

WILHELM DILTHEY: HISTORICAL CONSCIOUSNESS AND THE WORLDVIEW

*World history is the progress of the consciousness of freedom
– a progress whose necessity we have to investigate.
G.W.F. Hegel Reason In History*

*History, said Stephen, is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake.
James Joyce Ulysses*

The juxtaposition of these two quotes seems a neat summary of the passage from the Enlightenment to the Twentieth Century, from an optimistic belief in Reason and Progress through *fin de siecle* world-weariness and skepticism to despair in the face of cataclysmic events. Stephen Dedalus speaking in 1904 could hardly have known how much of a nightmare the Twentieth Century would prove history to be. On the surface he seems as prescient as Hegel seems naïve. But Hegel was hardly naïve.

[I]n contemplating history as the slaughter-bench at which the happiness of peoples, the wisdom of states, and the virtue of individuals have been sacrificed, a question necessarily arises: To what principle, to what final purpose, have these monstrous sacrifices been offered? (Hegel 27)

And Stephen Dedalus, at least as he is presented in A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man with his desire to escape the nets of nationality, language and religion and "to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race," (276) can be interpreted as an embodiment of the Hegelian "world-historical individual."

It is at this point that appear those momentous collisions between existing, acknowledged duties, laws, and rights and those possibilities which are

adverse to this system, violate it, and even destroy its foundations and existence. Their tenor may nevertheless seem good, on the whole advantageous – yes, even indispensable and necessary. These possibilities now become historical fact; they involve a universal of an order different from that upon which depends the permanence of a people or a state. This universal is an essential phase in the development of the creating Idea, of truth striving and urging toward itself. The historical men, world-historical individuals, make it their own purpose, and realize this purpose in accordance with the higher law of the spirit. (Hegel 39)

It is not my intention here to explicate either Hegel or Joyce, but I could not resist using the opening quotes; and, having done so, I felt compelled to indicate how there may be more to each than meets the eye. The real question is what it would mean to awaken from the nightmare of history. This is not just a prayer for world peace; it is a spiritual struggle to find meaning – the realization by a hyper-conscious individual that the contents of his mind, the very constitution of his “self” and the way it perceives the world, are the product of history and tradition. History is a nightmare because it is a vivid (and disorienting) experience in which one is totally immersed and which must be interpreted in order to discover its “meaning.” Descartes dreamt of clear and distinct ideas which provided a certainty grounded in the existence of oneself, but there is no unmediated self-knowledge. The self is known only through inherited ideas and language. Experience of the world and experience of the self are tied together, and both are historically conditioned or rather not just “conditioned”, but possible only in or as “history.”

This idea of history is itself an inherited idea, and an appreciation of its relevance to philosophical understanding seems to require some kind historical perspective on the way it has evolved. The best place to start may be with the philosophy of Wilhelm Dilthey. Dilthey occupies a kind of watershed point in modern philosophy. In his commitment to the project of applying the scientific method to “human” as well as natural phenomena he represents the culmination of the scientific spirit of the Enlightenment. In his attempt to stave off the skepticism and relativism rooted in historical awareness by developing a philosophy based on the ideas of “lived experience” and the “worldview,” he laid the groundwork for the development of many twentieth century philosophical trends which view the scientific method as inadequate or irrelevant in the face of moral or existential dilemmas.

Another watershed point is represented by the philosophy of Edmund Husserl. Husserl reacted to the intrusion of historical concerns into philosophy by attempting to retrieve and update the Cartesian project of founding philosophy rigorously on self-evident insights immediately available to consciousness. The result was phenomenology, which had an abiding impact on Continental philosophy. Towards the end of his career, however, Husserl felt the need to grapple with the idea of history; and the way in which he did so may help provide an entry point into more recent discussions of the relevance of history to philosophy. Heidegger, Gadamer and Ricoeur were all profoundly influenced by phenomenology and attempted to incorporate its insights into their own ideas about “historicity.”

Ricoeur’s translations of Husserl into French are largely credited with the impact of phenomenology on French thought. In his attempts to expand the insights of

phenomenology in ways that could account for the reality of evil, Ricoeur was driven first towards a study of Freud and then became increasingly involved with problems of language and interpretation. Ricoeur's analysis of phenomenology may provide access to the idea of hermeneutics as it has functioned in his later work and may permit a fuller appreciation of the direction in which Heidegger and Gadamer took Husserl's ideas.

The motivation behind all of this is a more basic desire to come to terms with how language enables (and prevents) "understanding." The nature of language, the way in which metaphor functions in philosophical as well as poetic thought, and the way in which expressions can "die" or "harden" are themes for all of these thinkers which inevitably lead to questions about "history." On the surface it is obvious that the way people think – how their "understanding" is related to their "beliefs" – can have disastrous consequences. Philosophical hermeneutics may be an attempt to awaken from the nightmare in which delusions are regarded as eternal verities and in which convictions enable us to destroy civilization.

Although Wilhelm Dilthey seems to have received relatively little attention from American academics, many of his ideas feel immediately familiar because they are embedded in the very notion of a liberal arts education which shaped most American universities during much of the 20th century. The distinction between the sciences and the humanities and the desire to accord the humanities a status comparable to that of the "hard" sciences while recognizing the need for different methods in each can be interpreted in terms of one of the core issues driving all of Dilthey's work. Dilthey sought above all to formulate a way in which "human studies" could achieve the universal validity and rock-solid foundation provided to the physical sciences by the

scientific method. He understood and valued art, literature and philosophy too much to resort to a reductive approach based on simplistic empirical psychology, but he held out the hope that a more sophisticated psychology could evolve which would be worthy of the task of “explaining” human phenomena.

One of the key concepts in Dilthey’s thought is that of the *Weltanschauung* or world-view. Like the term *Zeitgeist*, *Weltanschauung* was imported into the English dictionary and used in a way that implied we all knew what it meant and that it could not be adequately translated. Even when the term was not explicitly used, the concept was often the underlying metaphor guiding the teaching of literature, art, philosophy and intellectual history. The appreciation of any given work or movement or idea involved seeing it as the expression of an entire attitude towards life and the world, a unique embodiment of one of the ways a human being can develop. The greater a work, the more completely it expressed a fully developed and consistent world-view. The object of a liberal education was to broaden one’s appreciation for the possibilities of human existence by assimilating the life experience or world-view implicit in the great works of human history.

