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ARTICLE

The Critique of Historical Reason and the Challenge of Historicism

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Abstract
This article examines Wilhelm Dilthey's project of a critique of historical reason and the reproach of historicism addressed by Heinrich Rickert. Through a comparative analysis of their respective attempts to establish a philosophical grounding for the human sciences, this article demonstrates that Dilthey and Rickert, despite their disagreement, converge toward a productive reinterpretation of the crisis of historicism and pave the way for a reconfiguration of the relationship between philosophy and history. The article focuses on three aspects of the historicist view: the importance of the particular, the historically situated character of the knowing subject, and the primacy of historical consciousness.

Résumé
Dans cet article, nous examinons le projet d'une critique de la raison historique mené par Wilhelm Dilthey et l'accusation d'historicisme portée contre lui par Heinrich Rickert. En comparant leurs tentatives respectives d'offrir un fondement philosophique aux sciences humaines, nous montrons que Dilthey et Rickert, en dépit de leurs divergences, convergent vers une réinterprétation productive de l'historicisme et conduisent à une reconfiguration de la relation entre philosophie et histoire. Cet article analyse trois implications théoriques et pratiques de l'historicisme : la mise en valeur du particulier, le caractère historiquement situé du sujet connaissant et la primauté de la conscience historique.

Keywords: crisis; critique; Dilthey; historicism; neo-Kantianism; relativism; Rickert

I. Introduction

In 1911, Edmund Husserl writes a letter to Wilhelm Dilthey in which he accuses the German philosopher of adopting a historicist stance. Husserl mobilizes the term to denounce the radical scepticism toward any foundational project that historicist philosophies encourage. According to Husserl, Dilthey's philosophical position negates the quest for scientifically valid truths in favour of a collection of dispersed and singular world-views or *Weltanschauungen* (Husserl, 1910–1911). This accusation points to a larger problem within critical philosophy of history at the turn of the century: the dangerous kinship between the belief in the pre-eminence of historical singularity and moral scepticism.

In this regard, Husserl shares the view of the neo-Kantian philosopher Heinrich Rickert, who formulated an attack against *Weltanschauungsphilosophie* in the 1910s

and criticized more thoroughly the different forms of philosophies of life in his 1920 work entitled *Die Philosophie des Lebens*. According to Rickert, Dilthey represents one of the chief proponents of an approach that insists on the primacy of historical experience, which leads to a relativization of our epistemological and moral categories that in turn fuels the so-called crisis of historicism in social science and philosophy (Rickert, 1920). Dilthey (2019b) promptly denies these accusations of historicism and reiterates what has been, throughout his life, his overarching ambition: to determine, through what he calls a "critique of historical reason," the fundamental conditions of a universally valid knowledge of social and historical reality (Dilthey, 1989, p. 165).

Contemporary scholarship on the German historicist tradition, and on the crisis of historicism that peaks during the first decades of the 20th century, focuses on the damaging effects of the historicist doctrine on historical science or on philosophy — or both (Bambach, 1995, 2013; Beiser, 2009, 2011, 2013; Paul, 2008; Strauss, 1949; Troeltsch, 1922). Indeed, the diagnosis of a 'crisis' of historicism, for all its ambiguous connotations and associations, often comes with two loyal travel companions: relativism and nihilism (Paul & van Veldhuizen, 2021). Representatives of the Baden school of neo-Kantianism are among those who seek to preserve the discipline of philosophy from the detrimental effects of historicization. They thus oppose those who, like Dilthey, proceed to a *rapprochement* of philosophy and history. The frictions between neo-Kantianism and the different types of *Lebensphilosophie* at the beginning of the 20th century reveal an enduring philosophical problem: that of a tension between universal validity and historical individuality (see Rickert, 1932).

Drawing on the confrontation between Dilthey and Rickert, I demonstrate that their respective answers to the challenge of historicism allow us to revisit the negative connotations associated with the term. The surprising kinship between Dilthey's and Rickert's philosophical projects shows that there is more to historicism than relativism. Historicism as a mode of interpretation can also lead to the recognition of the philosophical value of historical diversity and the benefits of historical consciousness. If Husserl and Rickert are correct in associating Dilthey's enterprise with historicism, this article contends that it might not be altogether negative, and that Rickert also espouses several premises of the historicist doctrine.

To make my case, I proceed in three steps. In Section II, I expose the roots of the crisis of historicism as an identity crisis of philosophy to set up the historicist challenge that both Dilthey and Rickert confront. In Section III, I analyze Dilthey's project of a critique of historical reason as a response to this crisis and examine the elements that might earn him the title of historicist, such as the philosophical attention to the particular, the emphasis on lived experience, and the primacy of historical consciousness. In doing so, I focus on the aspects by which Rickert, despite his criticism, stands in close proximity to Dilthey's position. Drawing on Rickert's argument against the confusion of orders between philosophy and history and Dilthey's response, I argue that historicism can be partly freed from its negative connotations when understood not as relativism, but as pluralism. As this article demonstrates, the project of a critical philosophy of history that Dilthey and Rickert share brings to light the positive impact of the crisis of historicism toward a reassessment of the traditional conception of knowledge and reason during the first decades of the 20th century.

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The two philosophers' confrontation with the historicist *Fragestellung* remains instructive on two accounts. On a historical level, this article clarifies the opposition between two prominent figures of critical philosophy of history and illustrates the unexpected kinship between the two perspectives. On a philosophical level, this article illuminates the enduring relevance of the question that the historicist tradition raises about the place and value of individuality in philosophical inquiry (see Rorty et al., 1984). The project of a critique of historical reason shows that a focus on historical consciousness might enrich, rather than endanger, philosophical activity.

II. Facing the Crisis: Neo-Kantianism and Critical Philosophy of History

The *Methodenstreit*, or debate, surrounding the object, method, and foundations of social sciences at the end of the 19th century and during the first decades of the 20th century occurs against the backdrop of a crisis (Gordon & McCormick, 2013; Troeltsch, 1922). This crisis is presented by philosophers such as Dilthey, Ernst Troeltsch, Georg Simmel, Husserl, and Martin Heidegger as a crisis of the meaning of history as a discipline (*Historie*) and process (*Geschichte*). The belief in the rationality and progress of the unfolding of history (Hegel, 1953) is radically put into question first by the German historical school and later by critical philosophy of history (Simmel, 1892; Windelband, 1980).

