenen Tone in der Philosophie*, and Hegel's critique of Jacobi in the "Vorbegriff" to his *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften*.⁷² We find in Weber the same emphasis on the necessity of discursivity as we do in Kant and Hegel, the same exposé of the flaws of the claims for intuition.

One of the basic themes of Weber's polemic is that it is impossible to separate interpretation from explanation. Some intuitionist accounts of interpretation went to great pains to distinguish it from explanation according to the principle of causality. Münsterberg, for example, had argued that subjectivity can be understood only from within, by reliving someone's inner experience, and not by seeking the causes of that experience; as soon as we seek its causes, we objectify it, making it another object in the external world, and so we fail to grasp its subjectivity.⁷³ Weber rejected Münsterberg's account of interpretation as simply unworkable for the historian. History is never just a matter of studying the inner world of the subject, of reproducing his thought alone; rather, it requires examining the subject's relation to the world, because it is in the world that his actions take place and his character is formed (GAW 78, 83; O1 136,

141). In any case, it is impossible to make a clear and clean distinction between interpretation and explanation, as Münsterberg supposes. We can often understand someone's speech, for example, only if we know the motives for an utterance; and to know these motives we must understand the causes, the genesis of the utterance (89, 95; 148, 154).

Another *leitmotif* of Weber's polemic is the sheer naivité of intuitionism. If it is taken literally, intuitionism assumes that empathy can actually reproduce the experience of the agent, as if the spectator can feel (something qualitatively identical to) what the agent himself felt when he acted. This is naive, in Weber's view, because it completely abstracts from what the spectator must bring to his subject matter in order to understand it; it is as if he were a passive sponge that could somehow creep inside the inner experience of someone else. When a spectator empathizes with an acrobat on a tightrope, for example, he does not really feel what the acrobat feels, nor is he even aware of what he himself would feel if he were on the tightrope. For what he feels, Weber argues, is inevitably conditioned by his specific interests and assumptions, which lead him to focus on one aspect of the object rather than another. Empathy, Weber contends, is not a pure intuition of the object that comes to us independent of prior concepts, judgments and inferences (GAW 107–8; O1 165–6). Whatever we intuit is conditioned and constituted by the interests and concepts by which we approach the world.

Weber's remarks on Croce's theory are especially instructive, because here he exposes two fundamental premises behind much intuitionist theory: its belief in bare particulars and its naive realism. Croce, and other intuitionists, held that particulars are simply given to us in all their unity and determinacy; they therefore have to be grasped through intuition, which alone grasps an object in its wholeness, unity and determinacy. We cannot grasp particulars through concepts, Croce argues, for several reasons: because concepts are *abstract*, missing the determinacy of the object; because they are *selective* and *partial*, focusing on one aspect of an object rather than its wholeness and unity; and because they are *relational*, seeing the object in its similarities with other things rather than as it is in itself.⁷⁴ Weber thinks that the belief in bare particulars, which underlies all Croce's reasoning, is untenable in the first place. True to his Kantian principles, Weber argues that particulars are not simply given to us but that their determinate identity is a construction of our mental activity (GAW 109–10; O1 168–9). We identify something as a particular only through the application of concepts, which are necessary to determine that it is this thing rather than another (104; 162–3). The apparent unity of the particular, which the intuitionist takes as given, is really the result of the mind's synthetic activity, which unites a manifold of impressions into a

single object. One basic error of the intuitionist position, Weber concludes, is that it presupposes the old picture theory of knowledge, according to which we know something to the degree that we copy it (113, 119; 173, 177–8). Since every object is infinitely rich, an indeterminate and indeterminable mass viewable from an indefinite number of perspectives, we can never simply reproduce its unity, wholeness and determinacy. The historian, like the natural scientist, has to come to his object with definite questions, interests and values before it becomes an object for him.

Pushing home his critique, Weber finds yet another basic error in the intuitionist position, which he indeed calls its “decisive mistake” (GAW 111; O1 170). This is the same confusion committed by the naturalist: the conflation of the *quid facti?* with the *quid juris?*, of genetic or causal questions with matters of validity or justification. The intuitionist is right when he holds that all knowledge begins with intuitions; but he is wrong when he goes on to assume that it ends with them. Intuition is indeed involved in the genesis of our knowledge, which must start from unreflective experience; but the problem is that it alone cannot *demonstrate* our knowledge. For that we need to resort to concepts, judgments and inferences. The intuitionist thinks that he does not need these discursive media because intuitions are immediate and self-justifying. But the problem of justification is not, Weber thinks, so easily avoided. It begins when someone, who is unsure whether they have the same intuition, asks what the intuition means; and it grows when someone, who claims a conflicting intuition, demands to know the grounds for the opposing one. As soon as the intuitionist attempts to identify and justify his intuition he has to fall back on the discursive media he was so anxious to avoid. For the identification of intuition requires concepts; and its justification demands finding and assessing evidence, i.e., the use of judgment and inference.

Partly what motivates and misleads the intuitionist, Weber explains, is the apparent certainty of inner experience. It seems that we can know ourselves as human agents better than we can know anything in the external world. After all, as Descartes' taught, I cannot doubt that *I* am a thinking being but I can doubt that *you* are one; and I can be mistaken about *what* I perceive but not *that* I perceive. This belief in the immediacy of inner experience resurfaces frequently among the intuitionists, who for these reasons made psychology the queen of the social sciences. In response to these claims, Weber admits that there is a sense in which the intuitionist can claim certainty for his own inner experience. This is the sense in which I am more certain of my own inner experience than the experiences of others, the sense in which I am certain *that* I am having the experience but not *what* this experience consists in (GAW 104; O1162). Although both points are true, they are still too weak to make inner experience the infallible source of empirical knowledge. For my inner experience to provide evidence for the construction of a theory, it is necessary that I describe it, that I explain in what it consists; and even the most basic description or explanation requires the application of concepts and generalizations. I have to isolate the experience, to show how it is similar to, and different from, other experiences; only then does it have the clarity and distinctness

necessary to be a source of evidence (103; 161). But in identifying and describing an experience for the sake of empirical knowledge, Weber points out, my own experience is no more privileged than the experience of others. It ceases to be subjective and private and becomes instead objective and public, like any other object of scientific enquiry.

Such was the breadth and depth of Weber's polemic against intuitionism that many of his contemporaries thought him to be a positivist. Indeed, nothing in the later positivist critique of the *Verstehen* tradition matches the thoroughness and rigor of Weber's polemic. But it is the fate of anyone who strives for the middle road that both extremes conflate him with the opposite extreme. For all the confusions and mistakes of intuitionism, Weber still wanted to rescue its basic insight. Although Weber rejected the psychologistic language of intuitionism, and its belief in an inner realm that would be reproduced through empathy or intuition, he still believed that there lay an important methodological principle behind it: namely, that the motives or reasons of agents have to be reproduced or reconstructed from within, that such reproductions and reconstructions are irreducible to general causal laws, or even a long conjunction or complex of singular laws. Such laws are indeed necessary to confirm the reconstruction of an agent's motives; but they are never sufficient by themselves to provide a *complete* understanding of a human action. To that extent, then, Weber accepts the intuitionist's point about the need to reproduce the agent's own "inner" standpoint; and to the same extent he was opposed to naturalism.

6. The limits of naturalism

Weber's account of the subject matter of the cultural sciences—in all its formulations—is intended as a counter against positivism. *Pace* the positivist interpretation of Weber, such opposition is the unmistakable purport of many passages of *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*. When, on the title page, Weber calls his discipline an "interpretative sociology" (*verstehende Soziologie*) he clearly aligns himself with the hermeneutical tradition and distances himself from positivism. And when, in sections 1 and 9 of the "Methodologische Grundlagen," he argues that the defining feature of sociology and history is their concern with the *subjective meaning* of actions, he plainly intends to distinguish them from the natural sciences, which, on his view, cannot provide an explanation of such meaning. Weber is indeed explicit in section 9 that a naturalistic explanation of human action, no matter how precise and probable, is never sufficient to understand its meaning. In other texts Weber's contempt for positivism is sometimes perfectly explicit: in "Roscher und Knies" he laughs at the "naturalistic vanity" that would make everyday truisms into scientific laws (GAW 112–13; O1 171–2); and in the "Objektivität" essay, he casts scorn on the "naive naturalistic monism" that there is a single form of explanation in the sciences (GAW 186; FS 86). The very definition of a cultural science, he writes in the "Objektivität" essay, means that its phenomena cannot be derived from "a system of laws, no matter how perfect" (175; 76). All

these passages—and many others could be cited—show, at the very least, that the positivist interpretation of Weber is problematic.

Granted that Weber was opposed to positivism, the question remains “Why?” Why did he reject the naturalistic paradigm as a complete explanation for human action? Why, precisely, did he think that the subjective meaning of actions is inexplicable by it? This question goes to the heart of Weber's position; but it permits no easy answer. The problem of what is right, and what is wrong, with naturalism concerned Weber in several of his writings, and he went to great pains to spell out his views in relation to contemporaries and predecessors. On this difficult question Weber attempted to walk the fine middle line between naturalism and anti-naturalism, and so his views are often conflated with one extreme or the other. Our task here is to spell out his middle position.

Advocates of a theory of understanding like Weber are often taken by their positivist opponents to be defending freedom from determinism. Their motive for insisting that understanding is a logically different form of explanation from the nomological paradigm, it is assumed, is their concern to exempt freedom from the causality of nature. While this is true of some champions of the theory of understanding—most notably Droysen and Dilthey—it is not the case for Weber. It is indeed in this respect that Weber departed most markedly from other thinkers in the historicist tradition. In “Roscher und Knies” Weber attacks relentlessly the position of Knies, Wundt and Münsterberg who defended the “irrationality” of human actions for the sake of freedom. The “irrationality” of human actions meant for them their “incalculability,” i.e., the fact that they cannot be predicted in principle according to natural laws. Weber regards this kind of theory as a serious mistake. The cost of defending freedom in this manner is that it is placed in a mysterious ontological realm above and beyond the natural world. It is as if human responsibility and dignity then depend upon their inexplicability. Weber traces this kind of theory back to Kant, whose theory of freedom as noumenal causality removed the will from the natural world (GAW 62; OI 120). In opposition to the Kantian view, Weber advocates a strict *compatibilist* theory of freedom; in other words, he argues that free action does not exclude but requires the principle of causality. An action is free to the extent that it is rational; and it is rational only if the agent can apply rules of causation that determine which effects follow from which causes (73, 132; 132, 191). An action that is irrational in Knies', Wundt's and Münsterberg's sense, Weber argues, is “the privilege of the insane” (67; 125).

True to his compatibilism, Weber affirms the possibility of a complete naturalistic explanation of human action. He is perfectly explicit that all actions fall under causal laws, and that they are, if only in principle, explicable according to them. In “Roscher und Knies” he declares flatly on several occasions that the historian's concern with the cause of an action is the same as that of a natural scientist, and that he too seeks the sufficient cause for an action, just as if it were a natural event.⁷⁵ He further contends

that the historian uses the concept of cause in a no less strict sense than the natural scientist. If we analyze the concept of a cause, Weber argues, we need to distinguish it from merely statistical laws, which simply note correlations between distinct sets of data. The concept of a cause, in its strict sense, involves two basic components: the concept of power or efficacy, of a cause producing an effect; and the concept of a regular or uniform rule connecting events (GAW 135–6; OI 196). When the historian applies the concept of cause to a human action, Weber contends, he presupposes both these elements: that the motive produces its effect; and that, under specific circumstances, there is a regular connection between this kind of motive and this kind of effect. Weber goes out of his way in “Roscher und Knies” to reassure his reader that he does not want to set down any limits on naturalistic explanation (57; 112). He says that it is in principle possible to find a naturalistic explanation for the most subtle and sophisticated piece of scientific reasoning, even if psychology is still far from providing such an explanation in practice. Weber stresses, however, that, though the historian presupposes a normal concept of cause, it is not his intention to formulate the sufficient causes of every individual action. All the factors that go into the sufficient cause of any specific action are so complex that the historian has to resign himself to selecting only a few that make an action more understandable. The historian does not attempt to show, therefore, the *necessity* of the action, i.e., to demonstrate how it must follow from the causes he assigns to it. For the cultural scientist as well as the natural scientist, determinism has to remain “a strictly *a priori* principle” (66; 123), i.e., a regulative ideal rather than a reality (136; 196–7).

In the “Objektivität” essay Weber argues expressly for the necessity of a causal explanation of human action.⁷⁶ Although the main interest of the historian is to understand individual human actions, his understanding of them still presupposes knowledge of general causal laws which he has to apply to specific cases. The historian has to determine the causal factors behind a specific concrete action; and to weigh the importance of any specific factor, he needs to know what its consequences are in other cases, i.e., he needs to know some general law (GAW 179; FS 79). Hence without knowledge of universal laws, knowledge of the specific causes of concrete actions would be impossible. After stressing the necessity of causal explanation in the cultural sciences, Weber then pushes the argument a radical step further: he denies that there is any difference in principle between purposes and causes: a purpose is for him simply “the representation of an effect that is the cause of an action” (183; 83).⁷⁷ Teleology, for Weber, is not different in kind from efficient causality. When we say that human action is for the sake of purposes, what we mean is that the idea of the effect becomes

the motive for the cause. Reasons, for Weber, function as causes when they are the motives for action.