“Historical consciousness” is another principal motif in Dilthey’s thought, and American academia seems to view Dilthey primarily in terms of his theory of history. The full implications of his idea of historical consciousness are somehow more difficult to grasp than the idea of the world-view, perhaps because the assumptions about history it contains were so engrained in our ideas about education and intellectual life at least during the first half of the 20th century. Assumptions that feel like “common sense” are easily ignored or glossed over in attempting to assimilate someone’s thought. Gadamer

devotes a great deal of discussion to the way in which Dilthey was entangled in “the aporias of historicism,” much of which is couched in terms of a scholarly review of 19th century Romantic German philosophy. Having some appreciation for Dilthey’s ideas about history and the relationship of “historical consciousness” to philosophical understanding seems to be a prerequisite for understanding the full import of Gadamer’s idea of hermeneutics.

The third influential idea in Dilthey is his idea of “lived experience” (*Erlebnis*). Today Dilthey may be most known because of the influence of his “life philosophy” on Heidegger. Approaching Dilthey through Heidegger is probably a much steeper climb than approaching Heidegger through Dilthey. If one begins with Dilthey’s attempt to synthesize a positivistic philosophy of science with the traditions of Romantic idealism and his own love of literature and religious thought, it may be easier to see how one aspect of his thought provided inspiration for Heidegger’s analysis of existence.

Finally Dilthey is relevant to an appreciation of hermeneutics because he was explicitly concerned with Schleiermacher’s theory of hermeneutics and the broader application of it to the arts rather than just the interpretation of scripture. He wrote a biography of Schleiermacher and sought to incorporate Schleiermacher’s ideas into his own approach to the “human sciences.”

Probably the best place to start with Dilthey is his admiration for science.

Modern science arose in the seventeenth century, and in the eighteenth century it laid the foundations for the liberation of humanity from the oppression of religious tradition, for the knowledge of the systems of causal laws in nature and the domination of nature which this knowledge makes possible, for the

recognition of the deeper nexus of spiritual phenomena which constitute the historical world, and for theories which were able to guide the transformation of society. Thus humanity came of age through science. (Poetry 284)

(Most of what follows is based on a reading of a handful of Dilthey's shorter works written at different stages of his career. One, *The Essence of Philosophy*, was written a few years before his death and can be taken as a concise summary of his central ideas, but Dilthey's thought evolved over the years and even at its most mature may not have been completely consistent. I make no attempt to distinguish here between an earlier version of an idea and a later, perhaps more mature, version.)

As much as Dilthey was able to see the limitations of science, there was never any question of the benefits derived from it. Science and technology were not for him the double edged sword that they were for many in the next generation. Any conflict between science and religion was resolved in his thought by a proper understanding of religion and by the elevation of the "human sciences" to a status on a par with the natural sciences. Scientific knowledge was a pinnacle of human achievement which permitted mankind to live more fully and freely. Its perfection was also an unachievable goal towards which man must always strive. Dilthey was not blind to the problems looming on the horizon at the end of the 19th century, but the "dark ominous outlines" he saw were more a reflection of a move away from science and reason than the direct result of technology.

A new epoch dawned with the French Revolution. A new world age, whose dark, ominous outlines are beginning to emerge, can be characterized by the following basic traits: the transformation of life

through science, a world-industrial system based on machines, work or labor as the exclusive foundation of the social order, war against social parasites for whose idle pleasure others pay the cost, a new, proud feeling of mastery by man, who, having subordinated nature, will now lessen even the blind effects of passions in society. Yet over against such a rationalistic regulation of all the affairs of what is ultimately an irrational and unreasonable planet, society has also developed a historical consciousness that preserves what has been achieved already. Various nations have developed a feeling of their own identity through the workings of their parliament and press. The heroism of our century is rooted in the struggles generated there. (Poetry 171f)

Even in context this is a strangely ambivalent description of the new world age. The industrial social order is surely at odds with the humanistic culture whose literary and artistic achievements he so highly valued, but Dilthey seems to remain optimistic that the liberating effect of greater self-consciousness including the newly achieved historical consciousness will enable reason to prevail.

The distinction between the natural sciences and the human sciences is a difference in the subject matter: “All the disciplines that have socio-historical reality as their subject matter are encompassed in this work under the name ‘human sciences.’” (Introduction) The difference between the subject matter of the natural sciences and that of the human sciences results in what Paul Ricoeur calls “the great opposition which runs throughout Dilthey’s work, the opposition between the *explanation* of nature and *understanding* of history.” (Ricoeur Hermeneutics 49)

What is contained in the concept of science is generally divided into two subdivisions. One is designated by the name "natural science," while for the other there is, curiously enough, no generally accepted designation. I shall follow those thinkers who refer to this second half of the *globus intellectualis* by the term *Geisteswissenschaften*. In the first place, this designation is one that has become customary and generally understood, due especially to the extensive circulation of the German translation of John Stuart Mill's *System of Logic*. This term seems the least inappropriate among the various from which we can choose. To be sure, the reference to the spirit (*Geist*) in the term *Geisteswissenschaften* can give only an imperfect indication of the subject matter of these sciences, for it does not really separate *facts of the human spirit* from the *psychophysical unity of human nature*. Any theory intended to describe and analyze socio-historical reality cannot restrict itself to the human spirit and disregard the totality of human nature. (Introduction)

Mill's term which was translated as *Geisteswissenschaften* was "moral sciences." Mill used it in connection with the idea that inductive logic was an appropriate method for the study of social, cultural and historical phenomena just as it was for the study of natural phenomena. *Geisteswissenschaften* is generally translated as human sciences and taken to include everything normally categorized as social and humanistic disciplines.

In expressing his reservations about the reference to spirit with its Hegelian connotations, Dilthey touches on an aspect of *Geisteswissenschaften* which is easily

overlooked. While the data may be cultural artifacts, the real subject matter is not a phenomenon which can be objectified like a natural phenomenon. The distinction between natural sciences and human sciences is a deeper distinction between objective phenomena and the reality of lived experience.

Natural sciences lift out of lived experience only partial contents which can help to determine changes in the physical world, independent of us. So knowledge of nature deals merely with appearances for consciousness. The subject-matter of the human studies, on the other hand, is the inwardly given reality of the lived experiences themselves. Here, therefore, we possess a reality, lived – to be sure, only lived – which philosophy longs incessantly to comprehend. (Essence 24)

Experience of natural phenomena is always mediated by the senses whereas in lived experience there is immediate access to reality. When Dilthey describes this reality as “lived – to be sure, only lived,” he is underscoring the fact that this reality is not fully comprehensible via conceptual thought.