Historicism, defined in the 19th century in epistemological terms as a focus on historical methods against speculative philosophy of history (Jollivet, 2013; Megill, 1997) — especially in the work of Leopold von Ranke — morphs in the 20th century into a practical doctrine of relativism, one that affirms that "human nature, thought, and value depend upon their specific historical and cultural context, so that they are not eternal and universal but changing and local" (Beiser, 2013, p. 117; see also Heussi, 1932). Earlier analyses of the crisis of historicism confirm this view. Troeltsch proposes a similar definition in 1922 in *Der Historismus und seine Probleme*, where he goes so far as to describe historicism as a "stream without beginning, end and shore" (*ein Strom ohne Anfang, Ende und Ufer*) (Troeltsch, 1922, p. 573).[1] Troeltsch thus considers the emergence of historicism as a symptom of the "vanishing of all stable norms and ideals of the human being" (Troeltsch, 1925, p. 628) to be inevitably replaced by historical and immanent self-knowledge.

Philosophy pays the price for this historical revolution. The 19th century witnesses a crisis of legitimation of philosophy as a discipline (Bambach, 2013). The ever-increasing development of historical studies and the growing awareness of historical diversity are accompanied by a premise that existentially threatens traditional philosophy: *Geschichtlichkeit*, or historicity (Heidegger et al., 2003). The consequence for philosophy is obvious: if the claim that the validity of norms is limited in its scope by a given historical horizon is correct, then philosophy's status as a discipline seeking universal truth is challenged (see Mannheim, 1952; Troeltsch, 1922). In its most radical form, the historicist view makes it impossible to provide a normative justification for the pursuit of the good life or the search for what a good or just society ought to be. The crisis of historicism thus conveys a general uneasiness with the practical

[1] All translations from German and French sources are mine, unless indicated otherwise.

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consequences of an overemphasis on history and singularity (Wittkau-Horgby, 1992). On this point, Herman Paul and Adriaan van Veldhuizen note, citing a theology professor in the 1940s: "Historicism is a bad philosophy resulting from a hypertrophical growth of the historical view" (Paul & van Veldhuizen, 2021, p. 3).

Despite fundamental methodological divergences, Dilthey and Rickert answer the crisis of historicism in a similar manner. They both wish to save philosophy from complete historicization, but they also want to make philosophy more attuned to the variations of the socio-historical world. For Rickert, the return to Immanuel Kant is seen as a potential way to solve philosophy's identity crisis. For the neo-Kantians, as Frederick C. Beiser notes, "[h]aving the right interpretation of Kant was therefore one and the same as having the right conception of philosophy itself" (Beiser, 2009, p. 11). Kant's recognition of the limit on what we can possibly know — nothing beyond experience — sets the starting point for the neo-Kantians. However, this return to Kant cannot be a full return, since one now must come to terms with post-Hegelian thought and the emergence of historical consciousness. Philosophy must redefine its status and tasks as critical philosophy of history and must be reborn as a second order science (Rickman, 1988, p. 87). Rickert embraces this Kantian return set against Hegel's speculative philosophy by interpreting the criticist heritage in terms of a transcendental philosophy of values that would avoid the pitfalls of subjectivism (Rickert, 1921, pp. 3–4).

According to Dilthey, the resolution of this crisis could be achieved through a critique of historical reason, which he defines in succinct terms as the attempt "to examine the nature and condition of historical consciousness" (Dilthey, 1996a p. 389). Dilthey thus presents his project as a heterodox sequel to Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, to which he adds the missing category of the understanding of the historical world (Dilthey, 2002, p. 310; Makkreel, 1975, p. 242). We can credit Dilthey for this novel application of Kant's criticism to the newly discovered 'continent of history.' As Sylvie Mesure points out, the critical dimension lies in the liberating force of the emerging historical consciousness against metaphysical illusions (Mesure, 1992). The Diltheyian critique of history should be understood as the equivalent, for metaphysics of history, of the Kantian critique against the systems of dogmatic metaphysics (Mesure, 1992).

Dilthey's Kantian retrieval, however, remains ambiguous. Unlike the more orthodox disciples of the Heidelberg school — with which he had conflictual relations — Dilthey strongly rejects the Kantian transcendental view of the subject (Dilthey, 2002, p. 130). As he writes in his draft for a "Critique of Historical Reason," a planned but unfinished continuation of the *Aufbau* written between 1907 and 1910, "[w]e must leave the pure and refined air of Kant's critique of pure reason to do justice to the completely different nature of historical objects" (Dilthey, 2002, p. 298). Moreover, as Katherina Kinzel notes, the announced proximity with Kant tends to mask the fact that Dilthey's epistemological position "opposes the perceived dualisms of Kantian criticism" (Kinzel, 2018, p. 351). She adds that Dilthey "questions the distinctions between intuition and understanding, between theoretical and practical philosophy, and between the transcendental and the empirical" (Kinzel, 2018, p. 351). Commentators such as Rudolf A. Makkreel have argued in favour of an *affinity* between Kant and Dilthey, but the original thesis that Makkreel defends, that of

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reading Kant's third *Critique* together with Dilthey's aesthetic philosophy, does not rely on Dilthey's explicit position toward Kantian philosophy (Makkreel, 1975). In fact, Makkreel is clear about the extent to which Dilthey distances himself from Kant despite a shared initial impulse to reject traditional metaphysical dogma, arguing that Dilthey "found that the categories of the Kantian epistemology were inadequate to cope with historical experience" (Makkreel, 1975, p. 8). In that regard, Dilthey's status within neo-Kantianism is ambiguous. Many commentators have emphasized the existentialist tone of his later works and the lack of safeguard against ethical relativism (Aron, 1969; Jollivet, 2013). Others have defended his philosophy of the human sciences and its ambition to provide a coherent structure for knowledge acquired through particular social sciences (Kinzel, 2018; Mesure, 1992; Rickman, 1988).