Such is Weber's advocacy of the causal explanation of human action that he appears to be a pure positivist. The only difference between Weber and positivism, it seems, is that Weber has a theory of singular causality, according to which the aim of causal explanation is to account for individual rather than typical events or actions.⁷⁸ But such an interpretation would be a serious mistake, failing to take into account how Weber thinks understanding is logically different in kind from causal explanation. As much as Weber wants to uphold the validity of the principle of causality he also wants to stress its limits. The principle of causality is for him only a *necessary*, never a *sufficient*, condition of the understanding of human action. This point becomes very clear from some decisive passages in "Roscher und Knies" (GWA 61; OI 117–18), and the "Objektivität" essay (GAW 175; FS 76). In both essays, just after he has stressed the power and necessity of the causal principle in explaining human actions, Weber abruptly turns around and focuses upon its limits. For Weber, the crucial point is that the causal principle cannot explain human values. It is one thing to explain an action according to its causes; and it is quite another to assess its validity according to norms. Here Weber falls back upon the neo-Kantian distinction between the *quid juris?* and the *quid facti?* To illustrate his point, he asks us to suppose that psychology has advanced so far that it is possible to assess the precise neurological causes behind the reasoning of a mathematical theorem; that never suffices to determine whether or not that theorem is true (61; 117). Why? Because there is a fundamental distinction in principle between determining causes and assessing validity, which no amount of causal explanation will ever surmount. As Weber puts it in "Roscher und Knies": "There is absolutely no bridge that leads from the purely empirical analysis of a given reality with the means of causal explanation to the affirmation or denial of the validity of some judgment of value..." (61; 117). Hence, for Weber, the fundamental distinction between causal explanation and interpretation is that between distinct kinds of activity: explaining according to general laws and evaluating according to general norms. These are distinct because laws attempt to explain what *is* whereas interpretation attempts to assess what *ought to be*. Interpretation is no more reducible to explanation than "ought" to "is", an imperative to a statement of fact. According to this account, then, the distinction between explanation and interpretation has nothing whatsoever to do with an ontological distinction between kinds of being, no matter how we construe these forms of being, whether they are the mental and physical, the inner and outer, the noumenal and phenomenal, the archetypal or ectypal. Everything that falls within

the realm of being—in all these different forms—is explicable according to the law of causality; but matters of value simply do not fall into any realm of being at all.

As we have explained Weber's position so far, it still seems terribly abstract and artificial. Someone might admit that there is a difference between determining causes and assessing reasons; but then he might ask what this has to do with the explanation of human actions. We can have a better idea of Weber's meaning when we consider his own example of how we would understand a specific human action.⁷⁹ If we want to understand, for example, the battle of Königgratz in 1866, we have to reconstruct the ideal strategy of both Moltke, the Prussian commander, and Benedek, his Austrian opponent. In other words, we have to imagine how each would have acted if he had complete knowledge of his own situation and that of his opponent, if he had total command over his troops, and so on. On the basis of this reconstruction we can compare what should have happened with what in fact did happen, and then better determine the real causes of Moltke's victory and Benedek's defeat. The crucial point to see here is that understanding an action involves *a hypothetical reconstruction of the agent's reasoning*. To understand it means to assess it according to some ideal of what a rational agent would do under those circumstances, where this ideal is formulable in terms of a practical syllogism. This practical syllogism would take the form: "I want X; Y is the only means toward X under circumstances C; therefore, I should pursue Y." The explanation would consist in showing that the agent's action conformed to such reasoning, or it would give the causes why it did not do so. But in either case we need to have in mind the ideal, the practical syllogism, to have a full understanding of the action.

So when Weber stresses the difference between interpretation and explanation what he has in mind is, in part, the difference between practical reasoning and causal explanation. To reason practically presupposes the application of causal laws, to be sure, but it is not one and the same as explaining an action by applying a universal law to it. When I reason "I want X; Y is the only means toward X under circumstances C; therefore, I should pursue Y," I assume that Y is the sufficient or necessary cause of X under C; but the reasoning itself is not the same as that of "covering law": "Whenever conditions A hold, then B happens; conditions A now obtain; therefore B will happen." The practical syllogism is not reducible to the covering law because of its imperative or normative element, which tells us what the agent should or ought to pursue.

For these reasons, Weber attacks any attempt to conflate interpretation with causal explanation. To make such a conflation is for him the old sin of psychologism. When I reconstruct an agent's reasoning and make it comprehensible to me, he argues, I do not therewith assume that the agent has actually as a matter of fact reasoned in this manner, either consciously or subconsciously. To make this assumption would be like

confusing the laws of logic, which have a solely normative validity, with the processes of reasoning. Weber makes this point forcefully in *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*:

...The meaning (*Sinn*) of a piece of reasoning is not "psychic". The rational reflection of an agent whether a definite action according to specific interests is necessary to achieve certain ends or not is not one whit more understandable through any psychological considerations. (§1.I.10)

By way of a summary, we should distinguish Weber's anti-naturalism from two anti-naturalistic doctrines with which it is often confused. One of these doctrines states that the explanation of human action amounts to singular causal explanation, according to which explanation in the social sciences is unlike explanation in the natural sciences insofar it does not involve *general* laws; the explanans of singular causal explanation is some *singular* phenomenon, an *individual* action or event, not a *typical* phenomenon, as in the natural sciences. The other doctrine states that the explanation of human actions is essentially teleological, involving reference to human purposes, which are distinct in kind from causes. Weber does not accept either doctrine. He rejects the former because, by itself, it does not amount to a difference in principle from other forms of naturalistic explanation. Singular causal explanation still conforms to the nomological model, because other phenomena relevantly similar to the singular cause should also be a cause; the law is more specific but it differs in degree and not in kind from other causal generalizations. Weber also rejects the latter doctrine because, as we have seen, he is happy to identify purposes with causes. Where Weber differs from both these doctrines is in stressing the *normative* dimension of the explanation of human actions. This normative dimension appears in the form of a practical reasoning, a practical syllogism, which presupposes, though it is never reducible to, the operation of natural causes alone.

7. Ideal types

There is no more influential, and no more controversial, aspect of Weber's methodological thought than his theory of ideal types. The theory is still a central topic in discussions about the methodology of the social sciences; and so, not surprisingly, there has been a significant body of commentary upon it, which has interpreted it in the most diverse ways. But on purely historical grounds the theory is also of the first importance. It was at the very heart of Weber's thinking. It was the essence of his solution to the *Methodentreit*. Yet, for all its importance, Weber gave the theory only the sparest exposition. The most substantial account appears in a section of the "Objektivität" essay; there are also a few pages devoted to it in the "Wertfreiheit" essay and *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*; but there is nothing more. Weber's brief and dense account of his theory left his commentators plenty of room for conjecture and quarrel.

Weber, it is well to note, did not invent the ideal type. Ancestors of the concept appear already in the younger historical school. Schmoller would use the term "type" in a very general sense to designate all recurrent and similar phenomena, and, no less

than Weber, he insisted that it was one of the essential tasks of the economist to formulate types.⁸⁰ Georg Jellinek, a political historian and friend of Weber, would use the term “ideal type” to designate a standard of perfection to measure existing realities.⁸¹ Weber's own use of the concept, however, is closer to Menger than to Schmoller and Jellinek. Menger would refer to “types”, which are class concepts, and to “typical relationships”, which are laws.⁸² Weber appropriated Jellinek's term to designate what Menger called types and typical relationships.

Perhaps because he thought it was so familiar to his readers, Weber does not bother to provide an explicit definition of the ideal type. His best positive statement about it appears in the “Objektivität” essay: “a construction of thought for the measure and systematic characterization of individual contexts which are significant for their uniqueness” (WGA 201; FS 100). Now and then he refers to the ideal type as a “conceptual construct” (*Gedankenbild*), “a fiction”, “a utopia” or “a limiting concept” (*Grenzbegriff*) (191, 194; 90, 93). But these phrases raise more questions than they answer. Rather than providing a technical definition, Weber seems more concerned to prevent misunderstandings, and so he is more forthcoming about what the ideal type is not. He is very firm that the ideal type is not a generic concept (*Gattungsbegriff*), i.e., a general concept that summarizes the common features of various phenomena (201–2; 100–1). If this were the case, the ideal type would subsume an individual under a universal, just like a natural law, and so fail to apply to the individuals that are the subject matter of history. Weber is also clear that the ideal type is not an average, a typical magnitude that can be determined by statistics (202; 101), and that it is not an hypothesis but a heuristic device to formulate hypotheses (190; 90). Finally, Weber is careful to distinguish between the ideal type and a normative concept that specifies some standard of perfection; the ideal type is “ideal”, he explains, in a strictly logical sense, and it does not attempt to determine what ought to be (192–3, 200; 91–2, 98–9).

Discussions of the theory of ideal types tend to analyze the different meanings of the concept, which Weber allegedly failed to distinguish. All kinds of distinctions have been made, and it would be easy to multiply them. For the true aficionado, Weber's theory has even been formalized.⁸³ It is doubtful, however, whether these distinctions apply to the real historical Weber, whose conception of theorizing was too flexible, pragmatic and open-ended to bother with a rigid typification of all the forms of

ideal types.⁸⁴ Our interest here is in the historical Weber, and more specifically the reconstruction of his theory in its historical context. From this standpoint the important question to ask is: *What purpose* did the theory of ideal types serve? We need to identify the problems Weber was facing, and then to see how the theory serves as a solution to them. We will not multiply distinctions beyond necessity, and make only those warranted by Weber's context itself.

Weber's theory of ideal types was meant to solve two basic problems, both handed down to him by the historicist tradition. One problem was the classical conundrum of historical knowledge. Namely, if the subject matter of history is individual, how is it possible to know it by discursive means, i.e., by general concepts? The purpose of Weber's ideal type was thus to close the infamous gap posed by Lask's "*hiatus irrationalis*."⁸⁵ This is a point on which Weber would lay great stress in his "Objektivität" essay: "The goal of ideal-typical concept formation is always to make explicit not the generic features but, conversely, the individuality of cultural phenomena." (GAW 202; 101) And with even greater firmness Weber writes emphatically at the close of the essay: "... nothing should be more sharply emphasized than the proposition: that the final aim of conceptual and critical work is solely and exclusively the knowledge of the *cultural significance of concrete historical contexts*" (GAW 214; 101, Weber's emphasis). Weber laid such great emphasis on the point because he was worried that thinkers of the historical school would misconstrue his advocacy of ideal types as a defense of pure theory for its own sake. That was the historicists' chief objection against the theoreticians, which Weber feared could land on his own doorstep. Once this point is taken into account, it becomes clear how misleading it is to say, with Parsons, that the theory of the ideal type was meant as a critique of the historicist tradition and as a defense of generalization and theory construction.⁸⁶ Weber was indeed defending the role of theory-construction; but he insisted repeatedly that it was merely a means whose ultimate end is the illumination of the individual.⁸⁷

Weber's theory of ideal types was also meant to be his solution to the problem of understanding human action. This problem took a specific form for Weber: How to find a middle path between naturalism and intuitionism. As we have seen, neither of these positions were satisfactory to him. While the naturalist used precise concepts by subsuming actions under universal laws, he failed to take into account the subjective meaning of an action, the significance it had for the agent himself. The intuitionist did justice to that subjective meaning by reliving it and empathizing with the standpoint of the actor; but he failed to convert his intuitions into precise conceptual form. Somehow, then, it was necessary to find a precise conceptual form to explain the subjective

meaning of human actions. This was the challenge confronting Weber around 1903, at the beginning of his methodological enquiries.

So the theory of ideal types faced a double task: the conceptualization of the individual and the understanding of human action. To some extent, these tasks coincided: a human action is an historical individual. But note that the converse does not hold: not all historical individuals are human actions. There are phenomena that can be regarded as historical individuals though they are not human actions. Feudalism, capitalism and Calvinism, for example, are all unique or singular phenomena, though they do not do anything and so cannot be called actions. Following the historicist tradition, Weber had a word for these phenomena: they were ideas (*Ideen*). With regard to them, the problem of conceptualizing the individual took a distinctive form: How to formulate the fundamental concepts of whole epochs, cultures and developments. One purpose Weber's theory of ideal types was to articulate, with precision and without hypostasization, "the ideas" that had been so important to Humboldt, Ranke and Droysen. Hence Weber wrote in the "Objektivität" essay: "... it is self-evident that one of the most essential tasks of every science of cultural life is to explain these 'ideas' for which people partly really, and partly only allegedly, struggle." (GAW 150; FS 53). The reference to the historicist tradition, marked by the use of quote marks, is implicit but unmistakable. In attempting to explain the logical point behind these ideas, Weber was carrying on, though through more subtle and sophisticated means, the historicist tradition.

Corresponding to the distinction between action and ideas, there are two very different kinds of ideal types, though they are not precisely distinguished by Weber himself. There are *models*, whose purpose is to understand actions; and there are *types*, whose aim is to formulate ideas.⁸⁸ The model understands actions by reconstructing the practical reasoning behind an action; and the type formulates ideas by determining the characteristic or unique attributes of a culture or epoch. Weber's theory has often been interpreted exclusively as one or the other; but in truth it is a mixture of both.

How did Weber's ideal types solve the problems confronting him? How, for one, did they conceptualize individuality? Weber sketches the answer to this question in the "Objektivität" essay. When the historian or sociologist constructs an ideal type, he explains, they attempt to focus upon not its generic or average but its characteristic or unique traits, viz., those features of capitalism that distinguish it from socialism or feudalism, or those doctrines of Christianity that separate it from Judaism or Mohammedism. Of course, these singular or distinctive properties are never simply given in reality, and they are determined only by a process of abstraction and comparison. We never find, for example, an economy that is capitalism in its purest form. But, if this is

so, how does the ideal type conceptualize the individual? As if to respond to this very question, Weber stresses that the construction of an ideal type permits the historian to grasp individuality by comparing reality with the ideal; he has better insight into the individual by examining the extent to which it not only approximates but also deviates from the ideal.⁸⁹ Such a comparison will then help the historian to determine the causes of a particular action or event. For example, if we know how the ideal general would act, i.e., one who has full command of healthy troops and complete knowledge of his enemy's resources, then we can determine why under specific circumstances the real general was defeated, viz., the sickness of his troops, the ignorance of his enemy's movements. It is only by imagining how such an ideal general *would have acted* under *hypothetical* conditions, Weber argues, that we are able to assess the degree of causal efficacy of particular events.

Weber laid down the most express guidelines regarding the use of ideal types to explain general social phenomena. They must never be confused, he warned, with forces or laws in reality itself. This mistake has been made by liberals, who think that their economic policies are laws of nature, no less than Marxists, who think that their theory of capitalism is an iron law of history. But Weber's strictures were also meant to apply against the theory of ideas of the historicist tradition, which had hypostasized its ideas by treating them as forces within reality itself. He noted that it is especially tempting to hypostasize ideas, because they are formulations for the governing ideals of an epoch, for the thoughts which dominated a mass of people or at least the most influential people. But he still insisted that it was necessary to distinguish between the idea as a causal factor in people's action and the ideal type, which was an abstraction from all the diverse actions of a multitude of particular agents. Christianity, for example, has been a powerful idea in motivating people's actions; but the idea as such never appears in a pure form in any single person. In all these strictures against hypostasis Weber reveals his true Kantian roots: he was essentially applying the classical Kantian lesson that constitutive principles must be read as regulative. Hence he characterizes the ideal type as a "limiting concept," i.e., a norm by which we judge appearances.