A lived experience is a distinctive and characteristic mode in which reality is there-for-me. A lived experience does not confront me as something perceived or represented; it is not given to me, but the reality of lived experience is there-for-me because I have a reflexive awareness of it, because I possess it immediately as belonging to me in some sense. Only in thought does it become objective. (Poetry 223)

The description of a “mode in which reality is there-for-me” tempts the reader to conceive of this as something of which one is conscious, but Dilthey is struggling to find

a way to verbalize something that is not a “thing” and is not an object of consciousness. It is somehow a pre-conscious reality which the human mind “possesses” or participates in. Lived experience is a very elusive idea which in retrospect can suggest the Unconscious of psychoanalytic theory. It can also push the mind to the brink where Heidegger’s neologisms begin to seem necessary.

Dilthey is not a rigorous, systematic philosopher who defines terms and only uses them in a restricted way. He has too much appreciation for the richness of language and literary expression to do that and is often most persuasive when he relies on his own rhetorical skills to communicate his insights:

The death of a loved one involves a special structural relation to grief. This structural relation of grief to a perception or a representation, referring to an object about which I feel grief, is a lived experience. This structural nexus appears in me as a reality, and everything that it contains of reality is lived experience. This lived experience is delimited from other lived experiences by the fact that as a structural nexus of grief, of perceiving or representing what the grief is about, and of an object to which the perception refers, it constitutes a separable immanent teleological whole. It can be isolated within the household of my life because it belongs to it structurally as a function.

As it is with the above lived experience, so it is with a cognitive experience, with every volitional experience that realizes a purpose, every aesthetic experience; lived experience designates a part of the course of life in its total reality – a concrete part which from a teleological point of

view possesses a unity in itself. Because the concept of the present does not ascribe any dimensions to it, the concrete consciousness of the present must include the past and the future. Therefore lived experience is not merely something present, but already contains past and future within its consciousness of the present. (Poetry 224f)

Using terms like “structural relation” or “structural nexus” cannot fully compensate for the reliance on expressions like “household of my life” or “a part of the course of life” not to mention the evocative richness of the term “life” itself, which Dilthey may never articulate fully. But surely every attempt at systematic expression inevitably involves reliance on some cornerstones which support the edifice and are themselves pointers to some other kind of non-systematic apprehension or intuition. Dilthey was himself well aware of this limitation in philosophy:

...Thus again we are faced with the incomprehensible. We cannot imagine how manifoldness could emerge from the one and only totality of the world, nor how the eternal can become changeable. The relation between being and thinking, dimension and thought, is not easier to comprehend by the magic word identity. Ultimately nothing remains of all metaphysical systems but a condition of the soul and a world view. (Existence 70)

This is the conclusion of his survey of philosophical systems and the world view expressed by them, and it is part of a description of “objective idealism,” which seems to occupy a privileged position among world views. The expression “a condition of the

soul” is another way of indicating that lived experience involves the totality of the human individual and not just “representational” thought.

For Dilthey the inevitable desire of philosophy to express a world view in a universally valid form is doomed to failure because every expression of lived experience is rooted in a particular finite historical situation of an individual. Before exploring how he attempts to avoid the “relativism” implicit in this idea, we need to look more closely at the relationship between a world view and lived experience.

The description of the lived experience associated with grief is intended to convey two things. It is primarily concerned with the way in which lived experience encompasses the past and the future, but the key to this is the more basic fact that lived experience is “teleological.” The seeming redundancy in a description of “experience” as “lived” is probably an attempt to indicate the active, intentional or goal directed component in an experience rather than allow experience to be viewed as just something that “happens to” one or which one passively “undergoes.”

One idea that may occur to a reader encountering the term “lived experience” may be the experience of “the present moment.” During the last century our culture has been inundated with ideas about how to “live in the moment” and to be “more fully present.” Generally this is conceived of in terms of the focus of one’s mind or attention. There is the suggestion that the elimination of distraction and the overcoming or shedding of emotions which result in distraction can enable one to find joy and fulfillment by living completely in the moment. Dilthey cites Heraclitus’s phrase “being present at what happens to us” as a description of “the sober circumspection by which the phenomena of the course of the world, taken for granted by the crowd, arouse the admiring astonishment

and thoughtful reflection of the true philosopher.” This seems to be a call for a Zen-like perspective on the present moment, and it is easy to conclude that immersion in the present is the real point of the idea of lived experience. This is, however, to miss the point of what Dilthey is trying to describe or at least it risks jumping to a conclusion without first seeing the full implications of the idea.

Lived experience is reality. The fact that reality is “there-for-me” is an indication of the “structure” of human being. As Dilthey says we are both “inner” and “outer” and lived experience is the connection between the two or the basis on which they are possible. Just as Kant explained the foundation of scientific knowledge in terms of the categories of the understanding, Dilthey seeks to explain the possibility for knowledge of human phenomena by analyzing the structure of life or human being. Lived experience at the core of human life inevitably results in something which has a structure. Not only does it involve sensory perception of the natural world which is shaped by the categories of the understanding, it also involves the structures of purposiveness inherent in human life. It is “teleological.” To be human is to judge phenomena and to have goals. It makes no sense to ask whether this “structure” is imposed on a chaotic reality by the human mind or is inherent in reality. Reality is “there-for-me” only as lived experience, and lived experience is shaped by will and judgment as well as the categories of sensory perception. Dilthey takes his idea of “structure” from an analysis of scientific knowledge. In scientific knowledge “structure” consists in the “nexus” of causal connections relating the data. The connections in the human sciences are a matter not of causation but of “meaning,” and meaning is to be understood in terms of the purposiveness inherent in lived experience.

...But the events of the inner life are joined by relations of another kind. As parts they are united in the system of mental life. This system I call the mental structure. It is the pattern in which diverse mental facts are united in mature mental life by a relation which can be lived. The basic form of this inner system is determined by the reciprocity in which all mental life is conditioned by its environment and reacts purposively to it. Sensations are evoked and represent the variety of their outer causes. Stimulated by the relation of those causes to our own life, as the relation is expressed in feeling, we attend to these impressions, we apperceive, distinguish, unite, judge, and reason. Under the influence of objective awareness the basic manifold of feeling gives rise to more and more correct evaluations of life's aspects and of the external causes of this inner life and the system of its impulses. Guided by these evaluations, we alter the character of the environment through appropriate conduct, or through inner volition we adjust our own conscious processes to our needs. This is human life.