For all the differences in their respective approaches, Dilthey and Rickert nonetheless share a similar epistemological aim: to provide a solid philosophical foundation for the emerging 'human studies' or 'sciences of the mind' (*Geisteswissenschaften*) or 'cultural sciences' (*Kulturwissenschaften*) through a new critical philosophy of history.[2] They both adopt the same neo-Kantian starting point, which is to answer the question: under what conditions is objective historical knowledge possible? Already in his *Introduction to the Human Sciences* published in 1883, Dilthey seeks to establish the condition of an objective knowledge of the socio-historical world (Dilthey, 1989). Rickert pursues a similar project with the publication of his influential work on cultural science and natural science in 1899, in which he demonstrates the need for rethinking the scientific foundations of the cultural sciences (Rickert, 1962). He seeks to explain why "cultural life, because of the *concrete* particularity of each of its *actual* instances, must be represented not only in general terms, but *also* in terms of its unique individuality, and therefore historically, if science is to do full justice to all aspects of its subject matter" (Rickert, 1962, p. xiii).[3]

However, the two philosophers part ways in regard to delimiting the domain of sovereignty of historical consciousness and the role of lived experience. What one sees as a threat to the integrity of philosophy, the other sees as its necessary refoundation. Three elements contribute to a historicist reading of the Diltheyian project of a critique of historical reason: a) the attention to the particular, b) the insistence on the situated character of the knowing subject and on lived experience, and c) the primacy of historical consciousness. In examining these aspects, I demonstrate that if the accusation of historicism held against Dilthey is founded, it is not altogether negative and that Rickert, despite his reservation, also shares several of these historicist insights.

III. Dilthey's Elective Affinities with Historicism and Rickert's Critique

a) The Attention to the Particular

Dilthey and Rickert share a similar diagnosis on the practical effects of the crisis of historicism. In a conference speech delivered in 1898, Dilthey warns against the

[2] For a discussion of the normatively charged debates about the choice of the term *Geisteswissenschaften* and *Kulturwissenschaften*, see Makkreel, 1975, Chapter 1; see also Rickert, 1932.

[3] Rickert also mentions, in the preface to the second edition, his gratitude for the work of Dilthey (Rickert, 1962).

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dangers of the domination of science over life. He suggests that science, despite its great achievements, leaves us at loss when considering the fundamental questions of the meaning and value of our existence (Dilthey, 2019a). While the progress in science since the 17th century led to a progressive mastery of nature, the moral and political spheres did not in fact advance at the same pace. At the dawn of the 20th century, Dilthey thus writes that "[t]his age is no wiser with respect to the great mystery of the origin of things, the value of our existence, or the ultimate worth of our activity than were the Greeks in the Ionian or Italian colonies or the Arabs during the age of Averroes" (Dilthey, 2019a, p. 146).

According to Dilthey, the loss of faith in science's ability to answer the most fundamental questions can lead to scepticism, and if left unchecked, nihilism (Holborn, 1950). Dilthey thus experiences the crisis of meaning of scientific inquiry as an existential problem, which further reinforces his belief in the urgent need not only for a new method of inquiry in the social sciences, but for a new *Grundlegung*, a new foundation for our knowledge about the human world in a broader sense.

In "The Concept of Philosophy," published in 1910, Rickert presents a similar defence of the practical role of philosophy as a source of meaning. Unlike the empirical sciences, which provide specific answers to specific problems, philosophy deals with the fundamental quest for meaning: what is the aim of our existence? What ought we to do? Philosophy should "interrogate everything that can be seriously interrogated, and ask all the questions that other sciences do not want to answer" (Rickert, 1910, p. 6). Both Dilthey and Rickert think that philosophy can fulfill its function only if it stands in greater proximity to the cultural and ethical world.

There is thus a specific angle from which the crisis of historicism can be interpreted in positive terms: through philosophy's relation to the knowledge of historical individuality. The crisis of historicism opens new avenues for rethinking rationalism in dynamic rather than static terms (Mannheim, 1952) and for bringing traditional academic philosophy back to the concrete question of the meaning of our individual and collective existence (Beiser, 2013, p. 120). This practical starting point and return to philosophy's fundamental questions are in part a consequence of the rise of historicism, which encourages a venture into the concrete manifestations of life — and in turn a blurring of the line between historical and philosophical inquiry.

In two of his major works, the *Introduction to the Human Sciences* and *The Formation of the Historical World in the Human Sciences*, Dilthey provides a comprehensive study of the historical deployment of the various aspects of human existence. The *Geisteswissenschaften* — such as psychology (which has, in Dilthey's project, a privileged status), history, economics, philology, political science, cultural studies — do not produce abstract knowledge. They are related to fundamental questions about how to live. Dilthey's effort to provide a new philosophical grounding for the human sciences stems from his critique of positivism and naturalism. In his view, the attempt to make the *Geisteswissenschaften* fit into the model of the natural sciences can only result in a mutilation of social-historical reality. Instead, one needs to pay attention to the processes involved in knowing about history (*Geschichte*), which means to investigate how one comes to acquire valid knowledge about the singular, the unique, the unrepeatable. Dilthey reminds us many times over that philosophy does not deal with pure spirits but with living beings who constitute themselves through their past (Dilthey, 1989).

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Furthermore, in his view, philosophy can be a practical guide only if it considers the social situation of individuals (Makkreel & Rodi, 2019). This will be, for Dilthey, the task attributed to philosophy: to find an epistemological grounding for the human studies that would not disintegrate into relativism (Makkreel, 1975, p. 53).

In the *Limits of Concept Formation in Natural Sciences*, Rickert's second book published in 1896, he establishes the foundations of his epistemology for the cultural sciences. Similar in that regard to Dilthey, he shows that history is deserving of philosophical treatment, not as philosophy of history in the Hegelian or Comtian sense, but in view of the elaboration of a theory of historical singularity (Rickert, 1986, p. 4). Philosophical inquiry, to be deemed scientific, had until that point tried to mould itself onto the model of the natural sciences with limited and problematic results and left the *Kulturwissenschaften* without adequate foundation. His project, Rickert writes, "developed from the conviction that a lack of philosophical understanding of the nature of the historical sciences is one of the most serious defects in the philosophy of our time" (Rickert, 1986, p. 16).