How did the ideal type solve the problem of understanding human action? To understand a human action from within, according to the agent's point of view, Weber argues, we have to begin, at least in the most common cases, with the assumption that the agent is rational, i.e., that he is attempting to achieve a specific purpose. The ideal type then determines (1) what the ideal agent, given such goals, would do to achieve them, if he were aware of all the options and their consequences, and (2) what, under the specific circumstances, is the most effective means to them. We then understand a human action, Weber thinks, only if we determine the specific ends of the agent, and only if we see why, under the circumstances, his action was the best or only means to

achieve them. Weber's theory of understanding works, therefore, by attributing a process of practical reasoning to the agent. The aim of the ideal type is to provide a reconstruction of the agent's practical reasoning; it understands the action, as Aristotle would say, as the conclusion of a practical syllogism. Such a reconstruction avoids the dilemma of naturalism versus intuitionism: a practical syllogism formulates intuitions into precise conceptual terms yet it is not reducible to natural laws.

As explained so far, Weber's theory seems to suffer from the standard objection against all normative accounts of human action: to explain an action by reference to norms, such as those involved in practical reasoning, leaves a gap between ought and is. The norm specifies what a person ought to think or do, but not what they actually think or do; and so any normative account is essentially incomplete. Weber was perfectly aware of this problem, and it was just for this reason that he insisted that any normative account of an action has to be supplemented by a causal account. A normative account of an action gives a reason for it; but that reason can explain the action only if it is also its cause. The point of ideal-typical explanation is indeed to overcome the gap between norm and reality by determining the causes that make an action deviate from or comply with a norm. Weber was as firm as Rickert and Windelband that it is necessary to distinguish between normative and factual questions, and that there is a distinction in logical kind between the *quid juris?* and *quid facti?* However, he insisted that the normative and the factual had to coincide in the case of the explanation of human action; any explanation had to be adequate on two levels: that of subjective meaning and that of causality itself. In the "Kategorien" essay Weber laid the greatest stress on the need to bring together both forms of explanation, and protested against any separation of "understanding" and "explaining", "reasons" and "causes": "What sociology would reject is the assumption that 'understanding' and 'explanation' have no relation to one another ..."⁹⁰

The question remains whether Weber's ideal-type theory slants the explanation of actions toward a model of instrumental rationality. Weber seems to take the ideal form of explanation as an action where the agent chooses optimal means toward his ends, and where he determines his ends by assessing all their options and their consequences. This kind of explanation, he writes, has the highest degree of self-evidence for us. But if this is the case, the theory seems very narrow, failing to account for other forms of action. According to Weber's own classification, there are four kinds of action: purposive rationality (*Zweckrationalität*), where an agent chooses the most effective means toward his ends and appraises the consequences of his actions; value rationality (*Wertrationalität*), where the agent accepts an absolute value regardless of its consequences; affective actions, where an agent is driven by emotion alone; and, finally, traditional action, where he does an action simply because it is an established practice. The problem is that Weber's theory seems to take only the first kind of theory as the

measure of rationality, as if the others were irrational. The default assumption of the enquirer seems to be that the agent's action will be rational in the purposive sense, and after that he will determine the “irrational” factors that in practice have led the agent to deviate from that ideal.

Weber himself was troubled by the objection that his own theory was too rationalistic, and his first response to it is that the ideal type does not imply that people's behavior is normally rational. While that point might be correct, it did not take account of the full force of the objection. For the question goes deeper: apart from any question of whether people normally act rationally, does it not beg the question by taking instrumental rationality as the model of rationality itself? Why is not value rationality, where an agent sticks to a principle regardless of the consequences, not equally rational? Yet again, though, it would be unfair to think that Weber commits this mistake; indeed, he goes to pains to avoid it. It is noteworthy that in his essay on “Wertfreiheit” he is anxious to declare that actions should be judged not only by their instrumental but also by their intrinsic value (GAW 514; FS 24). He then argues that it is impossible to prove that someone who acts according to absolute values regardless of the consequences is in some sense irrational (530; 38). Far from being skewed toward instrumental rationality, he indeed reminds us that, from a strictly logical standpoint, there could be ideal types even for irrational or self-defeating behavior (535; 42). In *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* he insists that, though normally explanations do *begin* from the starting point of instrumental rationality, that assumption is made only for the sake of convenience and not because it can claim any form of epistemic priority or privilege. He then warns against the danger of rationalistic explanations in the instrumental sense.

However problematic, when it is viewed from the perspective of the historicist tradition Weber's theory of ideal types amounts to a singular achievement. Despite its vagueness, it realized some of the central goals of that tradition though without having to buy into its questionable metaphysics. It provided a middle path between naturalism and intuitionism, an explanation of human action that did justice to both subjective meaning and causation. It also salvaged the sense behind the theory of ideas, though without having to adopt the metaphysics of organic forces. Ironically, the ideal type was the realization of Hegel's methodological ideal: the concrete universal. For the ideal type was no less oxymoronic: it was an “individual concept”—one that could be a universal and yet account for the particular. Armed with this tool, Weber seemed to do the impossible, to achieve what the historicist tradition had never done: leap over the *hiatus irrationalis*.

8. The value of value-freedom

One of the most controversial aspects of Weber's methodological thought is his principle of value-freedom (*Wertfreiheit*) in the social sciences. Since Weber announced this principle in 1909 in the *Deutsche Gesellschaft für Soziologie*, it has been the source of

controversy, and still today it has its passionate defenders and detractors. Because of his reputation as a founder of sociology, Weber has been, and continues to be, the central figure in contemporary debates about the role of value-judgments in the social sciences.⁹¹ After nearly a hundred years of controversy, it should not be surprising that these debates have their own logic and that they now have little to do with the Max Weber of history. Both Weber's defenders and detractors have misunderstood him. Assuming that his aim was to abolish all values from the social sciences, his critics have charged him with positivism; for the same reason, his supporters regard him as the savior of scientific objectivity from political ideology. It is important to see, however, that Weber never intended to purge all values from the social sciences, and that, as a neo-Kantian, he insisted on their role in the creation and conduct of enquiry.

Weber's *Wertfreiheit* thesis is misunderstood unless it is seen together with his *Wertorientierung* thesis, according to which the social sciences are created and governed by values.⁹² This means that both Weber's critics, who insist on the role of values in the social sciences, and his defenders, who demand removing values from social sciences, have got Weber wrong. His own position was much more subtle and sophisticated than his interpreters allow, and it remains of interest today precisely because it manages to combine the principle of value-freedom while still recognizing the role of values in science.

Precisely how Weber combines these two views we will investigate in section 10. Our task now is to examine the origins and background of the *Wertfreiheit* thesis.

Weber's value-freedom thesis has to be understood in the context of a dispute about the role of value-judgments in the social sciences, the so-called *Werturteilstreit*, which took place in the early 1900s.⁹³ This dispute began in 1909 in the Vienna meetings of the *Verein für Sozialpolitik*, an organization devoted to the social and economic education of the middle class. The president of the *Verein* was no less than Gustav Schmoller, the leading figure of the historical school of economics, with whom Weber had already tangled during the *Methodenstreit*. Now, though, Weber would wrangle with Schmoller in a somewhat different role.⁹⁴ For Schmoller was not only the defender of a strictly historical methodology in economics, but also the spokesman for "ethical economics", according to which economics should not only study ethical values but also be guided by them. Weber had already set forth his position on value-judgments in 1904 when he, along with Werner Sombart and Edgar Jaffé, took over the editorship of the *Archiv*

für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik. The first section of Weber's "Objektivität" essay, where he lays down the policy guidelines for the journal, states his case for value-freedom in the social sciences. Given the difference in their views, it is not surprising that Weber would soon clash with Schmoller. Sure enough, a brief first skirmish took place in the 1905 session of the *Verein* in Mannheim, though it led to no major breach. In the 1909 Vienna meetings of the *Verein*, however, the dispute became public and battle lines were formed. The spark that ignited the controversy was a paper by Eugen von Philippovich, Weber's predecessor in the Freiburg chair, on productivity in the national economy. Weber and Sombart criticized the paper on the grounds that the concept of productivity, which was closely connected with that of national prosperity, was a covert value concept that should have no place in economics.⁹⁵ Apparently, Weber and Sombart expressed their views vehemently, giving offense to the more conservative members of the society. The *Verein* threatened to fall apart into opposing factions. Schmoller, as president, called for moderation and patience and did his best to show a unified front to the public.⁹⁶ A special closed session of the *Verein* was called for to discuss the question. But that session, which met January 5, 1914, only led to more heated dispute and a solidification of the factions. For the debate at the special session Weber had written a paper setting out his position, the draft for his "Werfreiheit" essay, which he eventually published in 1917 in *Logos*.⁹⁷ Weber's essay was in part a response to Schmoller's article "Volkswirtschaft, Volkswirtschaftslehre und ihre Methode,"⁹⁸ whose concluding section contained explicit criticisms of Weber's approach. No stranger to the arts of polemical provocation, Schmoller was waving a red flag before a bull. He charged Weber with "ethical purism", "fanaticism" and "puritanism" for wanting to purge values from political economy. If such a policy were to be implemented, he argued, political economy would become a barren study of prices and production quotas. When we consider the aims of the *Verein* it becomes obvious why Weber's value-neutrality thesis aroused such controversy. Weber was—whether by intention or implication—overturning all the organization stood for. He was essentially questioning the purpose of political economy as understood by Schmoller and other leaders of the *Verein*.⁹⁹ They saw economics basically as a political science, a *Staatswissenschaft*, whose

aim was to promote the general welfare and humanity of the people.¹⁰⁰ The goal of economics was not to increase wealth according to some abstract conception of human beings as self-interested agents—the conception of classical economics—but to promote the well-being of the citizens in a specific state according to its national goals and aspirations. Economics should never be conceived as an end in itself, as if its sole goal were to make money, but it should be seen as a means to an end, where the end is set by the moral and political ideals of a nation. To help achieve this goal, the political economist saw himself as a servant of the state; his task was to investigate the basic facts of social and economic life so that he could advise the government about the best course of action. The aims of the *Verein* essentially followed this conception of political economy. The goal of the *Verein* was to support and conduct research, so that it could recommend specific policies to the government. The real addressee of the *Verein* was ultimately, therefore, not the middle classes but the Prussian bureaucracy.¹⁰¹

Given such a conception of economics, Weber's value-freedom thesis could arrive only as a bombshell. If the *Verein* were to follow Weber's policies, it would essentially have to close its doors. To the traditional political economist, Weber seemed to be reviving the classical view that economics should be done for its own sake. It is no wonder, then, that Weber retreated from the *Verein* and formed his own rival association, the *Deutsche Gesellschaft für Soziologie*, which, he hoped, would be devoted to the ideal of value-free social science. But it was not to be. When the first meetings of the *Gesellschaft* also ended in bitter disputes about value-freedom, Weber was forced to resign. Weary from all the fighting, he declared himself the “Don Quixote of an allegedly unrealizable principle.”¹⁰²

The passion with which Weber argued for his “Wertfreiheit” thesis, and the utter break it involved with traditional political economy, leave us wondering why he adopted such a provocative thesis in the first place. What made this Don Quixote tick? The mystery only increases when we recognize another striking fact: that Weber was not always an advocate of value-freedom. On the contrary, in his 1895 Freiburg Inaugural Address, “Der Nationalstaat und die Volkswirtschaftspolitik,” he shows himself to be a spokesman for traditional political economy regarding the fact-value question. There Weber reminds his listeners that political economy is a *political* science, and that as such it is a servant of politics, which he defines in terms of the power interests of the national state.¹⁰³ He also reasons that, since the political economist is inevitably led to identify with the interests of either the state or the masses, it is illusory

to expect him to refrain from siding with one party or another.¹⁰⁴ So far is Weber from his later position that he does not hesitate to do exactly what he will later denounce: he makes value-judgments from the academic podium. He lays down precisely what government policy should be regarding the decreasing German population of the Eastern Prussian agricultural lands, viz., the government should systematically buy these lands to prevent them from falling into the hands of Polish peasants. Weber noted with satisfaction that Schmoller had made similar recommendations. All in all, the “Inaugural Address” was a stellar performance by a promising young professor who seemed to carry on the traditions of the historical school. Surely, it is not surprising that Schmoller was deeply impressed by it, convinced that Weber was to be his legitimate heir.¹⁰⁵

But Weber was soon to disappoint Schmoller. When he announced his “Wertfreiheit” thesis he effectively broke with traditional political economy. What led to this reversal in Weber's thinking? What made a stalwart spokesman for traditional political economy into a passionate advocate of value-freedom? The question goes to the very heart of Weber's thinking; but there is no clear answer to it. As usual, the issue is controversial.

Stephen Turner and Regis Factor have put forward the hypothesis that Weber championed his principle of value-freedom to support his nationalist politics.¹⁰⁶ Their interpretation begins from the assumption that Weber's principle serves his ultimate political value: the power of the national state. If the scientist were to refrain from his own value-judgments, he would not come into conflict with the state; indeed, he could better serve the ends of *Realpolitik*. Since the social scientist recommends no values himself, and since he determines only means to ends, he will be a helpful servant of the state in determining means to *its* ends. On this theory, then, the social scientist is something like a bureaucrat: he has no purposes or policies of his own but simply accepts whatever purposes or policies the government lays down for him.

Despite its apparent plausibility, there are fatal problems with the Turner–Factor thesis. First, it attributes to Weber attitudes like those of Schmoller, which he violently opposed. Second, though Weber was no liberal in the classical sense, and though he did believe in the power of the national state, he was still a passionate defender of academic freedom, the right to think for oneself, for both professors and students. Third, the empirical evidence shows us that Weber was concerned *to avoid* precisely what the Turner–Factor theory thinks he was seeking: the bureaucratization of the social scientist. What the Turner–Factor hypothesis sees as Weber's solution was in fact his problem.

Against the Turner–Factor hypothesis, I would like to propose an opposing hypothesis, one strongly supported by textual and historical evidence.¹⁰⁷ What motivated

Weber to move toward value-freedom, I suggest, was his concern for the autonomy of his discipline, its freedom from state control. The older and wiser Weber saw that if political economy were to remain the servant of the state, as he once advocated in the “Inaugural Address”, it too would inevitably succumb to the powerful forces of bureaucratization. Rather than setting their own agenda, political economists would have it set for them by the state. This was an especially great danger in Germany, of course, where all university professors were civil servants, employees of the state. Political economists might soon find themselves suffering the same fate as all those who “live from” rather than “live for” politics: they would have to do their masters bidding. In short, political economists were in danger of becoming bureaucrats, prisoners in “the iron cage,” specialists without spirit if not sensualists without a heart.