(Essence 34)

Simplistic empiricism which conceives the human mind as a tabula rasa inscribed by external phenomena via sensory perception ignores the way in which judgment and will shape our experience of the world. The external world impinges on the human individual not just by sensory impression but primarily as something which offers resistance to the will:

Among such experiences which establish the reality of the world around us and our relations to it, the following are the most important: the world

and our relations to it hem us in, oppress us in a manner which we cannot overcome, and they restrict our intentions unexpectedly and beyond our control. (Existence 23)

Disinterested sensory impression is not the raw material of human life. In fact the ability to perceive “disinterestedly” is a difficult and somewhat unnatural state for a human being to achieve.

The mental system has a teleological character. Wherever the mind learns through pleasure and pain what is valuable, it reacts in attention, selection and elaboration of impressions, in struggle, act of will, choice among its goals, and search for the means to its ends.

So the mere awareness of objects is already clearly purposive.

The forms of representing any reality constitute stages in a purposive system, in which the objective element gains ever fuller and more conscious representation. (Essence 34f)

The achievement of “ever fuller and more conscious representation” of reality is an inevitable development both in an individual and in any historical community of individuals:

A being which aims somehow at the values of life demanded by the impulses, a being which in its differentiation and integration of activities sets out for this goal, will develop itself. So, from the structure of the inner life its development springs. (Essence 35)

Since such a development obviously admits degrees or stages, Dilthey draws on the Romantic concept of genius to describe how some individuals are more capable of

achieving “fuller” or “more conscious” representations of reality than others. These are the creative or imaginative individuals whose thought and work can have lasting influence.

The religious person, the artist, and the philosopher are distinguished from average men – indeed, even from geniuses of another sort – by preserving such moments of life in memory, raising their content to consciousness, and combining the particular experiences into universal experience of life itself. In this way they perform an important function, not only for themselves, but also for society. (Essence 39f)

The “average” man relies on custom and tradition for his world view rather than his own intellectual, creative and imaginative powers.

The driving force behind the development of a world view is a need to unify or integrate the self and the world. In describing the origins of religion he refers to “the mysterious power of personality to achieve integration in comprehending the world, evaluating life and organizing its affairs.” (Essence 45) Elsewhere he says, “We naturally gather lived experiences that have been fixed by their expressions into a system, which is then completed as a memory system, as conduct of life and totality of life.” (P228) Each lived experience must be “expressed” or articulated in order to be “there-for-me,” and the individual exists as a human being because of the ability to gather these expressions together in memory or to assimilate them into a persistent attitude which is the groundwork for a fully conscious world view.

Dilthey often speaks of a “will to stability” which drives the reflection on life and the formation of a world view. He also assumes the inherent value of the individual in a

way that seems partially inherited from Kant's founding of morality on "practical reason" and partially inherited from a mystical tradition which is able "to see a world in a grain of sand and a heaven in a wild flower." Individuation seems both an inevitable and an inherently good thing. The human individual, however, is constituted by the ability of the human being to integrate experience into a coherent whole, and it may be that there is nothing in Dilthey's description of lived experience which guarantees that this integration can be fully achieved. There is simply the inevitable impulse to do so and the assurance that any attempt to do so will be subject to the "formative laws of world views" (Existence 24) which are founded in the "structure" of human life. In describing the evolution of world views in the course of the history of mankind Dilthey is able to detect a formative principle:

In the midst of an apparent fortuitousness of structures there exists a strict relatedness of purpose which springs from the interdependence of the cosmic picture, appraisal of life judgment and life goals. A universal human nature and a trend toward an order of individuation are coordinated and firmly related to life and reality; and, reality is everywhere and forever the same, and life always reveals the same aspects (Existence 28)

The formation of a world view is a selective and judgmental response to lived experience. Since it is driven by a need to integrate experience into a coherent whole, it presumably achieves its goal by filtering out or ignoring certain aspects of reality. The coherence it achieves is the coherence of a value judgment. This is one reason why the history of mankind reveals a seemingly endless variety of world views. A second reason is the fact that the formation of a world view is conditioned by the environment within

which it is developed and that environment is constantly changing as a result of the adaptive interaction between man and his world. The implication of this seems to be that as mankind has developed or evolved it has become possible for world views to represent reality more accurately or more inclusively and that the development of world views may evolve in a manner analogous to or even parallel to progress in the never-ending refinement of scientific knowledge.

Dilthey describes three principal types of world view: the religious, the poetic or artistic and the metaphysical or philosophical. Most of the time it seems as though history presents a clear progression from religious to poetic to philosophical world view. It is not a simple linear process from religious antiquity to a modern scientific world view, but at least as presented in The Essence of Philosophy there is a kind of dialectic which begins with a religious world view and evolves naturally into an artistic and finally philosophical world view as increasingly reflective understanding aspires to a universally valid formulation of a world view. The three types of world views can exist simultaneously and can influence one another, but there is the clear implication that a philosophical world view represents the most fully evolved type of world view. In some of Dilthey's other works, however, the relative status of the types of world view is a bit more ambiguous. His love of poetry, especially the poetry of Goethe and Hölderlin, lead him to formulate a poetics which seems to set poetry at the pinnacle of expression and to present philosophy as limited in comparison to poetry. Also his own philosophy seems to push him towards a world view which is more sympathetic to religious mysticism than scientific positivism. Even in The Essence of Philosophy it becomes clear that any philosophical world view is ultimately untenable because of its very desire to give a

universally valid formulation to issues which are inherently incapable of a universally valid resolution. It is as though he is writing philosophically about the impossibility of philosophy.

Religiosity, poetry and metaphysics likewise express only symbolically what is contained in the formula set up by objective idealism for understanding the interrelation of the world. It can in fact never be grasped by cognition. Metaphysics can do no more than single out the special aspects of what constitutes the life of the subject from the living complex of the person and project this connection of the world into infinity. This eventually gives rise to a new restless dialectic which drives on from one system to another, until all possibilities are exhausted and man recognizes that the problem can never be solved. (Existence 73)

The causal knowledge of reality; the feeling of value, meaning, and significance; the volitional attitude containing within itself the goal of conduct and the principle of obligation: these are various general attitudes, combined in the structure of mind. Their mental relation is revealed to us in lived experience; it is one of the ultimate facts of consciousness within reach of introspection. The subject has these various attitudes towards objects; one cannot go back behind this fact to a reason for it. So the categories of being, cause, value, and purpose, originating as they do in these attitudes, can be reduced neither to one another nor to a higher principle. We can comprehend the world by only one of the basic categories. We can never perceive, as it were, more than one side of our

relation to it, never the whole relation as it would be defined by the systematic unity of these categories. This is the first reason for the impossibility of metaphysics: to succeed it must always either unite the categories sophistically or distort the content of our consciousness.