In his subsequent work, including his methodical analysis of the logic of history in *Science and History*, Rickert continues in his attempt to answer the Kantian-inspired question about the conditions under which a universal knowledge of the past is possible. His answer is: through the discovery of the "inner logical structure of all historical concept formation" (Rickert, 1962, pp. 2–3). By using philosophy as a 'second-order' science capable of defining the specific concepts of the *Kulturwissenschaften*, Rickert demonstrates that the study of the cultural world can achieve the status of an objective science, not despite the singular character of the cultural goods it purports to understand, but because of it.

A central premise of the historicist tradition, starting with Giambattista Vico, is thus common to both Dilthey and Rickert: a defence of knowledge of the particular. While this fact is more apparent in Dilthey's case, Rickert's historical orientation is often neglected in favour of his systematic philosophy of values. However, both denounce philosophers of history who abandon singular facts in the search of immutable laws of history. They do not deny the utility and necessity of nomological knowledge but insist on the fact that the specificity and autonomy of historical knowledge have been neglected (Dilthey, 1989, 2002; Rickert, 1962). As Wilhelm Windelband, a representative of Southwest neo-Kantianism, puts it in his Friburg Rectorial Address in 1894, "[o]ur entire traditional theory of concept, proposition, and inference is still tailored to the Aristotelian principle according to which the general proposition is the focal point of logical investigation" (Windelband, 1980, p. 177). Further still, the successful results brought by the natural sciences reaffirmed this primacy of general laws over singularity. Against this strong association between science and universality, critical philosophers of history take on the task of describing the richness of the historical world and the peculiar nature of the material it offers for a scientific inquiry of a different — albeit valid — kind.

It is important here to insist on what unites Dilthey's and Rickert's respective projects. For both, generalization is not the sole aim of science. Using history as the paradigmatic science of the particular, they insist on the fact that when we engage our attention toward a historical object, we do so with the desire of developing a feeling, a sympathy for the past in its individuality, "which Goethe correctly saw to be the

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finest fruits of historical observation" (Dilthey, 1989, p. 140). For them, the empathy with the object is the precondition of the understanding of the particular, the unique. For Dilthey in particular, the human sciences engage the whole self in the understanding of another perspective (Dilthey, 2002, p. 298). The very notion of understanding (*Verstehen*) applies to sciences that do not aim primarily at generalization, but at grasping the particular. To give life to "bloodless shadows of the past" (Dilthey, 2002, p. 222), one needs to re-enact them through their unique historical features.

In Rickert's logic of the cultural sciences, the subject, through the activity of valuing, can grasp the singularity of the past. In doing so, the historian or philosopher performs a task akin to Dilthey's empathy for the object. There are feeling and volition involved in the relationship the subject creates with the object she seeks to understand (Rickert, 1962, p. 20). In a discussion of Ranke's work, Rickert explains that the German historian succeeded at reconstructing the past "not by being neutral, but by manifesting a universal *sympathy*" (Rickert, 1962, p. 86). In other terms, the affective participation in the object is a prerequisite to understanding. This empathic disposition is a central component in the individualizing process of selection of historical reality (i.e. what will spark the historian's interest and how she will define her object). Rickert argues that this initial empathic impulsion with the particular in history should be recognized as a *moment* in the scientific process rather than as a dimension to conceal.

The main difference is that Rickert's reservation regarding the psychic aspect of inner life precludes him from fully embracing the notion of empathy as a core element of understanding. Unlike Dilthey, Rickert is not interested in the internal psychological structures of the subject, but in the cultural goods to which individuals ascribe value. However, because historical knowledge is not a "reflecting process by which 'phenomena' are faithfully transcribed" (Rickert, 1962, p. 32), but rather a process of reconstruction, it inevitably involves a sympathetic movement toward the object of study. Maintaining the distinction between explanation (*Erklären*) and understanding (*Verstehen*), Rickert argues that the former is of no use in the case of cultural goods insofar as they are permeated with value and meaning, which can only be interpreted (Rickert, 1910, p. 8). It is the activity of understanding, as the privileged mode of apprehending historical reality, that creates what Rickert designates as a "familiar world," a *Heimat* in which one can live and act (Rickert, 1910, p. 7).

For both philosophers, the method of understanding succeeds in grasping the singular. Understanding the particular is an end in itself, not a mere step in a progression toward the universal. What is unique is not simply the raw material for abstraction, as Dilthey points out (Dilthey, 1989). Behind this defence of the particular is an explicit criticism of the universalist inclination of philosophy. Singular historical elements themselves are deserving of attention, not as exemplars or specimens of larger phenomena, but in view of their unique contribution to enriching our understanding of the world. By insisting on that dimension, Dilthey and Rickert invite us to reconsider the status of philosophy's relation to individuality, which is one of the ultimate purposes of the "critique of historical reason" (Dilthey, 2002, p. 310).[4]

[4] See also Dilthey's pioneering work in intellectual history and the genre of intellectual biography, which further confirms this orientation toward the particular.

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The defence of the particular also affects the philosophical conception of knowledge. Dilthey's critique of historical reason involves a critique of ahistorical and deductive modes of apprehending socio-historical reality, which subsume particular instances under general categories and make us miss the richness of historical reality (Dilthey, 1996b). Instead, Dilthey adopts an approach "from the ground up" (Makkreel & Rodi, 2019, p. 10) and expresses a form of respect for the ambiguous and complex manifestations of life, which scientific forms of knowledge should not negate. As Friedrich Meinecke points out two decades later in his defence of historicism, philosophical thought was for a long time captive of general terms and can now move from a generalizing view of human forces in history to a "process of *individualising* observation" combined with a "feeling for the individual" (Meinecke, 1972, p. lv). Meinecke adds that this 'sense of individuality' is the true novelty brought about by historicism and should be celebrated as such (Meinecke, 1972).