That Weber was worried about the dangers of bureaucratization already in the early 1900s there cannot be much doubt. Weber's chief statements about these dangers—*Parlament und Regierung im neugeordneten Deutschland* (1918) and *Politik als Beruf* (1919)—are from his later years; but his concern about the problem goes back much earlier, appearing famously toward the close of his 1905 *Die protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus*.¹⁰⁸ It was also in the same year that Weber clashed with Schmoller in a *Verein* meeting about an issue that concerned the merits of bureaucracy.¹⁰⁹ Schmoller was a great believer in the virtues of the Prussian bureaucracy, which he saw as a well-trained professional corps, standing above class and party interests, and devoted to the common good and enforcement of law. True to his faith, Schmoller, to prevent the formation of cartels, proposed placing government officials in supervisory boards of companies that had a capital worth more than seventy-five million marks. Weber voiced his strong opposition to this proposal, because it smacked of increasing state power and bureaucratization (GASS 399–403). Government power was no longer exercised through the sword on the battlefield but through mountains of ink and paper. Schmoller seemed to think that the bureaucrats on company boards would be men of judgment and discretion; but this only showed how old-fashioned he was; the bureaucrats of today were nothing more than “businessmen, matter of fact men” who would do only what they were told. They would dutifully execute government edicts and make the businessmen comply with them. Toward Brunnhilde, as Weber later put it, the bureaucrats would act more like King Gunther than Siegfried.

It was in the *Verein's* 1909 meeting that Weber's opposition to bureaucratization simply explodes. He begins in moderate tones by praising the older generation of political economists for their opposition against "the purely technological achievements of industrial mechanization" (GASS 413). But he then points out that, in supporting the present government, they are now in danger of supporting "mechanism on the level of administration and politics." Firmly and clearly, Weber expressed his fear that Germany was now turning into a vast bureaucratic state along the lines of ancient Egypt; only now it would be even worse because it was based on a more advanced technological foundation (413–14). The very idea that young people would now have to scramble for positions in a bureaucracy, where all would be beholden to their employer and where everyone would become a cog in a vast machine, Weber found too horrible to contemplate. Then, in strident tones, he denounced the faith of the older historians in bureaucracy: "This passion for bureaucracy...brings one to utter despair." (414). Increasing bureaucratization was inevitable; the crucial question was what could be done at least to limit its powers and "to save the last remnants of humanity?" So that there would be no tincture of a doubt, Weber concludes his speech by bluntly telling his colleagues what disturbs him about the politics of the older generation: "their uncritical glorification of bureaucratization" (415).

Weber was especially concerned that political economists would themselves become loyal and obedient servants of King Gunther. This emerges, obliquely but unmistakably, in two passages from his later 1914 "Wertfreiheit" essay, the chief statement of his mature attitude toward the value-fact problem. In one passage, heavy in ironic innuendo, Weber refers to the tendency in Germany, which is "glorified by the name of *Realpolitik*," for people to pursue success at all costs, even if it means abandoning moral ideals; he then goes on to say that he sees no reason why practitioners of empirical science should support such a tendency (GAW 513–14; FS 23). Here Weber was distancing political economy from the German state, which had become famous, especially under Bismarck, for its policies of *Realpolitik*. Just so that there would be no mistake about his position, Weber goes on to say a little later that the strivings of German culture toward an impossible ideal, which everyone esteems, does not derive from "the bureaucratic mentality of Confucianism." (514; 24). In the other passage Weber argues passionately against the view that only a few—namely, those who accept government policies and not "Marxists and Manchesterites"—should have the right to express their opinions on an academic podium (495–6; 7). If values are to be discussed, he argues, then all parties should have the right to do so, and no one should claim a privilege to do so because they happen to agree with the government. Weber was again targeting Schmoller, the great believer in bureaucracy, who was happy to accept the traditional role of political economy as the servant of the government. If this kind of view were to prevail, Weber claimed, the university would soon become "a state institution for the training of loyal administrators," which is not so much a "technical school" but "a theological seminary" without the dignity of religion (496; 7). These passages reveal clearly enough, then, Weber's concern regarding

growing bureaucratization, his fear that the social scientists could become mere servants of the state.

All this brings us to a rather ironic conclusion, that Weber's advocacy of value-freedom was all undertaken for the sake of a specific value: namely, intellectual freedom, the autonomy of science. The point behind the principle of value-freedom was to undercut the traditional link between political economy and the government, and to protect freedom of enquiry by placing social science in a self-sufficient realm immune from bureaucratic manipulation. That realm was called *Wissenschaft*, which still had a hallowed ring to it in the late nineteenth century. If the bureaucrat recognized that social science is essentially value-free, he would have to accept that it could not be his business to control it; social science could no longer be a servant of the state; but it also could no longer be a threat to it.

9. Arguments for value-freedom

After considering the purpose behind Weber's value-freedom principle, we should now turn to the justification he gave for it. What arguments did Weber give for this principle? Weber himself distinguishes between two issues regarding value-freedom: the *practical* question whether value-judgments should be permitted in university teaching; and the *logical* question whether they should enter into academic discourse (GWA 439, 497; FS 1, 8). Weber attempts to answer both questions in the "Wertfreiheit" essay. In each case he maintains that the social sciences should be free from value-judgments. The university lecturer should not attempt to teach specific values from the podium; and the social scientist should not attempt to derive evaluative conclusions from factual premises. Let us see how he argues for each conclusion.

Regarding the first question, Weber admits that it is ultimately a matter of value whether one thinks it is appropriate to teach values in a university (GAW 491; FS 3). The question cannot be settled, therefore, by strict logical reasoning. One has to *decide* between two competing conceptions of the university: one can see its purpose as the formation of character, the all-rounded development of the individual; or one can see its goal as simply specialized training in a specific vocation. In setting forth these alternatives Weber was alluding to an old debate in German education. All the classical thinkers of the *Goethezeit*—Fichte, Schiller, Goethe, Humboldt and the romantics—saw the goal of university education as *Bildung*, and they deplored the degeneration of the university into an institute for technical training. It is striking that Weber rejects this tradition; he tells us, frankly, that his preference is for the more modern technical conception (491; 3).¹¹⁰ He immediately explains that, in deciding for this option, he does not think that everyone should become as specialized as possible, a mere cog in a machine. But the problem is that this option is now the only realistic one in the

modern world. Weber thinks that the modern world is characterized by two fundamental tendencies: the growth in a plurality of values, of competing conceptions of the meaning of life and the highest good; and the rise of rationalization, whereby all life is subject to calculation. Both these tendencies have had the most profound impact on university life. The first means that the professor can no longer take for granted, as he did in the past, that there is a general consensus about the kinds of values he should inculcate in his students. The second means that specialization, as the most effective means of achieving ends, is inevitable, and that the university can no longer provide the all-rounded *Bildung* that it did in the past. Professors, like Schmoller, who still believed in the old humanistic education, Weber believed, were living in the past (494; 5–6). Given that the professor could no longer assume a consensus about ultimate values, and given that increasing specialization is inevitable, it was necessary to abandon, however admirable, the old humanistic ideal as a goal of university education.

Weber's conception of the modern world was decisive for his view of the purpose of education, and it is a crucial, if implicit, premise behind his principle of value-freedom. On its own, however, it is not sufficient to justify that principle. For, even if there is no consensus, why should the professor refrain from giving his opinion on the podium? Why not a plurality of values preached from a variety of lecterns? Weber's response to this question reveals the deeper values underlying his principle. Because of the pluralism of the modern world, each individual has to decide for himself how best to live or what faith to hold; the university lecturer therefore should not claim a kind of *ex cathedra* authority about these matters, which are best left to the individual's own decision and conscience (491; 3). Weber was again upholding, therefore, the value of intellectual liberty, which he now applied to the student. The very value that kept the university from infringing on the rights of the professor also meant that the professor should not infringe on the rights of the student. The threat to that liberty came from not only the government but also the professor himself should he start preaching his own values from the lectern. The problem with preaching from the lectern, Weber points out, is that it inevitably becomes *ex cathedra*. Since it is necessary for students to take some courses, the professor virtually has a captive audience (493; 4); and since the professor is also a specialist in a technical field, whatever he says seems sanctioned by science (492; 4). In the lecture hall there is no discussion; hence the professor can say whatever he likes without control or contradiction. But is not limiting the professor from voicing his views an infringement of intellectual liberty in its own right? Not at all, Weber insists. He is careful to explain that he does not mean to limit the professor's right to speak *outside* the university. In newspapers, in party organizations and in public meetings he should have the full right to express his views and to discuss them openly with others. It would be a complete abuse of the principle of value-freedom, he warns, to infringe on someone's rights in these contexts (495; 6).

Since Weber's chief concern in the "Wertfreiheit" essay is to resolve the logical rather than practical question, three-quarters of the essay are devoted to it. Regarding the logical question, it is important to take note of the limited parameters of Weber's

argument. He wants to show that value-judgments cannot be legitimate conclusions from factual premises; but he does not mean to banish all values from empirical science, because, as we shall soon see, he holds that they are necessary to define the subject matter of research and to set its goals and limits. But even for this limited objective Weber's argument is complex, involving several premises which are often confused with one another.

A major premise in Weber's argument is his sharp distinction between fact and value, "is" and "ought". Weber takes this distinction in its straightforward classical sense: that statements of fact do not logically entail statements of value; in other words, it is logically possible without contradiction to approve or disapprove, like or dislike, the same set of facts. After setting forth this distinction in the "Objektivität" essay, Weber does not hesitate to draw an important conclusion from it: "that it can never be the task of an empirical science to provide binding norms and ideals from which practical maxims can be derived." (GAW 149; FS 52) Similarly, in the "Wertfreiheit" essay, he insists that every empirical science should observe this distinction:

For an empirical discipline everything rests on this: that the validity of a practical imperative as a norm on the one hand, and the truth-value of an empirical matter of fact on the other hand, lie in absolutely heterogeneous spheres, so that the specific dignity of each is damaged when one fails to recognize this and forces both spheres together. (GAW 501; FS 12)

This simple distinction became a telling weapon in Weber's campaign against traditional political economy. Schmoller and his ilk held that the task of their discipline was to provide policy recommendations from empirical study. But Weber's distinction meant that any such effort was simply poor science: it was drawing conclusions beyond the evidence. In the "Wertfreiheit" essay Weber did not hesitate to drive home this lesson against Schmoller. This fallacy has been committed all the time, he wrote, and it appears especially in the work of Professor von Schmoller (WGA 501; FS 12). Not accidentally nor incidentally, Weber cited Schmoller's "Volkswirtschaft" article as an outstanding example of such fallacious reasoning.

Another crucial premise behind Weber's argument, which he would stress in the "Wertfreiheit" and "Wissenschaft als Beruf" essays, is that there cannot be any rational basis for a choice between ultimate values.¹¹¹ We cannot decide by reasoning, for example, whether it is better to turn the cheek or to resist evil. These are utterly opposed values; yet we cannot prove one right and the other wrong. "According to our ultimate standpoint, one is the devil and the other God, and the individual has to decide which for him is God and which the devil."¹¹² The modern world is characterized by a "polytheism of values," all competing with one another for exclusive hold over the individual. The fruit of the tree of knowledge, Weber wrote in the "Wertfreiheit" essay, is that the ultimate values in life, those which give it all its purpose

and meaning, rest on decisions by which the soul “chooses its own fate” (GAW 507–8; FS 18). This premise seems to be simply an expansion of the fact-value distinction; but by itself that distinction does not entail that there is no *rational* basis for a choice between values. All that it implies is that the choice between values cannot be based upon fact, where it is left open whether factual enquiry is the only form of rational discourse.

This gap in Weber's argument is no logical technicality. It becomes very problematic as soon as one considers the Kantian strategy for dealing with the “is-ought” distinction. Kant too followed that distinction; but he did not infer from it that there cannot be any rational basis for ethical choice. Although *theoretical* reason could never provide such a basis, *practical* reason could in the form of the categorical imperative, i.e., the demand that we test putative moral principles by seeing whether they can be consistent as universal laws. What is Weber's response to this Kantian strategy? Given his general attitude toward the powers of reason, one would expect that he rejects the categorical imperative on the usual grounds: namely, that it is “empty”, barren of practical results, because it amounts to nothing more than the demand for logical consistency, a requirement that any principle can satisfy. Rickert had endorsed this standard objection,¹¹³ and Weber seems, as he often did, to follow his example. It is striking, however, that in the “Wertfreiheit” essay, Weber adopts a somewhat different response to the categorical imperative. Rather than treating it as a purely logical principle, he regards it as a substantive normative principle in its own right (GAW 506–7; 16–17). It is normative because it implies such principles as treating others as ends in themselves, or doing unto others as one would have others do unto oneself. These normative principles cannot be based on sheer logic alone, i.e., non-contradiction or universalizability, because there is no contradiction in denying them or in universalizing their opposing principles, viz., if I make a policy of treating others as means to my ends, I make no mistake in logic though one in morals. Weber made this point in the context of arguing against Schmoller's contention that advocates of value freedom in the empirical sciences can accept only formal ethical truths.¹¹⁴ Weber's response to Schmoller is that the proper empirical scientist does not adopt even formal principles. He thinks that Schmoller is wrong to think that formal principles have no practical content at all; they do have a content, even if a minimal one, and for just that reason they have no place in social science. The reason that the social scientist has to drop even formal principles, Weber argues, is that there is an irreconcilable conflict even for them, and not just for more specific or substantive principles. Hence Weber believed that the choice of even a very abstract and formal moral principle, viz., the Kantian categorical imperative, is still not defensible by reason alone. So even if formal principles do have a content, there is no rational basis to decide between them. Hence, if only tacitly, Weber rejected the Kantian view that there could be a foundation in

practical reason for the choice between ultimate values. He assumes, in other words, that the only form of rational discourse is theoretical, and indeed that of empirical science.