(Essence 65)

Like Nietzsche and Heidegger Dilthey seems to be looking for a mode of philosophical thought which can still be viable and valuable after the futility of metaphysics becomes clear. He makes a distinction between metaphysics as the systematic attempt to formulate a universally valid conceptual scheme and what he admires as the philosophical spirit:

The philosophical spirit is present wherever a thinker, free from the fashion of a philosophical system, examines what appears to be odd and obscure in man, like instinct, authority, or faith. It is present wherever investigators with a consciousness of method regress from their science to its ultimate grounds of justification or press forward to generalizations which connect and confirm several sciences. It is present wherever values of life and ideals are reexamined. What appears anywhere in chaotic or hostile struggle within an age or the heart of a man is to be reconciled through thought; what is obscure is to be clarified; what stands there in bare juxtaposition is to be mediated and connected. This spirit leaves no feeling of value and no striving in its immediacy, no precept and no knowledge in its isolation. In this sense the eighteenth century rightly called itself the philosophical century in virtue of its effective rule of

reason over the dark, unconscious, instinctive forces within us and the regress from every historical product to its origin and its right. (Essence 73)

He also sees in the historical consciousness a way out of the futility of philosophy and the relativism suggested by contradictory philosophical systems' claims to universal validity. The very idea of a world view seems to carry within it an attitude of relativism. Husserl recoiled from the notion that philosophies should be regarded "as art works of great artistic spirits" and that philosophy as such had "the unity of an art" (Crisis 389) The very idea of a world view was for him symptomatic of a crisis.

The conviction has certainly become dominant that philosophy is a task for man as struggling for his existence, man who has raised himself to autonomy in the European cultural development and sees himself as standing, thanks to the sciences, within the horizon of the infinities – and of the destinies these involve. The world-reflection of autonomous man necessarily leads to the transcendent as something which is unknowable and cannot be practically mastered. Man is capable only of arriving, by starting from his own position, from his horizons of knowledge and feeling, at certain conjectures and thereby of forming for himself certain ways of believing which, as his world-view, offer him a personal evidence for conjectures and for norms of action under the guidance of the conjecturally believed absolute. Such a posture also provides groups of men who bear within themselves a similar original direction with something like common understanding and mutual advancement.

A world-view is thus essentially an individual accomplishment, a sort of personal religious faith; but it is distinguished from traditional faith, that of revealed religion, through the fact that it makes no claim to an unconditioned truth binding for all men and communicable to all men: just as scientific truth about the absolute is not possible, so it is impossible to establish a world-view truth which is totally valid for each human being. Any such claim would mean that knowledge upon rational – i.e., scientific – grounds was possible about the absolute and its relation to man.

Philosophy is in danger, i.e. its future is endangered... (Crisis 390)

The first thing to acknowledge is just how well Dilthey painted himself into this corner. He is unequivocal about the fact that any world view is historically conditioned and that the study of history reveals the flowering of seemingly unlimited varieties of world view. At the same time he approaches this flowering as a scientist and looks for patterns or laws involved in their formation:

As the botanist classifies plants and investigates the laws of their growth, so must the analyst of philosophy hunt for the types of *Weltanschauung* and recognize the regularity in their formation. Such a comparative procedure raises the human mind above the conviction, rooted in its finitude, that in one of these *Weltanschauungen* it has grasped truth itself. As the objectivity of the great historian restrains him from passing judgment on the ideals of particular periods, so through historical comparisons the philosopher must understand the reflective consciousness,

which subjects the objective facts to itself, and thus assume his standpoint above them all. Then in him the historical aspect of consciousness is perfected. (Essence 41)

As the comparative study of languages, religions, and states reveal certain types, developmental lines and regularities of change, so can we demonstrate a typology of world views. All generalized types have to pass through historically conditioned and unique phases of individual structures. They are conditioned on the peculiarity of the region in which they originate. But to derive the type from the individualized conditioning was the grave error of the systematizers. Only a historical comparison with its own method can approach the task of establishing such types and their variations, developments and permutations. (Existence 29)

By checking at the door all recognition of claims to universal validity made by philosophical world views, Dilthey is able to enter a realm which is somehow “above,” and therefore outside of, history. This is the point of view of “historical consciousness” which makes it possible to survey the expressions of world views available in literary, artistic, religious, philosophical and even political texts or institutions and to discover in them patterns of meaning by which they can be related to one another. From the historical perspective it is possible to see how one world view evolved into or gave rise to another as historical circumstances changed. This historical perspective is not an absolute or eternal perspective which views all of history as the necessary unfolding of Reason or actualization of Freedom. It is a perspective which is able to access any given age by interpreting the data from scholarly research in an hermeneutical process made

possible by the understanding of the structure of world views and the relationship that exists between world views and life experience.

On the surface the possibility of such a point of view seems both obvious and self-contradictory. How can a being whose very nature involves “historicity” lift himself by his own bootstraps out of the historical situation in which he exists? By the same token the study of history which has flourished for quite a while seems to be built on this possibility. Certainly the easier position to defend is the more consistent one which would maintain that even the study of history is limited by the historical situation of the scholar and that any claim to achieve a perspective “above” history is delusional. It does seem as though Dilthey wants to have his cake and eat it too. Human nature and reality are ever the same even though the historical situation of the individual is always changing. The “structure” and the function of any world view is always the same although the content will vary with the historical circumstances and the “condition of the soul” of the individual formulating the world view. Surely what matters, though, is the content of the world view.

There is a core to the meaning of life, as the poet would like to portray it, which is the same for all ages. Thus there is something eternal about a great poet. But man is simultaneously a historical creature. When a new social order has been instituted and the meaning of life has changed, the poets of the preceding epoch no longer move us as they once moved their contemporaries. This is our situation today. We are awaiting the poet who can speak to us about our sufferings, our joys, and our struggles with life! (Poetry 173)

If the “meaning of life “changes when a new social order is instituted how can philosophy or any form of thought dream of providing the stability which Dilthey says human nature needs? What is “relativism” if not the idea that the “meaning of life” changes along with the social order? Does Dilthey’s resolution of this problem hinge on a notion of cultural progress comparable to the progress of scientific knowledge or is the issue of “relativism” a pseudo-problem in some way?