To a lesser degree, Rickert shares this historicist inclination. He insists on the philosophical importance of studying the particular for its own sake and the dignity of a philosophical interest in singularity. Like Dilthey, Rickert criticizes the way in which rationalism — a view according to which reason is the chief source of knowledge — leads to a doctrine that considers as scientific only what can be placed under general concepts. Rickert thus rejects the approaches that express disdain for the 'merely historical' (*Historischen*) (Rickert, 1902). While he defends the notion of an objective realm of validity of values, he also affirms that these values only acquire a definitive shape in cultural elements that are formed historically (Rickert, 1913). History, as Rickert defines it, is interested in what happens only once: "[…] it does not seek to represent what is everywhere and always the same, but to provide an accurate representation of particular existences, with their individual characteristics, at different places and times" (Rickert, 2010, p. 10). He is aware of the potential objection that without the universal there is no science and that to speak of a science of the particular is a contradiction. Rickert's answer here is similar to the one Dilthey offers in *The Formation of the Historical World in the Human Sciences*: while all the sciences need a universal dimension, not all of them aim to build a universal system (Dilthey, 2002, p. 161).

In an article published in 1901, Rickert distinguishes different 'modes' of the universal. There is an essential difference between a universal concept (what would be common to all but is not the material of history) and the universally significant (what would *matter* to all, regardless of its unique or singular character) (Rickert, 2010). History does not tend toward a general explanation, nor does it seek to extract from a plurality of isolated singular events some general rules or principles. But, if the content of history itself is not universal, the unique character of an historical event can acquire universal *importance* (Rickert, 2010). Departing from Windelband's (1980) categorical distinction between nomothetic and idiographic sciences, Rickert claims that the difference resides in the method and not the object, and that history could yield knowledge of universal significance through its focus on singularity (Rickert, 1962).

While Dilthey's defence of the philosophical rights of the particular line up with his overall historical orientation as a philosopher, Rickert's defence comes as more of a surprise. In his view, recognizing the centrality of the historical world for

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philosophy does not lead to complete historicization. In proposing to rethink the mistaken association of the historical with the purely individual, he becomes an unlikely ally in making a case for a positive reinterpretation of historicism (Rickert, 1902). The whole question that will separate the two philosophers relates to *how* and *by what means* a philosophy of human sciences should represent the individual. For Rickert, grasping singularity is only possible through a systematic, universal philosophy of values; for Dilthey, it is through the concept of lived experience.

b) The Knowing Subject as Historical Being and the Primacy of Lived Experience

If we were to agree with Rickert's and Husserl's depiction of Dilthey's philosophy as historicist, the evidence would be found in Dilthey's insistence on the notion of historicity (*Geschichtlichkeit*) (Dilthey, 2002, p. 310; see Heidegger et al., 2003). History is not solely a discipline or a method, but the element in which human existence unfolds: everything is historical and temporal in an existential sense. Dilthey writes in 1910: "The distribution of trees in a park, the arrangement of houses in a street, the handy tool of the artisan, and the sentence propounded in the courtroom are everyday examples of how we are constantly surrounded by what has become historical" (Dilthey, 2002, p. 169). This insistence on historicity changes the view of the knowing subject. As he emphasizes in his draft for a "Critique of Historical Reason," "[t]he historical world is always there, and the individual does not merely contemplate it from without but is intertwined with it" (Dilthey, 2002, p. 297). In other terms, individuals do not stand above the world they seek to understand, but in the midst of it. This means reconsidering the independence of philosophy from history and giving up the illusion that the philosopher can somehow reach an ahistorical realm of absolute universality.

Dilthey thus envisions a critique of historical reason that breaks with its transcendental Kantian roots. For the German historical philosopher, the consciousness at the basis of that operation is, as he writes in a letter to Friedrich Althoff, a *concrete* consciousness (Dilthey, 1989, p. 501). Individuals do not stand as isolated entities that science can study; they are *Mitmenschen*, always connected, in relation with the world and with others. By defining the critique of historical reason as "a critique of the capacity of man to know himself and the society and history which he has produced" (Dilthey, 1989, p. 165), Dilthey subscribes to a premise that could qualify as 'historicist'; namely, that our knowledge is always limited by our position as both creators *and* products of history. According to Dilthey, the neo-Kantians — and before them, Kant — proposed a conception of the subject that "fail[ed] to find the historical 'human' being" (Dilthey, 2002, p. 296).

As seen in the previous section, Rickert recognizes that the knowing subject is a historical being, determined by his environment and the socio-historical conditions of existence (Rickert, 1932). Common to both philosophers is the criticist recognition of the limits of philosophy's ability to gain a comprehensive knowledge of historical reality. According to Dilthey, no philosophical method could ever achieve that, and for two reasons. First, the infinite richness of reality precludes us from constituting a final sum of knowledge. Second, our epistemological limitations prevent us from achieving it. In other terms, the infinite extension of historical reality and the

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inner restrictions of our cognitive abilities to grasp that infinity should act as a sobering perspective against the hubris of systematic philosophy. In that regard, the challenge of historicism appears as an opportunity for both Dilthey and Rickert to rethink the possibilities, but also the limits, of philosophy.

Claiming the primacy of historicity also means radically questioning the belief in permanence beyond the historical flux. The result, as Dilthey suggests, is that criteria for knowledge or action should be immanent, given through history. In *The Formation of the Historical World in the Human Sciences*, his most complete and definitive account of his project, Dilthey explains that he sought to provide a philosophical foundation to the human sciences: "but in a way that resisted the intellectualism of the epistemology that was dominant then" (Dilthey, 2002, p. 139). The practice of philosophy, especially in neo-Kantian circles, had become foreign to the immediate and concrete concerns of individuals and societies. Dilthey's answer is to ground philosophy in an immanent principle, which he finds in the notion of life "in its totality" (Dilthey, 2002, p. 173). According to him, life is a power of creation. Individuals overcome the finitude of their condition by their ability to inject meaning into their world. However, the attempt at bringing together *Wissenschaft* and *Erlebnis* runs the risk of losing sight of the scientific or systematic character of philosophical inquiry.