But why does Weber assume this? Why, indeed, does he accept the fact-value distinction? What justification did he have for these crucial premises? His argument seems to hang, unsupported, in mid-air. Leo Strauss, for one, complained that Weber failed to provide any justification for his main premises. He conjectured that their source came from Weber's belief in "power politics", which was central to his tragic vision of life.¹¹⁵ "He had to combine the anguish bred by atheism (the absence of any redemption, of any solace) with the anguish bred by revealed religion (the oppressive sense of guilt). Without that combination, life would cease to be tragic and thus lose its depth."¹¹⁶ While Strauss's suggestion might be correct about the psychological motivation behind Weber's premises, it is not an accurate account of their logical basis. That basis, which Strauss does not locate, lies in Weber's voluntarism, his belief that the source of value lies in the will.¹¹⁷ Weber's ethical teaching is in the tradition of Montaigne and Hume, though he cannot fall back on faith, as Montaigne did, or on tradition, as Hume did. According to this voluntarist tradition, the will determines the ends of conduct, and reason has the power to determine only its means, so that there is no rational basis to decide between ends themselves. The most powerful writer in this tradition was, of course, Nietzsche, who was a major influence on Weber.¹¹⁸ Because of Weber's belief in the incommensurability of values, Strauss charges him with "nihilism"; but this is really little more than name-calling. Voluntarism is a powerful philosophical position, which is not easily refuted. Like Nietzsche, Weber had the courage to draw the proper conclusion from his voluntarism: that science cannot decide how we are to lead our lives; each individual has to decide for himself.

Besides the fact-value distinction and voluntarism, there was another third premise behind Weber's argument in the "Wertfreiheit" essay. This premise, though less explicit than the other two, still surfaces on two occasions (GAW 503, 526–7; FS 14, 34). Weber falls back on the old historicist principle, which had been invoked against the pragmatic history of the Enlightenment, that the historian should not judge past events, personalities, books, works of art according to *his* standards but that he should examine them according to *their* standards. The reason he should refrain from judgment is simply that he can better understand the past from *its* own point of view. But there was also, ironically, a value in doing this: it enlarged the self for it to see that there are other selves who think and act differently. In advising the historian to refrain from judgment, Weber

did not mean that he should be uncritical; like everyone else in the historicist tradition, Weber believed that the best criticism is *internal* criticism where a subject matter is evaluated according to its own intrinsic standards. He would appeal to the value of internal criticism in the “Objektivität” essay, showing how it is completely consistent with the principle of value-freedom (151; 54).

Weber was eager to make clear that his value-freedom principle did not mean that the social scientist should refrain from all discussion of values. In both the “Wertfreiheit” and “Objektivität” essays he explains how the social scientist can discuss values without committing himself to any value-judgment (GAW 148–50, 510–11; FS 52–5, 20–1). He could determine the means toward given ends, though he could not decide the ends themselves; he could determine the consequences of following a certain plan of action; he could pinpoint other options to following a specific course of action; and he could determine the precise meaning of the principles or ideals followed by an agent. In all these respects he would remain within the factual boundaries of his discipline; but in all these respects he could also help a statesman or businessman to make decisions. What he could not do, of course, is make the decision for the statesman or businessman.

Granting all the premises to Weber's argument, do they entail its conclusion? Arguably, they cannot, and precisely because of the fact-value distinction. The principle of value-freedom is a normative principle, and as such it cannot follow from any premises stating basic facts about the logic of discourse. Weber, it seems, has hoisted himself on his own petard. There is, however, an obvious Weberian rejoinder to this kind of objection: that given one wants to reason correctly and to acquire knowledge, one has no choice but to follow the value-freedom principle, because it is the necessary means to attain one's end. Weber admits that his whole argument assumes that knowledge is a desirable end that one ought to pursue. If, however, one admits this end, the principle of value-freedom becomes—so the argument would go—a necessary means to achieve it. Should one ignore the principle, one makes a *non sequitur* or judges the past by the standards of the present.

10. Objectivity and relativism

Just beneath the surface there lies a tension running throughout the whole of Weber's mature methodological thought. The tension derives from two of Weber's fundamental and characteristic doctrines. One of these is his doctrine of *value-orientation*, which states that there is no purely objective social science because all enquiry has to be conducted from the perspective of the enquirer, which is immediately directed by his interests and ultimately by his values. This is a view that Weber states most forcefully and fully in his “Objektivität” essay. The other is Weber's doctrine of *value-neutrality*, which demands that the social scientist refrain from all value-judgments and remain strictly within the limits of empirical research. This position Weber puts forward firmly and unequivocally in the “Wertfreiheit” essay. The tension between these positions seems obvious: the former demands that the social scientist have values to start his

enquiry; the latter demands that he have no values to acquire objective knowledge. Weber could not drop either position without surrendering a fundamental principle or ideal. The value-orientation doctrine comes from the heart of his neo-Kantian epistemology: that objective knowledge requires not a concept's resemblance with reality but its conformity with norms or values. The value-neutrality thesis is essential to Weber's attempt to make sociology a science, i.e., a discipline following objective standards independent of all the varieties and vagaries of social, political and religious opinion. Since these doctrines conflict but each is necessary, Weber faces an antinomy, a contradiction where both thesis and antithesis are based on solid grounds. Is there a solution to it? Or should we, as some scholars do, take it as evidence for a lack of coherence?

Whether resolvable or not, it would be a mistake to think that this tension runs so deep that it was hidden to Weber himself. He was fully aware of it and took great pains to resolve it. We shall have to take a close look at these efforts in a moment. However, it would also be an error to assume that this tension is easily avoided. Before we look at Weber's efforts to resolve it, we should first examine some of the first attempts to escape it, the illusory "quick fixes".

One such attempt is the old tired distinction between value-judgments (*Werturteile*) and the relation to values (*Wertbeziehung*). This distinction was first formulated by Windelband, and then used tirelessly by Rickert;¹¹⁹ Weber himself appeals to it in his "Wertfreiheit" essay.¹²⁰ Though this distinction is constantly confused, even by its inventors, it is really very simple. Essentially, it is a distinction between use and mention, between using or applying values and talking about them. Windelband, Rickert and Weber made the distinction do a lot of work, and it was duly applied to the present problem. It seems to resolve the tension between value-orientation and value-neutrality because one can now say that the social scientist studies values but does not use or apply them. Value-orientation, it seems, is only a matter of talking about values, not applying them. The sociologist, anthropologist or historian has to orient his enquiries around values, because they are the defining aspect of every culture; it is the orientation around values that makes both their enquiry and subject matter "significant." Nevertheless, the social scientist does not appraise, i.e., evaluate positively or negatively, the values of the culture; rather, he studies them neutrally and dispassionately. Whether he is studying the ritual of shrinking heads in New Guinea, the witchcraft trials in Salem, or the self-flagellation of monks in the Middle Ages, the anthropologist or historian tells the facts; he also explains why these people have such values; but, above all, he does not judge them. So, it seems, if we strictly follow the simple distinction between using and mentioning values we easily avoid the problem. In choosing and defining his subject matter, the social scientist does not have to commit

himself to any values at all; that commitment is made by his subject matter itself, by the values of the people living in the culture that he studies.

But a little reflection shows that this simple distinction cannot bear all the weight put upon it. It could work only if it satisfied both sides of the antinomy, only if it met the requirements of both the value-neutrality and value-orientation thesis; but it is clear that it does not do so. For the value-orientation thesis means that the social scientist not only talks about the values of others but also that he applies his own values. After all, it is only through *his* interests that he selects and defines his subject matter and that he poses the questions behind his enquiry. He cannot expect those tasks to be done for him by his subject matter, by the people in the history or culture that he is studying. There are several reasons why this is so. First, these people might not be fully self-conscious of their own values; they might be illiterate or they might not have handed down documents to us. Second, they could be mistaken, believing, for example, that the cause of drought is the wrath of the gods when it really lies in poor agricultural practices. Third, there might be many competing values in a culture, so that the outside observer has to decide for himself which is most important. For all these reasons, the social scientist has no recourse but to conduct his enquiry according to his own interests and values; he cannot alienate his autonomy and expect that to be done for him. As Weber summarized his predicament in the "Objektivität" essay: social reality is no more a given than natural reality (GAW 181; FS 82).

Another apparent solution to the problem comes from a theory of "transcendental values." This theory promises a science of the basic transcendental values, i.e., those values common to and necessary for all people who have values, whatever the cultural or historical differences between them. If the social scientist conducts his enquiry according to these basic transcendental values, his results will have an intersubjective validity; there will be no danger of social, historical or political bias, so that they will be recognized, as Weber puts it, "even by a Chinaman." This strategy appears to satisfy the requirements of both the value-orientation and value-neutrality thesis: there will still be values guiding social and historical enquiry, but they will be so broad that all people would assent to them, thus eliminating all partiality. The theory that there are such transcendental values, hovering above all the relativity of cultural difference and historical change, was first mooted by Windelband and then sketched by Rickert, though he too never developed it in any detail.¹²¹ It has been argued that Weber too endorsed this project, though the textual evidence is very slight and scarcely convincing.¹²² There is more compelling textual evidence that Weber could *not*

have approved such a project; for in both “Wertfreiheit” and “Wissenschaft als Beruf” he states explicitly and emphatically that there cannot be a logical basis to decide between ultimate values, and that every individual must “choose his own fate.”¹²³

Where, then, does this leave Weber? It seems he has to resign himself to a complete relativism. For if the social scientist has to apply values in starting his enquiry, and if these values are in irresolvable conflict, having no rational basis to decide between them, it then seems as if there will be many different, indeed opposing, perspectives in the social sciences, all of which are equally legitimate. The ideal of objective knowledge then proves illusory. Weber himself seems to accept just this conclusion in the “Objektivität” essay when he bluntly declares: “There is no absolutely objective scientific analysis of culture.” (GAW 170; FS 72). All the famous closing lines in that essay about the inevitable change of perspectives in the social sciences, about the lack of progress among them, appear to endorse the same point (GAW 214; FS 112). Understandably, because of passages like these, Weber has been taken as a complete relativist, not only about values but the social sciences themselves.

This was not, however, a conclusion that Weber himself was ready to endorse. Aware of the tension between his central theses, Weber went to much trouble in several of his essays to resolve it and avoid the implication of relativism. The main thrust of his efforts is to block the inference from value-orientation to relativism; in other words, he argues that just because enquiry depends on values, which are not rationally decidable, it does not follow that objectivity in the social sciences is impossible.¹²⁴ Value-orientation and objectivity are ultimately perfectly compatible. This is the purport of three key passages, which we summarize here.

The first passage comes from the “Objektivität” essay (GAW 183–4; FS 84). Here Weber argues that, although all values are “subjective” in the sense that they must derive from human choices and cannot be derived from facts, it does not follow that they are “subjective” in the sense that they are valid for one person but not another. He then goes on to explain that the choice of the object of investigation, and the extent to which it is investigated, depend on the values of the enquirer; however, he stresses that in investigating his object the enquirer has to employ certain norms and comply with

them. Weber suggests that though *what* we investigate, and *how far* we investigate, depends on our values, *how* we do so depends on intersubjective norms.

The second passage is in “Kritische Studien” (GAW 261; FS 159) where Weber distinguishes between the “primary” historical object, which is the individual selected and defined by our values, and the “secondary” historical facts and causes attributed to the object. The causes we attribute to the object we regard as objective, Weber says, because they are like all truths of experience. What is subjective is not the determination of causes but the delimitation of the historical object. Eduard Meyer is mistaken, therefore, when he thinks that we cannot have “any absolute unconditionally valid” knowledge in history.

The third passage is from the “Wertfreiheit” essay where Weber urges us to distinguish the truth-value of an empirical proposition and the validity of an imperative as a norm, because they are completely logically different (GAW 500; FS 12). This is the *locus classicus* of Weber's fact/value distinction. The straightforward implication of this distinction is that we can make clear “objective” statements of fact whatever our values. Whether I admire Napoleon or you hate him, we can still acknowledge the same basic facts about him, e.g., that he was the victor at Austerlitz.

The upshot of these passages is that Weber thinks that, though values are crucial in forming enquiry, they do not by themselves settle questions of empirical truth, which have to be decided by independent norms. Values seem to play four crucial roles: (1) they *select* the subject matter; (2) they *define* it; (3) they *interrogate* it, i.e., make the questions the enquiry is to answer; and (4) they *limit* it, determining the extent to which it answers its questions. But all of this, Weber holds, still does not provide knowledge of fact or causes, which have to be determined by independent norms. These norms, to which Weber only vaguely alludes, concern the assessment of evidence and the determination of causes. Whether there is sufficient evidence to draw a conclusion, and whether a cause is really necessary for an event to occur, are questions that have to be determined independently of the values of the enquirer. The distinctions Weber wants to draw here are at least *prima facie* plausible. Of course, there is no firm and clear borderline between them. An historian's values will often lead him, for example, to emphasize some aspects of a person's character over others, or to attribute causal efficacy to some factors rather than others. But when this happens historians are often charged with bias, lack of balance, and so on, which only proves Weber's point.

It is worthwhile here to formulate a distinction between two levels of enquiry which is implicit in much of Weber's argument. Familiar to all Kantians, this distinction is suggested by Weber himself in some of his more neo-Kantian moments. In the “Objektivität” essay he writes that “the transcendental presupposition” of every cultural science lies in the fact that we are cultural beings who adopt a specific attitude toward the world (GAW 180; FS 81). Following through with this suggestion, it seems that the scientist's value stance serves as a transcendental condition of enquiry. We can then distinguish two levels of enquiry. There is a *transcendental* level where the social

scientist determines what he wants to investigate, formulates his leading questions, and decides how much he wants to know; then there is the *empirical* level where he determines the basic facts and causes. It is clear that Weber thinks that values work on the transcendental level in starting an enquiry, and that the independent norms function on the empirical level in arriving at specific conclusions. This distinction settles the conflict between the value-orientation and the value-neutrality thesis because the former works on the transcendental level, the latter on the empirical level.