The first point to be made in Dilthey’s defense is that a world-view can be communal rather than just individual or personal in the way Husserl describes. The formation of a world view involves the expression or objectification of it at the very least in thought and generally in texts or works of art. Husserl does acknowledge the possibility of a shared world view which provides “something like common understanding and mutual advancement,” but the objectification of a fully developed and commonly held world view in tradition, custom and institutions functions in a way that Husserl’s description seems to underestimate. It does not, however, overcome the basic objection of relativism. Even if the entire population of the globe shared the same world view at some point, history shows us that other people have shared other world views under different circumstances. Moreover Husserl, like Dilthey, is looking for “guidance” from philosophy. The fact that the world view of the Third Reich can be shared by large numbers of people does not mean that it ought to be or that it is “valid” in any way.

There have obviously been a lot of people during the last century who felt that it was unrealistic to look to philosophy or any form of abstract thought for guidance. Their position is that there is no absolute right or wrong; there are only shared values. Groups of people who share a world view a like a fact of nature. The inevitable conflicts

between world views can be resolved only through negotiation or domination. It is certainly possible to interpret the history of civilization in this way, but there is surely little doubt that Dilthey would have balked at drawing these conclusions from his ideas.

To lift life to full awareness of cognition of reality, of appraisal of life, and of active performance through our wills, that is the slow and arduous task which all mankind performed in and through the evolution of world views.

(Existence 30)

There is certainly an optimistic evolutionary thread in Dilthey's thought which seems to imply that mankind is maturing and that increasing self-consciousness in all areas of life is riding in the wake of scientific progress in the cognition of reality. He seems to conceive of progress primarily through the metaphor of growth. An individual matures like a plant grows, and mankind as a whole matures through history as the individual does in the course of his life. Growth is part of life.

Life is the inner relation of mental activities in the system of the person. Experience of life is the growing meditation and reflection on life. It raises the relative, subjective, accidental, and separate elements in the rudimentary forms of purposive action to the insight into what is valuable and fitting for us. What do the passions mean in the whole economy of our life? What worth has sacrifice in a natural life, or honor or outward recognition? But the answers to such questions are sought not only in the individual's experience of life; this experience broadens to that which society achieves. Society is the comprehensive regulator of the life of feeling and impulse. In law and custom it restrains the unruly passions, as

the common life requires. Through division of labor, marriage, and property it creates conditions for the orderly satisfaction of the impulses, thus freeing men from their dreadful tyranny. Life wins room for the higher feelings and aspirations, and these can gain predominance. The experience of life which society acquires in such achievements leads to ever truer appraisals of life's values, and through public opinion gives them a secure, regulated position. Thus out of itself society generates a scale of values, which then influences the individual. On this social basis personal experience of life now arises in many ways from lived experience of value as its primary material and makes itself felt. Other lessons we learn as we witness the passions of men – emotions which ruin them and hence their relations to others, their consequent sufferings. And we supplement these personal experiences of life through history, which shows human destiny writ large, and through poetry. This above all reveals the painfully sweet stress of passion, its illusion and its dissolution. All things work together to make man freer and ready for resignation and the joy of surrender to the great objectivities of life. (Essence 69)

What can one say in the face of this? In retrospect it is painfully ironic to see a German intellectual in 1907 espousing such a belief, but in all honesty even today there is something stirring and even inspirational in the expression of it. There is no explanation of where the “higher feelings and aspirations” come from nor of why our collective experience is guaranteed to yield “ever truer appraisals of life's values,” but there is something about the tone of it which reminds me of the opening of Elgar's First

Symphony. I feel as though I am being carried along by Dilthey's philosophical passion in a way that lets me share his certainty and his commitment to "higher feelings and aspirations." This is not the no-nonsense positivism of a pragmatic scientist. It is a grand march in which reverberate all of the greatest achievements of Western art and literature. It makes me want to sign on for "the joy of surrender to the great objectivities of life" even though it is difficult for me to understand what that really connotes.

Dilthey is describing how human values are transmitted by cultural institutions and traditions which influence the development of individuals. Even if one recoils from the suggestion that anything resembling "public opinion" can make a positive contribution to the evolution of the species, Dilthey has put his finger on the way in which the self and the world are interwoven so that a young man can feel the need to awaken from the nightmare of history. The genius Dilthey admires is the individual who formulates his own world view based on his own lived experience and perhaps an assimilation of the lived experience of others rather than just accepting what is handed to him by tradition, but he also seems to be saying that the achievements of the genius are objectified and embodied in the cultural institutions and traditions in a way that make them available for all. What is for Dilthey a way of standing on the shoulders of our forebears becomes for Joyce an oppressive nightmare and for Heidegger an "inauthentic" mode of human existence.

Dilthey is also describing how an individual or a society can expand its horizons through the appreciation of art and philosophy. "Horizon" became an obscure technical term in Heidegger, but its use in Dilthey still has the ring of the cliché that education can "broaden one's horizons." What exactly happens in the appreciation of art is one of the

central themes in Dilthey's thought. The hermeneutic process, which was for Schleiermacher a process by which one could access the intentions of the creator of a work, reaches deeper in Dilthey to become a process by which the lived experience expressed in the work can be "relived." Regarding method in human studies Dilthey says,

The subjects of all statements in these studies are socially interrelated, individual selves. These are, first of all, single persons. Gestures, words, and acts are their manifestations. The problem of the human studies is to relive these selves and to grasp them in thought. (Essence 2)

For Dilthey literature and the forms of literature which he classifies as "poetry" occupy a unique position in the disciplines of human sciences. This is partially because works of literature provide more complete and direct access to the world view of a previous age than any other cultural artifact available for study, but it is also because poetry can express a world view in a unique way. Dilthey especially admires the poetry of Goethe and Hölderlin, and he recognizes that poetry in modern times has assumed a role in culture that it did not always have:

In the eighteenth century, poetry became a dominant power in Germany; it became conscious of a capacity – rooted in genius – to generate a world of its own. This capacity was embodied in Goethe. Thus poetry was led to recognize the following fundamental truth: poetry is not the imitation of a reality which already exists prior to it; not is it the adornment of truths or spiritual meanings which could have been expressed independently. The aesthetic capacity is a creative power for the production of a meaning that

transcends reality and that could never be found in abstract thought. Indeed, it is a way or mode of viewing the world. Thus poetry was acknowledged as an independent power for intuiting the world and life. It was raised to an organon for understanding the world, alongside science and religion. Both truths and exaggerations were mixed in this tenet and it is clear that any further poetics will have great difficulty in separating the two. (Poetry 44)