Dilthey recognizes the limits of an imminent and historicized understanding of lived experience (*Erlebnis*). In his later works, he acknowledges the elusive character of his conception of lived experience and emphasizes that, by being "insoluble by its very nature," it demands an infinite task of understanding (Dilthey, 2002, p. 245). Despite these limitations, one of the valuable lessons of Dilthey's historicist insights lies in his denunciation of the belief that one could arrive at a clear and transparent view of political and social life. This was, as Dilthey reminds us, the mistake of Enlightenment thought (Dilthey, 1996b). Of systematic normative philosophy, he writes: "Such rule-bound thought lets man down in every practical situation. Because it involves 'calculation,' it requires nothing but isolated, determinate concepts, which can be gained only by abstraction, that is, through the artificial reduction of real things and situations" (Dilthey, 1996b, p. 369).

One finds here the expression of Dilthey's sense of reality, which is a positive feature of a moderately 'historicist' philosophy. Rickert has said of Dilthey that he is more of a historian than a philosopher (Rickert, 1920). There is no doubt that Dilthey stands closer to the German historical school, to those "great historical minds who first combined philosophy and historical science and who grasped the entire life of a nation in its various facets […]" (Dilthey, 1996a, p. 388; see also Rickman, 1988, pp. 15, 20). By focusing on life and lived experience, Dilthey aims to recover the prescientific experience of the world and thus to reject the practice of philosophy as a strictly theoretical pursuit. As he writes of some of his predecessors, "[n]o real blood flows in the veins of the knowing subject constructed by Locke, Hume and Kant, but rather the diluted extract of reason as a mere activity of thought" (Dilthey, 1989, p. 50).

Here, Dilthey stands on a fine line between two problematic attitudes he seeks to avoid: a philosophical systematization of life that would 'fossilize' history, on the one hand, and a philosophical attitude that would consist in the rejection of all

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categorization and would thus be lost in the "unre-presentable depths of life" on the other (Dilthey, 2002, p. 179; see also Jalbert, 1988). Assessing Dilthey's mature writings, the question that Rickert raises in the 1910s is the following: do the Diltheyian limitations imposed on scientific knowledge mean accepting the truth of historical relativism? Dilthey reiterates several times his belief in a practice of philosophy that would rise above the "chaos of relative historical facts" and provide a way to see "what is universally valid in the relative" (Dilthey, 2019a, p. 159). But it remains unclear whether philosophy as Dilthey understands it could achieve that task given that its scope is now limited by history itself (see Beiser, 2011, pp. 358–359). This is, for Rickert, the problematic aspect of Dilthey's philosophical enterprise and more generally of *Lebensphilosophie* in its various forms.[5]

Lebensphilosophie acts as an umbrella term to designate approaches to culture that move closer to concrete experience and away from the transcendental conditions of knowledge (Rickert, 1911). As Julien Farges explains, Rickert is acutely aware of the philosophical situation during the 1910s, characterized by the tendency toward forms of 'irrationalism' that manifest themselves through the frequent appeals to the notion of 'life' against what is called, in pejorative terms, 'intellectualism' (Farges, 2007; see also Rickert, 1924b). In Rickert's view, because lived experience is not an *axiological* concept, it cannot act as the basis of an objective understanding of history and culture. This will be the core opposition between the Baden neo-Kantian school and the *Lebensphilosophie* that Dilthey, after Friedrich Nietzsche, espouses. Rickert's (1920, 1924b) attack against Dilthey can be broken down into three elements: the rejection of life as supreme value, the critique of the primacy of experience, and the denunciation of the confusion between the historical and philosophical realms.

Rickert's targets are philosophies that rest on the premise that, since all values presuppose life, life itself should be considered as the supreme value. Rickert's counter-argument is that while life is a necessary condition, it is not a value in itself. Moreover, valuing life above all else means devaluing culture. Contrarily, valuing theoretical goods lends immortality to culture (Rickert, 1913). In other words, Rickert, despite his shared insistence with Dilthey on individuality and the importance of historical inquiry, presents an anti-historicist argument: cultural goods escape biological processes and can become timeless. In "The Life of Science and Greek Philosophy," Rickert presents an immanent justification for escaping historicity. He argues that when individuals put themselves in the service of knowledge, they leave behind them works of thought. Rickert writes that "the life of the work lasts beyond all changes that unfold in the lives of men" (Rickert, 1924a, p. 333). Written traces that eventually form cultural goods save actions, thoughts, and events from finitude, and indicate the possibility of permanence beyond historical flux. What he defends is the importance of theoretical values, which, according to him, have been neglected in his own time (Rickert, 1911, p. 144). In a text written in 1924, he argues that German philosophy has witnessed a gradual devaluation of theoretical values. According to him, the search for an *arche* or eternal and atemporal principles among the Greeks

[5] Rickert distinguishes between biological, intuitionist, and phenomenological forms of philosophies of life (Rickert, 1911, p. 139).

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has been progressively replaced by a subjectivism that invalidates any attempt to develop an 'objective' science (Rickert, 1924a). On that basis, he maintains that the different forms of *Lebensphilosophie* ignore the necessary separation between science and life and irremediably end up in an aporia, that of being unable to safeguard their own foundation as a philosophy. This in turn would produce scholars incapable of justifying ethical choices (see Rickert, 1921, p. 18).

One can see why Dilthey's philosophy of the human sciences, which places at its core the notion of lived experience, would become a target. For Rickert, the fundamental problem lies in the fact that historicism ascribes more value to mobility than immobility, to change than stability, without ever justifying this philosophical preference. The problem of the opposition between stability and flux, Rickert adds, is as old as philosophy itself (see Rickert, 1921). Lived experience is in constant movement, but knowledge is only possible if it escapes fluctuations. For Rickert, there is not only a logical contradiction in the historicist view; there is something morally condemnable in it. He views it as the scientist's moral duty to provide permanent categories, order, and form to life in all its bursting manifestations. Therefore, Dilthey's philosophy brings us closer to scepticism in the theoretical realm and relativism in the practical realm by introducing a confusion of orders between *Wissenschaft* and *das Erlebte*. In Rickert's view, historicist philosophies are ultimately unphilosophic because they deny philosophy the necessary conditions of its existence (Rickert, 1921).