Seen from a broader historical perspective, Weber's distinction between levels of enquiry serves as his solution to the old dispute between Ranke and Droysen about historical objectivity. Weber's attitude toward Ranke was always ambivalent: he admired his artistry, his power of breathing life into the past; but he found Ranke's dictum about self-annihilation a naive, indeed impossible, ideal. Since the historian had to begin his enquiry with specific interests and values, he could never "extinguish himself" and enter into the very standpoint of his object. In this sense Weber sided with Droysen against Ranke; for he acknowledged Droysen's point that the historian has to approach his subject matter with the interests and values of his age. The closing passages of the "Objektivität" essay, where Weber states that each generation has to write history anew, read like pure Droysen. Nevertheless, with his principle of value-neutrality, Weber still preserved much of Ranke's old demand for objectivity. Ranke's insistence on objectivity, on telling the facts "how they actually happened," essentially meant that the historian has to be value-neutral, that he has to understand the past in terms of its own values instead of his own. Weber preserved enough of the norms of factual and causal enquiry to retain Ranke's talk about objectivity. The old dispute could be settled, then, if one only carefully distinguished between the levels of enquiry. Droysen was right on the transcendental level, while Ranke was correct on the empirical level. Confusion resulted only when these levels were mixed, i.e., when Ranke held that the objectivity of the empirical level is also possible on the transcendental, or when Droysen claimed that the partiality of the transcendental level also worked on the empirical. Although Weber himself never explicitly resolved the dispute in just these terms, it is the clear implication of his methodological reflections as a whole. It is just another case in point of how Weber resolved outstanding problems in the historicist tradition.

Notes:

(1) See David Zaret, "Max Weber und die Entwicklung der theoretischen Soziologie in den USA," in *Max Webers Wissenschaftslehre*, eds. Gerhard Wagner and Heinz Zippran (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1994), pp. 352–66.

(2) See "Der Nationalstaat und die Volkswirtschaftspolitik," in *Gesammelte Politische Schriften*, ed. Johannes Winckelmann (Tübingen: Mohr, 1958), p. 16. (Henceforth this work will be abbreviated GPS). Cf. Weber, *Political Writings*, trans. Peter Lassman and Ronald Speirs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 19 (Henceforth this translation will be designated LS).

(3) See his 1904 essay "Die Objektivität sozialwissenschaftlicher und sozialpolitischer Erkenntnis," in *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Wissenschaftslehre*, ed. Johannes Winckelmann. Fourth edition (Tübingen: Mohr, 1973), p. 208. (Henceforth this work will be abbreviated GAW). See also his 1909 "Verhandlungen über die Produktivität der Volkswirtschaft," in "Diskussionsreden auf den Tagungen des Vereins für Sozialpolitik," in *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Soziologie und Sozialpolitik*, ed. Marianne Weber (Tübingen: Mohr, 1924), p. 420 (henceforth GASS).

(4) Marianne Weber tells us that he had read Kant at twelve, and that at Heidelberg he went to the lectures of Kuno Fischer. See her *Max Weber: Ein Lebensbild* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1926), pp. 48, 70.

(5) This is the position of Fritz Ringer, *Max Weber's Methodology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), pp. 5, 60.

(6) This is the view of Wilhelm Hennis, "A Science of Man: Max Weber and the Political Economy of the German Historical School," in *Max Weber and his Contemporaries*, eds. W. Mommsen and J. Osterhammel (London: Unwin Hyman, 1987), pp. 25–70.

(7) H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, *From Max Weber* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1958), p. 44.

(8) See below, section 6.

(9) See Weber's "Roscher und Knies," GAW, p. 41.

(10) This point was not lost on one of Weber's better Anglophone critics. See W.G. Runciman, *A Critique of Max Weber's Philosophy of Social Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), pp. 30–1.

(11) See Alan Donagan, *The Later Philosophy of R.G. Collingwood* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962); William Dray, *Laws and Explanation in History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1957); and Rex Martin, *Historical Explanation* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977).

(12) All Weber's methodological writings have been collected in *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Wissenschaftslehre*, GAW (see note 3 above). The three major writings have been translated in *The Methodology of the Social Sciences*, translated and edited by Henry Finch and Edward Shils (New York, NY: Free Press, 1949) (henceforth designated FS).

(13) "Roscher and Knies und die logische Probleme der historischen Nationalökonomie," GAW 1–145; and "R. Stammers 'Überwindung' der materialistischen Geschichtsauffassung," GAW 291–359. "Roscher and Knies" has been translated by Guy Oakes, *Roscher and Knies: The Logical Problems of Historical Economics* (New York, NY: Free Press, 1975) (henceforth O1); and "Stammler" has also been translated by Oakes: *Critique of Stammler* (New York, NY: Free Press, 1977) (henceforth O2).

(14) *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1956). References to this work will be chapter and paragraph numbers, uniform to all editions. The earlier version of this chapter appears as "Soziologische Grundbegriffe" in GAW 541–81.

(15) See Hennis, "Science of Man," and *Max Webers Fragestellung* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1987) (translated as *Max Weber: Essays in Reconstruction* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1988); and Friedrich Tenbruck, "Die Genesis der Methodologie Max Webers," *Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie* XI (1959), 573–630.

(16) See Thomas Burger, *Max Weber's Theory of Concept Formation* (Durham, N.C. Duke Univ. Press, 1976); Rainer Prewo, *Max Webers Wissenschaftsprogramm* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1979); Karl-Heinz Nusser, *Kausale Prozesse und sinnerfassende Vernunft: Max Webers Fundierung des Soziologie und der Kulturwissenschaften* (Freiburg: Alber, 1986); and Guy Oakes, *Weber and Rickert* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1988).

(17) Alexander von Schelting, *Max Webers Wissenschaftslehre* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1934). The book has been reprinted by Arno Press, New York, 1975.

(18) See Talcott Parsons, *The Structure of Social Action* (New York, NY: Free Press, 1968), II, 579n1, where Parsons explicitly acknowledges his great debt to Schelting's work and pays tribute to him: "Secondary work of such quality is distressingly rare in the field this study has covered."

(19) See Schelting, *Max Webers Wissenschaftslehre*, pp. 1–12, 53–7.

(20) *Ibid.*, p. 71.

(21) GAW 508, 510; FS 18–19; 20–1.

(22) "Kritische Studien," GAW 217; FS 115.

(23) See Marianne Weber, *Weber: Ein Lebensbild*, pp. 272–3, 278, 319, 340. See Schelting's treatment of her testimony, *Max Webers Wissenschaftslehre*, pp. 6–7n. He claims that her description of Weber's methodological reflections as "*nebenamtlich*" is true only "externally" with respect to the time and effort he devoted to them compared with empirical research. But Schelting still has difficulty for justifying the "*Pathos*" and "*Leidenschaft*" he attributes to Weber.

(24) On Weber's role in the development of sociology in the United States, see Zaret, *op. cit.*, and G. Roth and R. Bendix, "Max Webers Einfluß auf die amerikanische Soziologie," *Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie* XI (1959) 38–53.

(25) "Die Genesis der Methodologie Max Webers," *Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie* XI (1959), 573–630. It is to be noted that Tenbruck later recanted and virtually reversed his position. See his "Die Wissenschaftslehre Max Webers," in *Max Webers Wissenschaftslehre*, eds. Gerhard Wagner and Heinz Zipprian (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1994), pp. 367–89. Since the errors of his earlier views are still so instructive, and since they provide a clear alternative to Schelting's interpretation, I have examined them here.

(26) See Wilhelm Hennis, *Max Webers Fragestellung* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1987), p. 10n15.

(27) See Marianne Weber, *Weber: Ein Lebensbild*, pp. 319–20. Tenbruck has as much difficulty with Marianne's testimony as Schelting. He takes her very seriously but only, it seems, when it supports his case; he exploits, for example, her many remarks about Weber's troubles in writing "Roscher und Knies." See Tenbruck, *op. cit.*, p. 627n11.

(28) On the importance of these reflections, see Hennis, *Webers Fragestellung*, pp. 45–8, 129–30.

(29) "Der Sinn der 'Wertfreiheit' der soziologischen und ökonomischen Wissenschaften," *Logos* VII (1917), 40–88.

(30) "Ueber einige Kategorien der vertehenden Soziologie," *Logos* IV (1913), 253–94.

(31) GAW 542–81.

(32) Tenbruck, "Die Genesis der Methodologie Max Webers," p. 580.

(33) See "Objektivität" GAW 147–8, 160–1; FS 50–1, 63; and "Kritische Studien" GAW 215–18; FS 114–16.

(34) For a general survey of the dispute, see Werner Hasbach, "Zur Geschichte des Methodenstreites in der politischen Oekonomie," *Schmollers Jahrbuch* XIX (1895), 465–90, 751–808. The *Methodenstreit* in political economy had little direct connection, historically or conceptually, with the other so-called *Methodenstreit* between Karl Lamprecht and the Berlin historians (Heinrich von Sybel, Friedrich Meinecke, Georg von Below), even though both disputes began in the early 1890s. The best account of this latter dispute is in Roger Chickering, *Karl Lamprecht: A German Academic Life (1856–1915)* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1993), pp. 145–283. For a briefer account, see Friedrich Jaeger and Jörn Rüsen, *Geschichte des Historismus* (Munich: Beck, 1992), pp. 140–6.

(35) See Karl Knies, *Die politische Oekonomie vom Standpunkte der geschichtlichen Methode* (Braunschweig: Vieweg, 1853), pp. 321–55; Wilhelm Roscher, *Grundriß zu Vorlesungen über die Staatswissenschaft* (Göttingen: Dietrich, 1843), pp. iv–v and §1. See also Roscher's *System der Volkswirtschaft* (Stuttgart: Cotta, 1894), I, 59–60, §26. This paragraph is explicitly cited and excoriated by Menger.

(36) Later, when the dispute became more heated, Menger abandoned his earlier claim that history and theory were equal and independent partners in economics; resentful at the intrusions of historians into economics, who behaved like "alien conquerors," he relegated history to the status of a "*Hilfswissenschaft*." See his *Die Irrthümer des Historismus in der deutschen Nationalökonomie* (Vienna: Holder, 1884), pp. 23, 25, 29, 31, 37, 46.

(37) Menger, *Untersuchungen über die Methode der Sozialwissenschaften und der Politischen Oekonomie insbesondere* (Leipzig: Duncker & Humblot, 1883).

(38) See Menger's own formulation in *Untersuchungen*, p. 56. He expounds his theory in more detail in his *Grundsätze der Volkswirtschaftslehre* (Vienna: Braumüller, 1871), pp. 172–9.

(39) Menger, *Untersuchungen*, pp. 37, 53.

(40) Menger, *Untersuchungen*, p. 40 (his emphasis).

(41) *Ibid.*, pp. 56, 58.

(42) *Ibid.*, p. 59.

(43) "Zur Methodologie der Staats- und Sozialwissenschaften" in *Jahrbuch für Gesetzgebung, Verwaltung und Volkswirtschaft* II (1883) 239–58.

(44) See Schmoller's later account of his methodology in *Grundriß der Allgemeinen Volkswirtschaftslehre* (Leipzig: Duncker & Humblot, 1900), p. 110.

(45) *Ibid.*, p. 251. Menger responded indignantly in his *Die Irrthümer des Historismus*, a bilious counterpolemic, which puts Schmoller in his place but does not clarify the issues of the controversy.

(46) Weber begins his discussion of the dispute at GAW 185; FS 85. The rest of the essay focuses on the issues of the dispute. The important argument at GWA 187–8 (FS 87–8) only makes sense if one keeps in mind Menger's argument in the *Untersuchungen*, pp. 64–5.

(47) This is an accurate account of Menger's views. See Menger, *Untersuchungen*, p. 14: "Wir haben eine Erscheinung erkannt, wenn das geistige Abbild derselben zu unserem Bewußtsein gelangt ist...." See Weber's argument at WGA 188, 194; FS 88, 93.

- (48) Weber makes this criticism directly against Marxists and classical economists; but given Menger's conception of general laws, he too is a target of criticism. See WGA 195–6; FS 94–5.
- (49) See Ringer, *Max Weber's Methodology*, pp. 51, 97, 102, 110, 171. In some vague sense Ringer is correct to point out the Weber was “inspired” by Menger; but he does not qualify this and goes on to advance an interpretation that scarcely distinguishes Weber from Menger's naturalism.
- (50) See, for example, Knies, *Die politische Oekonomie*, pp. 147–68; and Hildebrand, *Die Nationalökonomie der Gegenwart und Zukunft* (Frankfurt: Literarische Anstalt, 1848), I, 27–34.
- (51) Schmoller, “Zur Methodologie,” p. 243, 245.
- (52) “Soziologische Grundbegriffe,” GAW, pp. 541–81. This article was first published posthumously in 1921. An earlier formulation of some of its themes appears in Weber's 1913 article “Ueber einige Kategorien der verstehenden Soziologie,” *Logos IV* (1913), 253–94.
- (53) See above, chapter 12, section 4.
- (54) See *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*, Kap. I.I.5.
- (55) *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization* (New York, NY: Free Press, 1964), p. 89n3.
- (56) There is some textual support for Parsons' reading in an interesting, though very obscure, passage of Weber's 1913 article “Ueber einige Kategorien der verstehenden Soziologie,” which was the earlier version of the “Grundbegriffe.” See *Logos IV* (1913), p. 255. Here Weber defines action as “an understandable stance (*Sichverhalten*) toward objects specified by their (subjective) meaning.” The stance, attitude or relation to objects would be, of course, an intentional state, which is directed toward an object; and the subjective meaning would be the specific form of such a state.
- (57) Franz Brentano, *Psychologie vom empirischen Standpunkt*, ed. Oskar Kraus (Hamburg: Meiner, 1955), I, 112–13, 120, 124–5. This work was first published in 1874.
- (58) This point is not explicit in Weber, but it is fully explained by Rickert. See his essay “Urteil und Urteilen,” *Logos III* (1912), 230–45, esp. 237–9.
- (59) See “Roscher und Knies,” GAW 111, 123, 126.
- (60) See, for example, “Roscher und Knies,” GAW 111, 126; and “Kritische Studien auf dem Gebiet der Kulturwissenschaftlichen Logik,” GAW 225.
- (61) See Rickert, *Kulturwissenschaft und Naturwissenschaft* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1921), pp. 21, 28. See above chapter 10, section 3.
- (62) See Weber, “Kritische Studien auf dem Gebiet der Kulturwissenschaftlichen Logik,” GAW, 247–8.
- (63) See Rickert, “Vom Begriff der Philosophie,” *Logos I* (1910), 27.
- (64) See Rickert, *System der Philosophie* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1921), p. 113.
- (65) See chapter 10, section 5.
- (66) Runciman, *Critique*, p. 40.
- (67) See the passage in “Kritische Studien,” GAW 262; FS 180.

(68) See the passage in Weber's "Wertfreiheit" essay, GAW 511; FS 21–2, where he explicitly defines the concept in the latter sense, citing Rickert, who usually uses it in the former sense.

(69) See above chapter 9, section 5.