In what may ultimately be a mysterious process, the expression of a world view embodies the lived experience behind that world view in the concrete aspects of a work or act. The person who is able to fully appreciate the work or grasp its “meaning” is one in whom the same lived experience is evoked by the work. Dilthey explores this process in his attempts to develop a theory of poetry:

The way in which we become conscious of the external world – namely, as resistance to our will – explains the basic sense in which we spontaneously and inevitably attribute something inner to what is given to sense as outer. The essence of aesthetic apprehension and creation, i.e. the *relation of feeling and image*, meaning and appearance, inner and outer, is based on this. (Poetry 210)

The relation between feeling and image, between meaning and appearance, does not originate either in the taste of the listener or in the imagination of the artist. Rather, it emerges in the life of the human mind, which expresses its content in gestures and sound, transposes the power of its impulses to a beloved form or to nature, and enjoys the intensification

of its existence in image of the conditions that produced it. In such moments beauty is present in life itself, existence becomes a celebration, and reality becomes poetry. (Poetry 121)

The representation of an event in poetry is the fictitious appearance of a reality, relived and offered for reliving, lifted out of the context of existence and our relations of will and interest. (Essence 53)

The process by which one “understands” a poem is for Dilthey essentially the reverse of the process by which the poem is created. A lived experience is expressed in language, in this case with the added dimension of fictitiousness in the expression. The “style” of the work is the embodiment in rhythm and tone of aspects of the lived experience in such a way that the sensitive reader can “relive” the experience.

The style of an artwork produces an impression which is not adequately characterized as pleasure, satisfaction, or a delightful feeling. Rather, a definite form of activity is imparted to the psychic life of the perceiver, and in this activity the psyche is broadened, intensified, or expanded, as it were. Style exudes an energy which enhances the vitality of the perceiver and his feeling of life. The attempt to re-create the activity of a great soul, as embodied in a fresco of Michelangelo or in a fugue of Bach, calls up in me a corresponding energy and thus, in a very specific manner firmly established by the object, heightens my own vitality. Thus feeling here is only the reflex of the exertion of psychic energy and activity by which I appropriate the artwork. Through feeling I obtain a reflexive awareness of this inner activity. Consequently the processes involved in the *aesthetic*

apprehension of reality, in artistic *creation*, and finally, artistic *appreciation* are closely *akin* to one another. (Poetry 206)

The bridge which connects historical periods is shared human nature. Someone else's experience may be different from mine for a host of reasons, but I can still relive his experience if it is expressed in a great work of art.

The supreme principle of understanding the world does indeed lie in the psychophysical nature of man, which he then transfers to the entire world. There exist *stable lawful relations* between *inner states* and *outer images* which manifest themselves in dreams and insanity as well as in language, myth, and metaphysical and conceptual poetry. If we conceive a natural symbol as an image that stands in a stable, lawful relation to an inner state, then comparative considerations show that our psychological nature provides the basis for a sphere of natural symbols found in dreams and insanity as well as for those found in language, myth, and poetry. (Poetry 158)

For Dilthey the psychophysical nature of man is presumably relatively stable. If it is evolving, it is not doing so in such a way as to sever all connection to the origins of our current nature. My historical circumstances may determine the way I experience reality – they certainly determine the “world” in which I live – but the fact that I am a human being enables me to appropriate, or make my own, the lived experience of someone from a very different world when the expression of that experience has survived and is properly interpreted. When this happens, the world in which I live expands in some way. I may be forced to reconceive my own world view or feel a need to integrate this

experience with my own personal experience. Dilthey is fairly eloquent about the individuals who are able to do this. He gives little indication of how the individual copes when he is unable to achieve this integration. One imagines there must be degrees of integration of the self ranging from insanity to a pinnacle represented perhaps by Goethe.

Even though he knows that human nature needs the “stability and fixity of the cosmic picture, of the appraisal of life, of the guidance of will” (Existence 30) promised by a world view, Dilthey is willing to forego any hope of achieving the ultimate, universally valid world view in exchange for hope of progress towards a better and better approximation of it. This is why his final note is sometimes “resignation.”

Indeed, man’s transcendent consciousness of a spiritual being is itself only the projection of the greatest religious experience, in which he realizes that his will is independent of the whole natural order. This origin of the religious *Weltanschauung* colors every one of its features. The basic form of vision and confirmation, imposed by this origin, controls – secretly, dangerously, and irresistibly – every religious creation. In philosophy, on the other hand, there is a restful balance of mental attitudes, a recognition of what each of them yields, accordingly a use of the particular sciences and a joy in secular institutions. But there is also incessant labor to discover a universally valid coherence in all this, and an ever growing experience of the limits of knowledge, of the impossibility of combining objectively what is given in the various attitudes – hence resignation.

(Essence 50f)

The philosophical spirit seems to be a commitment to openness and growth. It acknowledges the inevitable yearning for a closed and absolute solution, and it even seems to derive creative energy from that yearning; but it is resigned to the impossibility of achieving perfect understanding. Instead it savors the endless variety possible in human life and seeks to increase its own vitality by assimilating alien world views through the appreciation of art, literature, philosophy, religion and all aspects of culture. What drives the philosophical spirit is the same impetus which gives rise to conceptual thought of even the most basic or primitive sort.

The most general characteristic, which belongs to all functions of philosophy, is rooted in the nature of objective awareness and conceptual thought. So regarded, philosophy appears as only the most consistent, vigorous, and comprehensive thinking, and it is separated from the empirical consciousness by no fixed boundary. From the form of conceptual thinking it follows that judging advances to highest generalizations, the forming and classifying of concepts to a conceptual architectonic with a highest apex; relating proceeds to an all-comprehensive system, and grounding to an ultimate principle. In this activity thinking refers to the common object of all the thinking acts of various persons, the systematic unity of sense-perception: the world. To form this world the plurality of things is ordered in space, and the variety of their changes and movements in time. All feelings and volitional acts of this world are arranged through the definite location of the bodies belonging to them and the perceptual elements woven into them All

values, purposes, and goods, posited in these feelings or volitional acts, are fitted into it. Human life is embraced by it. And now thinking strives express and to unite the whole content of perceptions, lived experiences, values, and purposes, as it is lived and given in the empirical consciousness (experience and the sciences of experience). In so doing thinking moves from the concatenation of things and of changes in the world toward a world-concept. For a ground it regresses to a world-principle, a world-cause. It seeks to determine the value, sense, and meaning of the world, and it asks for a world-purpose. Wherever this procedure of generalizing, of integrating, and of logical grounding is borne on by the cognitive drive and frees itself from the particular need and the limited interest, it passes over into philosophy. And wherever the subject, who relates himself to this world in his activity, rises in the same way to reflection on this activity of his, the reflection is philosophical.