This is where Rickert breaks with the historicist tradition. He agrees with the Diltheyian claim that the formation of knowledge does not begin with disembodied concepts, but with lived experience (*das Erlebte*). Rickert also recognizes that fact when he claims that it is in contact with the historical fabric of the world that we achieve a reflective awareness of our values (Rickert, 1913). However, he objects to Dilthey's presumed inability — at least in his early work — to recognize the necessary mediations in grasping life experiences. In his view, there is a theoretical and conceptual apparatus at play even in the most basic and simple experiences one makes of the world (Rickert, 1910). Those experiences remain mediated through language, and therefore through concepts that already place us at a distance from an ideal phenomenological experience of the world. Seen in this way, Dilthey's philosophy suffers from a lack of principles (*Prinzipienlosigkeit*). According to Rickert, Dilthey is unable to face the practical consequences of the crisis of historicism because he derives the principles for his philosophy from history itself. The result is a non-systematic science that replicates the chaos of historical experience (Rickert, 1920).

To face the pitfalls of historicism, Rickert claims that the methodological apparatus elaborated by the philosopher escapes the changing landscape of historicity and thus maintains the dignity of philosophy as a theoretical activity (Rickert, 1911). While he acknowledges the irreducibility of the historical experience to causal explanations, he nonetheless believes it is possible to grasp its complexity through a systematic philosophy of the social sciences that would be based on a theory of values. The starting point of Rickert's philosophy of values is that the researcher always faces an extensively and intensively complex reality. This situation forces the social scientist to make a selection. Since reality is this "immeasurable manifold which seems to become greater and greater the more deeply we delve into it" (Rickert, 1962, p. 32), the

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researcher always engages in a fundamental act of valuation by distinguishing what has meaning for us from what is meaningless. All science requires these guiding principles, which are founded upon the notion of value (*Wert*), or more specifically, on the activity of ascribing meaning to what we deem worthy of being reported. This system of values has a claim to universal validity insofar as its logical criterion is formal. Rickert argues that since the existence of these values must be accepted as necessary for life to make sense, values act as the condition of possibility of an understanding the cultural world (Rickert, 1962). Indeed, he does not purport to provide a substantive view of the content of these values beyond distinguishing between four categories (logical, aesthetic, cultural, ethical) (Rickert, 1913).

Rickert also seeks to avoid the consequences of subjectivism by distinguishing between the relation to values (*Wertbeziehung*), which is a theoretical exercise, and the act of positing values. The former remains at the empirical level of observing and reporting historical data and thus could aspire to objective knowledge. While "valuations always involve praise or blame," references to values do not (Rickert, 1962, p. 90). However — and this is where Rickert exposes himself to the same criticism as Dilthey — he has no choice but to recognize the artificial character of that distinction insofar as the mere fact of selecting what counts as important means that the scientist is engaged not only as a researcher but as a human being with feelings and interests (Rickert, 1910). Rickert thus writes that, although they might be avoided, "[t]here is perhaps not even a single historical work of importance that is *entirely* free from positive or negative valuations" (Rickert, 1962, p. 91). Therefore, he is compelled to recognize the role and power of subjectivity in scientific thinking. While Dilthey's ambiguous answer to the crisis of historicism is often underscored, it is important to note that Rickert's response is not as straightforward as it first appears and that he shares Dilthey's oscillation between the primacy of the historical and the autonomy of philosophy.

Another tension in Rickert's project derives from the very safeguard he mobilizes against historicism, namely the formal character of his transcendental philosophy of values. Because his theory is meant to provide formal categories, it does not offer much grasp on the concrete content of values and how human beings act on them or relate to them. The result can be a complete estrangement from the everyday ethical concerns of individuals, which is precisely what Dilthey seeks to avoid. A formalist theory of values devoid of content faces a similar risk of relativism: its substance is so poor that it cannot help determine how to orient oneself in the world.

c) Philosophy Through the Lens of Historical Consciousness

Despite what he concedes to Dilthey, Rickert reiterates in numerous texts his belief in a strict separation between the tasks of philosophy and those of historical science. He makes a point to distinguish his interest in history from those who fall under the "suspicion of being committed to *historicism*" (Rickert, 1986, p. 18). While it is "history in its diversity that constitutes the field of investigation of the philosophy of values" (Farges, 2007, p. 29), the latter must nonetheless preserve its autonomy *vis-à-vis* individual sciences. However, as this last part of the argument will show, Dilthey's philosophical enterprise redefines the relationship between philosophy and history in a

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way that puts emphasis on the benefits of interpretive and historical plurality rather than the pitfalls of historicization. On this point, Rickert's warning about the dilution of philosophy of history is tempered by an inclination to consider the gains in approaching philosophy through the lens of historical consciousness.

Dilthey's project as expressed in his later writings is 'historicist' if the term is understood as a *rapprochement* of history and philosophy. Indeed, Dilthey seeks to unite life and knowledge of life in a way that would bridge the gap between theory and the concrete facts of existence. He is, however, aware of the risk and expresses concern with the perils of an excessive relativization of our categories of understanding.[6] In his 1911 essay entitled "The Types of World-View" he writes:

> One of the main reasons for the persistence of skepticism is the anarchy of philosophical systems. There is a contradiction between the historical awareness of the boundless variety of such systems and the claim of each system to universal validity; this contradiction supports the spirit of skepticism more strongly than any systematic argument. (Dilthey, 2019b, p. 251)

The scepticism Dilthey refers to arises from observing the plurality of contradicting claims to truth, which leads to an irreducible plurality of *Weltanschauungen* or worldviews. But the problem, Dilthey tells us, runs much deeper than that. Historical consciousness discloses that a belief in the universal validity of any form of life is an illusion. He goes on to argue that progress in science, and specifically in evolutionary theory — which shows that life develops in contingent ways — only hardens this conviction (Dilthey, 2019b). To put it simply, the problem is not that explanations about the world might contradict one another, but that the rise of historical consciousness is itself "destructive of the belief in universal validity" (Dilthey, 2019b, p. 254).