(70) GAW, 42–145. This edition will be cited in parentheses, followed by the corresponding numbers of the Oakes translation (O1).

(71) For Simmel's theory of understanding, see above, chapter 12, section 4.

(72) Weber was not following a Rickertian precedent in this respect. It is noteworthy that Rickert's own performance in this tradition, his 1920 *Philosophie des Lebens* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1920), would not appear until May 1920, months after Weber's death.

(73) Hugo Münsterberg, *Grundzüge der Psychologie* (Leipzig: Barth, 1900), I, 7–200.

(74) Weber cites (inaccurately) Benedetto Croce, *Lineamenti di una logica come scienza del concetto puro* (Napoli: Gianni, 1905), though only to say he is leaving it aside and will deal with it on another occasion (GAW 109n1). It is otherwise unclear to which text he refers. But the kind of epistemology he opposes can be gleaned from Croce *Aesthetic*, trans. Douglas Ainslie (Boston: Nonpareil, 1978), pp. 1–12.

(75) GAW 53, 64; O1 106–7, 121. Cf. "Objektivität" essay, GAW 163; FS 65.

(76) Weber's commitment to naturalism shows that it is mistaken to think that Weber anticipated the view that scientific laws are only statistical or probabilistic. See Toby Huff, *Max Weber and the Methodology of the Social Sciences* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1984), p. 45.

(77) It is a mistake, therefore, to think that Weber is advancing teleology as a distinct kind of causal explanation. See Huff, *op. cit.*, pp. 35, 47. Runcimann, *Critique* p. 25, is also wrong when he says that Weber never identifies purposes and causes.

(78) This is the thesis of Ringer, *Weber's Methodology*, pp. 63, 77. Ringer's claim that Weber's devotion to singular causality is unique to him makes no sense in the context of the historicist tradition. Dilthey and Droysen also were committed to singular causal judgments in history, even though it is true that Weber analyzed the logic of these statements more than his predecessors.

(79) See *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* §1, I, 11.

(80) Schmoller, *Grundriß der allgemeinen Volkswirtschaftslehre*, pp. 105–6, §45.

(81) Georg Jellinek, *Allgemeine Staatslehre* (Berlin: Springer, 1922) pp. 34–42. (First edition 1900.) Jellinek distinguishes between *ideal* types, which are normative, and *empirical* types, which are derived from induction. He regards only the latter as truly scientific. Since empirical types also involve abstraction, Jellinek says that he thinks it is not wrong to call them "ideal types," as Weber does (40n1).

(82) Menger, *Untersuchungen*, p. 4.

(83) See Michael Schmid, "Idealisierung und Idealtyp," in Wagner and Zipprian, *Max Webers Wissenschaftslehre*, pp. 415–44.

(84) As Wolfgang Mommsen has pointed out. See his "Ideal Type and Pure Type" in *The Political and Social Theory of Max Weber* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1989), pp. 121–32, esp. 123.

(85) See chapter 11, section 2.

(86) See his Introduction; to *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization* (New York, NY: Free Press, 1947), pp. 9, 10–11.

(87) In addition to the statements above, see GAW 190, 194. Cf. SF 90, 93, 101.

(88) This vocabulary is not Weber's. From a different perspective and in different terms, a similar distinction is made by J.W.N. Watkins, "Ideal Types and Historical Explanation," in *Readings in the Philosophy of Science*, ed. Herbert Feigl and May Brodbeck (New York, NY: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1953), pp. 723–8. Watkins maintains, without citing evidence, that Weber later abandoned the second form of ideal type.

(89) See "Objektivität," GAW 191, 194 (FS 90, 93).

(90) "Ueber einige Kategorien der verstehenden Soziologie," p. 261.

(91) For an account of the contemporary reception of the *Wertfreiheit* thesis, see Jay A. Ciaffa, *Max Weber and the Problems of Value-Free Social Science* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1998), pp. 29–39, 126–155. For the history of the reception of Weber's thesis, see Stephen Turner and Regis Factor, *Max Weber and the Dispute over Reason and Value* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), pp. 90–233.

(92) On the distinction between value-relation and value-orientation, see section 4 above.

(93) For a brief account of the context, see Dirk Käsler, *Max Weber: An Introduction to his Life and Work* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), pp. 174–96; and Ralf Dahrendorf, "Values and Social Science," in *Essays in the Theory of Society* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1968), pp. 1–4.

(94) For Weber's complicated relationship with Schmoller, see Manfred Schön, "Gustav Schmoller and Max Weber," in *Max Weber and his Contemporaries*, eds. Wolfgang Mommsen and Jürgen Osterhammel (London: Unwin Hyman, 1987), pp. 59–70.

(95) "Diskussionsreden auf den Tagungen des Vereins für Sozialpolitik," GASS 420–1.

(96) See Schmoller to Arthur Spiethoff, October 15, 1909: "Among all of those on the Right the indignation about the Webers is great. I for one cannot share it. They are after all neurotics, but they are the leaven and they animate our general assemblies...." Cited in Schön, "Gustav Schmoller und Max Weber," p. 65.

(97) "Der Sinn der 'Wertfreiheit' der soziologischen und ökonomischen Wissenschaften," *Logos* VII (1917), 40–88. The draft for the essay, "Gutachten zur Werturteilsdiskussion im Ausschuss des Vereins für Sozialpolitik," appears in *Max Weber: Werk und Person*, ed. Eduard Baumgarten (Tübingen: Mohr, 1964), pp. 102–60.

(98) "Volkswirtschaft, Volkswirtschaftslehre und -methode," in *Handwörterbuch der Staatswissenschaften*, third edn (Jena: Fischer, 1911), 426–501, esp. 493–8.

(99) I cannot agree, therefore, with Hennis' judgment that Weber was simply carrying on, through new means, the legacy of the historical school. See his "Die volle Nüchternheit des Urteils." Max Weber zwischen Carl Menger and Gustav von Schmoller. Zum hochschulpolitischen Hintergrund des Webers Wertfreiheits Postulats," in *Max Webers Wissenschaftslehre*, pp. 104–45, esp. 115.

(100) On the conception of economics among the German historical school, see Wilhelm Hennis, "A Science of Man: Max Weber and the Political Economy of the German Historical School," in *Weber and his Contemporaries*, pp. 25–58.

(101) See Schön, "Gustav Schmoller und Max Weber," p. 65.

(102) Marianne Weber, *Weber: Ein Lebensbild*, p. 430.

(103) GPS 14; LS 16–17.

(104) GPS 16; LS 19–20.

(105) See Schön, “Gustave Schmoller und Max Weber,” p. 63.

(106) See *Weber and the Dispute over Reason and Value*, pp. 55–61.

(107) The theory that comes closest to my own is that of Wilhelm Hennis in his admirable “Nüchternheit des Urteils,” *Max Webers Wissenschaftslehre*, pp. 105–45. Hennis study provides a wealth of valuable background information on Weber's concern with issues of academic freedom. However, he lays no emphasis on Weber's fear of bureaucratization, and, strangely, he does not explain the connection between Weber's devotion to academic freedom and the postulate of value-freedom. On Hennis' interpretation, Weber was more concerned with a *pedagogical* problem—developing the power of independent judgment and practical knowledge in students—than with a *political* one (pp. 121, 124, 130). But it is really a political issue that inspires Weber's opposition to the historians.

(108) See *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1920), I, 203–4.

(109) For a more general account of the debate about bureaucracy, see Dieter Krüger, *Nationalökonomien im wilhelminischen Deutschland* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1983), pp. 78–82.

(110) Ringer, *Weber's Methodology*, fails to appreciate Weber's break with the tradition of *Bildung*. His claim, p. 8, that this tradition is central to Weber's context needs qualification.

(111) See “Wertfreiheit,” GAW 507–8; 17–18; “Wissenschaft als Beruf,” GAW 606–13; GM 148–56.

(112) ‘Wissenschaft als Beruf’, GAW 604; GM 148.

(113) Rickert, “Über logische und ethische Geltung,” *Kant-Studien* 19 (1914), 182–220, esp. 207.

(114) See Schmoller, “Volkswirtschaft, Volkswirtschaftslehre und -methode,” p. 497.

(115) Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1950), pp. 63–6.

(116) *Ibid*, p. 66.

(117) Weber announces the point, almost *en passant*, in the preface to his *Parlament und Regierung im neugeordneten Deutschland*, GPS 294; LS 130: “...the ultimate positions adopted by the will cannot be decided by scientific means.” There are other passages in the “Wertfreiheit” essay that imply as much.

(118) On Nietzsche's influence on Weber, see Hennis, *Webers Fragestellung*, pp. 167–194. About Nietzsche Weber is reported to have said: “The honesty of a scholar in our day, and even more of a philosopher, can be measured by how they stand toward Nietzsche and Marx....The world in which we exist as intellectual beings largely bears the imprint of Marx and Nietzsche.” See Baumgarten, *Weber: Werk und Person*, p. 555.

(119) See above chapter 9, section 5; and this chapter, section 4.

(120) GAW 500; FS 11. In “Kritische Studien” Weber refers explicitly to Rickert's distinction and discusses the concept of “Wertbeziehung” in more detail. WGA 252; FS 150.

(121) See Windelband, *Einleitung in die Philosophie* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1920), pp. 333–62; Rickert, *Kulturwissenschaft und Naturwissenschaft* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1921), pp. 162–3; “Vom System der Werte,” *Logos* IV (1913), 295–317; and *Die Probleme der Geschichtsphilosophie* (Heidelberg: Winter, 1924), pp. 118, 143. See above chapter 10, section 5.

(¹²²) The argument has been made by Dieter Henrich, *Die Einheit der Wissenschaftslehre Max Webers* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1952), pp. 30–2. Henrich's case rests mainly on two passages: GAW 213 and 508; FS 111, 18. In the first Weber refers to the “belief” or “faith” (*Glaube*) in ultimate transcendent ideas (*Glaube an die überempirische Geltung letzter und höchster Wertideen*). He stresses “faith” as if to say we cannot give it any further validity. The second passage only contrasts an empirical from a philosophical grounding of values; Weber does nothing to commit himself to such a project; he simply discusses such an idea to make clear what can be done on the basis of experience alone. In neither of these passages does Weber explicitly endorse Rickert's project. To make his thesis plausible, Henrich has to explain away all the passages (see the following note) in the “Wertfreiheit” and “Wissenschaft als Beruf” essays about the irrationality of ultimate values; but about them he says nothing.

(¹²³) See “Wertfreiheit,” GAW 507–9; SF 18–19. See “Wissenschaft als Beruf,” GAW 598–605; GM 143–5.

(¹²⁴) This point is not seen by Weber's critics. Runciman, for example, thinks that, for Weber, the results, concepts and hypotheses of the social scientist's enquiry are determined by his values. See *Critique*, pp. 38, 40. Oakes, *Weber and Rickert*, pp. 145–52, argues that the failure of Rickert's transcendental philosophy of values by itself commits Weber to relativism.

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Notes:

(82) On the significance of Humboldt's stay in Paris for his study of language, see Hans Aarsleff's brilliant "Introduction" to *On Language*, pp. xxxii-lxv. Although Aarsleff has made a valuable contribution to Humboldt scholarship in stressing the significance of the Paris years, it must be said that he overstates his case. He claims: "It was during the Paris years that Humboldt entered the path of language study he followed for the rest of his life." (p. xl). Yet, as the letter to Schiller makes clear, the interest in language antedates the Paris years; and it was only in Rome that Humboldt would devote himself more exclusively to language. Aarsleff's passionate polemic against Haym and Cassirer also leads him to exaggerate the influence of French writers. The significance of language for thought, and the importance of language for culture, were themes that Humboldt could have learned from Hamann or Herder, or picked up from German vapors, long before his reading of Degérando (p. xlvi).

(21) See, for example, Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1951), pp. 197–233; Hans Peter Reill, *The German Enlightenment and the Rise of Historicism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), pp. 2–3; Friedrich Jaeger and Jörn Rüsen, *Geschichte des Historismus* (Munich: Beck, 1992), pp. 10–11; and Herbert Schnädelbach, *Geschichtsphilosophie nach Hegel* (Freiburg: Alber, 1974), pp. 27–8.

(13) This is the mistake of Hans-Georg Gadamer. He attributes to the historicist tradition a crude positivistic conception of science. For he argues that the historicist tradition, despite its attempt to develop a *sui generis* historical method, was still deeply influenced by the methods of the natural sciences in accepting the ideal of objective and impersonal knowledge. See his *Wahrheit und Methode*, in *Gesammelte Werke* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1990), I, 13, 235–6, 340, 344, 378–9. It was, however, only Ranke who came close to espousing such an ideal, and even he never understood it in the naive sense that Gadamer imagines. See below chapter 6, sections 4–6. Chladenius's perspectivalism, which had an important influence on the historicist tradition, already undermined the positivist conception of history. Gadamer, however, never came to terms with Chladenius's doctrine. See below chapter 1, section 2. Gadamer's understanding of historicism is especially implausible considering that Droysen, Simmel and Weber explicitly repudiated the positivist conception of objectivity. The neo-Kantians were also highly critical of positivist conceptions of science, though Gadamer fails to do them justice. He has the same untenable reading of the neo-Kantians, whom he charges with a naive "objectivism". See his remarks to the "Vorwort zur 2. Auflage" in *Gesammelte Werke* II, 439, and his comment in "Hermeneutik und Historismus," *ibid.*, II., 388. Unfortunately, Gadamer inherited Heidegger's antipathy to the neo-Kantians and never saw beyond it.

(20) *Pace* Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, I, 186.

(5) In March 1933 Hans-Georg Gadamer, Erich Rothacker and Theodor Litt signed the *Bekanntnis der Professoren zu Adolf Hitler*. See Monika Leske, *Philosophie im Dritten Reich* (Berlin: Dietz, 1990), p. 110. This colors all their work on Herder from this time. Benno von Wiese's *Herder* also claims Herder for the national-socialist cause.

(10) This felicitous phrase is from Rudolf Haym's magisterial biography, *Herder: Nach seinem Leben und seinen Werken* (Berlin: Aufbau, 1958) I, 55.

(96) Of all Herder scholars Haym was the most sensitive to the changes in Herder's development. He would have been the first to dispute the value of a debate about Herder's ultimate allegiances. His explanation for these changes are scattered throughout his work. See, for example, the valuable insights in *Herder* II, 153–6, 182.