Accordingly, the fundamental characteristic in all functions of philosophy is the drive of the mind which transcends the attachment to the determinate, finite, limited interest and strives to fit into some inclusive, definitive idea every theory which has arisen from a restricted need. This drive of thought springs from its rationality, and meets needs of human nature which well nigh defy reliable analysis: the joy in knowledge, ultimate security in relation to the world, the endeavor to release life from its restricted conditions. Every mental attitude seeks a fixed point, free from relativity. (Essence 74f)

Rationality as the attempt to integrate or unify into a coherent whole both the self and the world out of the raw material of lived experience seems to be a response to the limitations of the human condition. To be a particular individual is to be limited and mortal. The very thing that makes us what we are is the problem to be overcome. It is tempting to view this schema in terms of psychoanalytic theory and to describe Dilthey's rationality as a defense mechanism in the face of death. What reason or human nature seeks is permanence and freedom from relativity. The question then becomes whether reason really has the last word in Dilthey's own world view. I see two indications that it may not.

The first is in his ambivalence towards religion. Generally in his schema of world views Dilthey views religion as a primitive form of philosophy and science. Dilthey approaches religion with the eye of a psychological anthropologist and almost seems to view the religious world view as a paranoid projection which sees a personal force behind inexplicable natural phenomena. The religious world view is one which cannot withstand the challenge of science and which crumbles under the weight of its own attempts to establish the universal validity of its concepts. There is also, however, another thread in Dilthey which is very sympathetic to the mystical traditions and his descriptions of "objective idealism" as a more evolved world view sound very much like a form of pantheistic mysticism which he makes no attempt to justify rationally.

I was particularly struck by one description of the origins of religion in the experience of an individual and the way it succumbs to a need to establish its universal validity:

The religious attitude is subjective and determined by particular lived experiences. An inexplicable, supremely personal element is present, which must seem absurd to anyone who does not share these experiences. This attitude remains confined to the limits inherent in its origin in one-sided, historically and personally conditioned religious experience, and inherent also in the inner form of religious intuition and the nîsus to the transcendent. But now, as the religious attitude in its cultural context encounters scientific results, conceptual thinking, and secular education, it comes to see its vulnerability in all its inner power, its limitations in every claim to communication and influence abroad. The religious man who feels deeply enough to perceive these barriers and be troubled must strive to surmount them. The mental law, that general ideas can be completed only in conceptual thought, forces him into the same course. The religious *Weltanschauung* strives to become philosophical. (Essence 51)

One way to read this is that there is a form of lived experience which cannot be expressed in a universally understandable manner and therefore cannot be communicated via language or art. It seems possible for others to share this experience, in which case they will understand the concrete expressions of it; but it is not clear why some can share the experience and others cannot. Part of the explanation seems to be that there are historical dimensions to the experience which are no longer accessible. I may never get the full import of Egyptian hieroglyphics because too much has been lost. There is also the indication that there is a personal component in the experience which is inaccessible to me just as the experience of a schizophrenic may be inaccessible to me. The idea that

an experience is too personal to be communicated, however, seems to undercut everything that Dilthey wants to say, unless there is some other form of communication which he has not addressed.

It is also possible to regard the attempt to express a religious *Weltanschauung* in conceptual thought as a failure of nerve, as though the scientific culture has bullied the religious person into abandoning his deeply felt world view in favor of a more acceptable one. This is obviously a risky line of thought for philosophical inquiry. It would seem to be headed in the direction of championing the right to teach Intelligent Design on the grounds that we need to respect the religious convictions of a large number of people in our community. The question is whether the literal-minded fundamentalism of believers who support the teaching of intelligent design is based on a personal religious experience of the sort Dilthey had in mind. My first association with the idea of a religious experience with a “supremely personal” element in it which seems absurd to the outsider is Soren Kierkegaard, and I am reasonably certain this is more in line with what Dilthey had in mind. However, Dilthey does seem to have very little to say about the dangers of close-minded dogmatism, except that it will inevitably give way to rational thought.

The second indication that Dilthey values something more than rationality is in his eulogies on poetry. In what sometimes seems to be the official schema the poetic world view is a pre-cursor of the philosophical world view, as though poetry naturally evolves from intimate lyrics which capture the particular to grand reflections of the meaning of life which capture a world view and embody the spirit of an age. The more poetry tries to embrace life in its entirety, the more it seems forced into the realm of philosophical concepts until eventually it must become philosophy. However, once it

becomes clear that metaphysics is doomed, the value of poetry seems to rise as philosophy sinks to its knees. Certainly poetry makes better use of all the resources of language to express and communicate a world view; and, since no single world view deserves to be crowned king, the poet may better serve society than the thinker who is obsessed with unifying everything into one coherent structure.

But the more freely he draws from the experience of life, the more he is subject to the power of life, which is always presenting new aspects to him. So the history of poetry reveals the endless possibilities of feeling and perceiving life, which are contained in human nature and its relations to the world. The religious relation, which forms communities and creates tradition, and the character of philosophical thinking, which is expressed in the continuity of stable, conceptual structures, tend to limit the *Weltanschauung* to fixed types. The poet is the true man even in his free surrender of himself to the action of life upon him. The common man's reflection on life is too weak for him to reach a secure position in the modern anarchy of views of life. In the poet the effect of the various aspects of life is too strong, and his sensitivity to its nuances is too great, for one definite type of *Weltanschauung* always to express adequately what life tells him. (Essence 58)

It would seem that the charge of "relativism" is dismissed as soon as Dilthey acknowledges the futility of metaphysics and moves on to celebrate the philosophical spirit and the endless gifts of poetry. He may not have a completely adequate philosophical or psychological explanation of how it is possible to relive the experience

of ancient poets by reading their works, but the requirement that he provide such a thing grows out of the experience of being profoundly touched by reading literature from the past and feeling that somehow our view of the world has been altered or that we have been made more alive, even if only momentarily. It is the *presence* of great works of art in our lives that amazes us and makes us want to find an explanation. If the past were only a junk yard to be scavenged (*as it seems to be for some contemporary artists*), we would not bother thinking about it (*and we would be justified in regarding the work of these contemporary artists as simply more junk as well*).