(116) Given his misgivings about Hegel in his final years, it seems plausible to read Humboldt's remarks about the philosophy of history as an implicit critique of Hegel. But chronology does not smile upon this hypothesis: Hegel gave his first lectures on world history in Berlin in the winter semester 1822/23, several months before Humboldt's address. Although Humboldt gives no example of a philosophical historian, it is likely that he had in mind Kant, Fichte or Schelling,

who do employ an *a priori* method. In his earlier 1812 or 1814 “Betrachtungen über die Weltgeschichte,” Humboldt explicitly mentions Kant as an example of the philosophical historian. See GS III, 350. On Humboldt’s reaction to Schelling’s philosophy of history, see his March 31, 1804, letter to Brinkman, in *Briefe an Brinkmann*, p. 167.

(⁹⁹) I cannot agree, therefore, with Hennis’ judgment that Weber was simply carrying on, through new means, the legacy of the historical school. See his “Die volle Nüchternheit des Urteils.” Max Weber zwischen Carl Menger and Gustav von Schmoller. Zum hochschulpolitischen Hintergrund des Webers Wertfreiheits Postulats,” in *Max Webers Wissenschaftslehre*, pp. 104–45, esp. 115.

(¹⁰⁷) The theory that comes closest to my own is that of Wilhelm Hennis in his admirable “Nüchternheit des Urteils,” *Max Webers Wissenschaftslehre*, pp. 105–45. Hennis study provides a wealth of valuable background information on Weber’s concern with issues of academic freedom. However, he lays no emphasis on Weber’s fear of bureaucratization, and, strangely, he does not explain the connection between Weber’s devotion to academic freedom and the postulate of value-freedom. On Hennis’ interpretation, Weber was more concerned with a *pedagogical* problem—developing the power of independent judgment and practical knowledge in students—than with a *political* one (pp. 121, 124, 130). But it is really a political issue that inspires Weber’s opposition to the historians.

(¹²²) The argument has been made by Dieter Henrich, *Die Einheit der Wissenschaftslehre Max Webers* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1952), pp. 30–2. Henrich’s case rests mainly on two passages: GAW 213 and 508; FS 111, 18. In the first Weber refers to the “belief” or “faith” (*Glaube*) in ultimate transcendent ideas (*Glaube an die überempirische Geltung letzter und höchster Wertideen*). He stresses “faith” as if to say we cannot give it any further validity. The second passage only contrasts an empirical from a philosophical grounding of values; Weber does nothing to commit himself to such a project; he simply discusses such an idea to make clear what can be done on the basis of experience alone. In neither of these passages does Weber explicitly endorse Rickert’s project. To make his thesis plausible, Henrich has to explain away all the passages (see the following note) in the “Wertfreiheit” and “Wissenschaft als Beruf” essays about the irrationality of ultimate values; but about them he says nothing.

(¹⁵) This is how the Möser family perceived itself. Of course, self-perception did not entirely agree with reality. As Knudsen argues, *Möser and the Enlightenment*, pp. 46–7, the Osnabrück notables owed much of their place in the world to family connections and marriages. Möser’s own position was arranged for him by his father. Equality of opportunity was not the ideal or reality of Osnabrück notables.

(⁴⁰) Meinecke, Knudsen and Epstein ignore them entirely; Klassen and Welker do not analyze their contents in detail or see their general significance. An important exception is Sheldon, *Intellectual Development*, pp. 27–42, who gives a detailed account of them, one very different from that provided here.

(⁶⁶) On these grounds Meinecke is correct to see Möser as a father of historicism. Knudsen’s claim, *Möser and the Enlightenment*, p. 29, that Möser’s historical sense was “not rooted in philosophical individualism” has no textual merit.

(⁷⁹) For this reason, Knudsen’s thesis, *Möser & the German Enlightenment*, pp. 94–9, that the *Osnabrückische Geschichte* is supposed to be a secular history of an ecclesiastical state proves insufficient. The work was indeed meant to be, at the very least, a secular history; and part of Möser’s argument was indeed directed against the clergy. But the work was also much more than a secular history; it was primarily meant to be a social history, one written from the standpoint of the burgher. Because of his conception of Möser as a conservative with deep interests in preserving the status quo, Knudsen misses Möser’s animus and argument against the nobility.

(⁹⁴) Remarkably, Knudsen, whose thesis is Möser’s affiliation with the Enlightenment, holds that it is accurate to view Möser as opposed to the Enlightenment after the Revolution, and chiefly because of his critique of revolutionary doctrines. See his *Möser & German Enlightenment*, pp. 2, 29, 30. This is an unnecessary concession, a spectacular “own goal.” Since

Möser's critique of revolutionary ideology is based on ideas he worked out in the 1760s, it would follow that Möser was opposed, at least implicitly, to the Enlightenment much earlier.

(⁵⁵) It is important to stress that the Windelband's distinction between value and fact was not meant to exclude naturalistic explanation; rather, the very opposite is the case: the entire realm of fact was to be explained naturalistically without interference or supervision by any evaluative standpoint. Klaus Christian Köhnke, *Entstehung und Aufstieg*, pp. 361–2, has maintained that Windelband's mature conception of philosophy involves a fundamental break with his earlier attempts to provide genetic explanations of logic, and ascribes this to Windelband's reaction to socialism in the end of the 1870s, pp. 416–27. But there is no reason to assume a break in the first place. In his early and later years Windelband not only permitted but encouraged naturalistic and genetic explanations of logic and morality. I will leave aside here the question of Windelband's political motivations, which are not relevant to the logic of the case.

(⁷⁶) Köhnke sees the general standpoint of the book as that of “naturalism,” and regards Simmel's program to dissolve ethics into natural science as essentially positivist. See *Der junge Simmel*, pp. 243–65, 284. This, however, is a misleading conception of Simmel's enterprise. Simmel was far too skeptical of the positivist program to regard his position as naturalistic. In chapter VI he raises many objections against the positivist attempt to explain psychology according to mechanical laws. See GSG IV, 265–83. As we have seen, this skepticism is all the more apparent in the other early works of the 1890s, especially *Über sozialen Differenzierung* and *Die Probleme der Geschichtsphilosophie*. For the same reason it is misleading to represent Simmel as a proponent of the explanatory and constructive psychology criticized by Dilthey. See Köhnke, p. 281. Simmel's position on social explanation in *Die Probleme* is in fact very similar to Dilthey.

(⁴⁷) The traditional view of Savigny's relationship to Kant was provided by Landsberg, who gave one of the most influential accounts of Savigny's intellectual development. Landsberg claims that Kant provided the basis for Savigny's own jurisprudence because his critique destroyed the old system of natural law and therefore made empirical investigation of the law the only option. See his *Geschichte* I, 249. Landsberg fails to see, however, that Kant's rationalism also made possible a regeneration of natural law, and that Savigny came to his rejection of natural law through a criticism of that rationalism.

(²⁵) The origin of this view of philosophy is complex and murky. It is usually associated with Dilthey, who certainly provided it with its most systematic and sophisticated exposition in his *Das Wesen der Philosophie* (1907). Though Dilthey began to develop his views in the early 1880s, that was probably too late for Windelband, who already published his “Was ist Philosophie?” in 1882. The idea was certainly “in the air” in the 1870s. The concept can be traced back to Schopenhauer, “Über Philosophie und ihre Methode,” §19, in *Parerga und Paralipomena* (Berlin: Hayn, 1851); and Lotze, *Geschichte der Aesthetik in Deutschland* (Munich: Cotta, 1868), pp. 396–405. On the origins of this conception of philosophy, see Erik Kreiter, *Philosophy as Weltanschauung in Trendelenburg, Dilthey and Windelband* (Amsterdam: Vrije Universiteit, 2007).

(⁸⁰) Hence Lukács would cite just these lines to demonstrate Dilthey's irrationalism. See *Zerstörung der Vernunft*, p. 371.

(¹¹) This question has had a long and tumultuous history. The battle goes back to the eighteenth century. Friedrich Nicolai, Möser's first biographer, saw Möser as a fellow *Aufklärer*. However, the young Goethe, Herder and Hamann claimed Möser for their own *Sturm und Drang*, a movement which rebelled against the rationalism of the *Aufklärung*. These opposing interpretations, which were largely dormant during the nineteenth century, have had twentieth-century counterparts. Scholars of German historicism tended to stress Möser's opposition to the *Aufklärung*. Wilhelm Dilthey, Eduard Fueter and Georg von Below, for example, saw Möser's theory of history as a reaction against the historiography of the Enlightenment. See Dilthey, *Das Achtzehnte Jahrhundert* III, 248–57; Eduard Fueter, *Geschichte* p. 393; and von Below, *Die deutsche Geschichtschreibung*, p. 3. It was primarily Meinecke, though, who was responsible for promulgating and solidifying the Counter-Enlightenment interpretation of Möser. This interpretation was then taken to extremes in the late 1930s and early 1940s by scholars sympathetic to national-socialism. See especially Werner Pleister's “Einleitung” to

his edition of Möser's *Briefe* (Hannover: Kommissionsverlag Ferdinand Schönigh, 1939), xiii–xxxi; and Peter Klassen, *Justus Möser* (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1936). Chiefly because of its unfortunate associations with national-socialism, the anti-*Aufklärung*-interpretation came under heavy criticism in the post-War years. See especially Joachim Streisand, *Geschichtliches Denken von der deutschen Aufklärung bis zur Klassik* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1964), pp. 68, 71; Jonathan Knudsen, *Möser & German Enlightenment*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986) pp. 1–30; and William Sheldon, *The Intellectual Development of Justus Möser: The Growth of a German Patriot* (Osnabrück: Wenner, 1970), pp. 63, 82. According to his critics, Meinecke had failed to consider Möser in his historical context, which makes plain his many debts to the tradition of the Enlightenment.

(3) Karl Popper has used the term in the first sense. See his *The Poverty of Historicism* (London: Routledge, 1961), p. 3. Popper's usage has been especially common in the Anglophone world. See, for example, Simon Blackburn, *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 174. It has been above all Meinecke who has used the term in the second sense. See his *Die Entstehung des Historismus*, pp. 1–10.

(10) No one has done more to perpetrate these misconceptions than Karl Popper, who sees essentialism as definitive of historicism. See especially his *The Poverty of Historicism*, pp. 26–34. See also *The Open Society and its Enemies* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1950), pp. 34–6, 206–18. Popper's attribution of essentialism to Simmel and Weber, p. 485n30, shows that he has failed to study them.

(49) This point is confused by Reill, *The German Enlightenment and the Rise of Historicism*, pp. 106, 107, who thinks Chladenius holds that human actions are in principle inexplicable. Reill does not consider Chladenius's model of causal explanation developed in the *Vernünftige Gedanken*.

(13) There are several excellent accounts of Chladenius's hermeneutics. See Peter Szondi, *Einführung in die literarische Hermeneutik* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1975), pp. 27–97; Claudia Henn, "Sinnreiche Gedanken": Zur Hermeneutik des Chladenius's, *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 58 (1976), 240–64; and Christoph Friederich, *Sprache und Geschichte: Untersuchungen zur Hermeneutik von Johann Martin Chladenius* (Meisenheim am Glan: Anton Hain, 1978).

(46) Szondi, *Einführung*, pp. 82–3, regards the contradiction as irresolvable, and finds its source in Chladenius's "pre-critical" realism. Such a heavy Kantian bias is unnecessary and unfair. It is necessary to reconstruct the reasons for Chladenius's realism.

(7) This picture of Simmel as a radical historicist contradicts one common interpretation of his thought, which regards him as an a-historical thinker. See, for example, the statements cited in Frisby, *Simmel*, pp. 58–9; and the essay by Friedrich Tönnies, "Simmel as Sociologist," in *Georg Simmel*, ed. Lewis Coser (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1965), p. 51. The evidence for this interpretation comes mainly from Simmel's later sociology, whose foundation seems very ahistorical. When Simmel defined the subject matter of sociology in his celebrated 1894 article "Das Problem der Sociologie," GSG V, 52–61, he seemed to purge the discipline of historical content. Sociology, he proposed, is about the *forms* of socialization, independent of their *content*, i.e., the specific interests or goals of people at a specific time and place (V, 54). While these interests and goals vary with history, these forms remain the same in different societies. For these reasons it has been said that Simmel's sociology lacks the "historical approach" of Weber's (see Frisby, *Simmel*, p. 58). But, even if this interpretation were true of Simmel's sociology, it would hold for only one aspect of his later thought. And it is questionable even as an interpretation of his later sociology. In an important 1959 article F.H. Tenbruck argued that Simmel's "forms of socialization" had been misunderstood as generic concepts, and that they should be read instead as those intersubjective levels of social phenomena that are irreducible to the interactions between individuals. See his "Formal Sociology," in *Georg Simmel 1858–1918*, ed. Kurt Wolff (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1959), pp. 61–99. Tenbruck's interpretation is essentially correct; it is only necessary to add that for Simmel these forms have an essentially historical dimension. What makes them intersubjective, irreducible to individual interactions, is the fact that they have a history, that they are the work of past generations who have invested them with a meaning that transcends the mental activities of

individuals in this generation. In this regard it is important to stress that Simmel was deeply influenced by Moritz Lazarus's theory of "historical condensation" (*Verdichtung*), according to which the forms of social life are rich in intersubjective meaning precisely because they accumulate and embody a culture's history. See Moritz Lazarus, "Verdichtung des Denkens in der Geschichte. Ein Fragment," in *Zeitschrift für Völkerpsychologie und Sprachwissenschaft* II (1862), 54–62. Simmel expressed his admiration for this doctrine in his 1885 review of Heymann Steinthal's *Allgemeine Ethik*, GSG I, 193–210, esp. 208.

(118) On Nietzsche's influence on Weber, see Hennis, *Webers Fragestellung*, pp. 167–194. About Nietzsche Weber is reported to have said: "The honesty of a scholar in our day, and even more of a philosopher, can be measured by how they stand toward Nietzsche and Marx....The world in which we exist as intellectual beings largely bears the imprint of Marx and Nietzsche." See Baumgarten, *Weber: Werk und Person*, p. 555.

(52) For this kind of interpretation of Herder, see Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1973), pp. 69–80.

(46) See Schuppe, *Der andere Droysen*, pp. 94–5, 97; and White, "Droysens Historik: Geschichtsschreibung als bürgerliche Wissenschaft," in *Die Bedeutung der Form. Erzählstrukturen in der Geschichtsschreibung* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1990), p. 120.