Dilthey's theory of *Weltanschauungen* and the underlying historicist premise that denies any claim to universality has been a key element in the reproach of relativism levelled at him. Husserl, in a text published in *Logos* the same year as Rickert's "The Concept of Philosophy," identifies two main obstacles to considering philosophy as a rigorous science: naturalism and historicism (Rickert, 1910). In analyzing the latter, he considers Dilthey's *Weltanschauungsphilosophie* as emblematic of the problems that historicism poses. While he acknowledges the latter's contribution to the theory of *Verstehen* or understanding, he nonetheless believes that Dilthey — albeit involuntarily — opens the door to unbridled relativism. Husserl argues that philosophers such as Dilthey provide a historical description of worldviews but no evaluation of their philosophical validity (Husserl, 1910–1911). Similarly, Rickert's argument in favour of the separation of philosophy and history is a philosophical one: one cannot derive normative conclusions from historical facts. A merging of history and philosophy would assume a continuity between fact and norm, when the two realms are in fact completely distinct.

Husserl goes further than Rickert and accuses Dilthey of committing a performative contradiction. He maintains that Dilthey's rejection of both the metaphysical

[6] Dilthey expresses this awareness in a letter he addresses to Husserl on July 10, 1911 (Heidegger et al., 2003, p. 121).

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systems of the past and the philosophies of his own time cannot be solely based on a negative, critical stance. To evaluate the past, one must have an implicit idea of what constitutes a 'correct' or 'valid' view (Husserl, 1910–1911). Therefore, Dilthey cannot claim to rely only on immanent principles and must admit criteria that stand outside the realm of history. Rickert, for his part, argues that if some historical concepts are bound to be valid for a definite time, that does not exclude the possibility of concepts with absolute validity (Rickert, 1962). The fact that concepts and paradigms change constantly in natural sciences without bringing into question their scientific character should prove that historical change should not exclude universal validity.

Ultimately, the accusation of historicism can be explained by Dilthey's decision to make historical consciousness the very basis of his philosophy, thereby abandoning any attempt at a transcendental foundation. In *The Essence of Philosophy,* Dilthey argues that we can arrive at the essence of philosophy through history, and history only. In doing so, he implies that the validity of philosophical ideas is contingent upon the historical conditions of their emergence. Although he maintains that he is looking for what constitutes "always and everywhere" the essence of philosophy, he nonetheless suggests that philosophical solutions, when viewed historically, belong to a specific time and place (Dilthey, 1954, p. 25). Beiser points out that "[s]ince 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" (Beiser, 2009, p. 14). This is the problem that Dilthey's philosophy of the human studies fails to address.

For the neo-Kantians, Dilthey's philosophy thus suffers from a "category mistake" (Kinzel, 2018, p. 364). As Rickert maintains, historical consciousness cannot be the basis of normative judgements. The confusion of orders can only lead to a defective practical philosophy, one that must abandon any notion of truth or validity. In that regard, Kinzel defends Dilthey and makes a persuasive case for reconsidering the separation between philosophy and history, arguing that "a category mistake can only be committed if there is an essential difference between domains that allows for the misapplication of categories from one domain to the other" (Kinzel, 2018, p. 358). If, against the neo-Kantian argument, one argues that philosophy and history have been wrongly and artificially separated, then Dilthey is not guilty of an erroneous 'fusion,' but is simply the one who points out the analytical mistake in considering them as two entirely separate modes of inquiry.

One could therefore argue that the idea of a *rapprochement* of history and philosophy is only problematic if we endorse a dichotomic vision of their respective foundations and tasks. Dilthey's nuanced assessment of the tension between objective validity and the plurality of historical facts makes the characterization of historicism sound less like a threatening peril and more like a productive reassessment of the value of singularity in philosophical inquiry. Rickert, in his later work, offers a more nuanced perspective on this tension and a more sympathetic interpretation of the role of historical consciousness. As he acknowledges in "History and the System of Philosophy," reality is "always historically conditioned in its entirety, and its historicity means at the same time a particularity that conflicts with the essence of universal science" (Rickert, 1932, p. 270). He then asks if this antagonism can be overcome, and whether there can exist something as a "universal-historical"

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position (Rickert, 1932, p. 270). In line with the Diltheyian argument, Rickert claims that the problem lies in the fact that history and philosophy are often presented as radically opposed, thereby requiring a stark choice between one and the other. He writes:

> As long as one contrasts history and the system of philosophy in such a way that under history is only included the presentation of the unique and the individually determined series of thoughts from earlier times, and that by system one understands a structure that is to be measured by its relationship to a timelessly valid truth, the rejection of every attempt to resolve philosophy into its history must appear so self-evident that one can consider its explicit combat and thus the rejection of historicism to be superfluous. (Rickert, 1932, p. 313)

In other terms, the fight against historicism in its problematic manifestations only makes sense in light of the possibility of an alternative relationship between philosophy and history. Embracing the effects of the historicist view, Rickert suggests that history must be understood anew as harbouring forms of universality imbedded within its particular fabric, on the one hand, and that philosophy must be redefined as an "open system" (Rickert, 1913, p. 297) that can accommodate historical and cultural variations on the other. In a letter to Husserl from June 1911, Dilthey suggests a similar resolution by stating that the observed contradiction of philosophical systems is a historical fact that allows philosophy to liberate itself from metaphysics, but that it does not signal the impossibility of all philosophy (Heidegger et al., 2003, p. 117).[7] On the contrary, historical consciousness allows for a renewed, critical, non-metaphysical philosophy. As he writes at the very end of his draft for a "Critique of Historical Reason,"

> *[t]he historical consciousness of the finitude* of every historical phenomenon and of every human or social state, and of the relativity of any kind of faith, is the final step toward the liberation of human beings. With historical consciousness human beings attain the sovereignty to enjoy every experience to the full, to surrender themselves to it completely and unencumbered, as if there were no system of philosophy or faith that could bind them. (Dilthey, 2002, p. 310)

In the end, Dilthey finds resources against scepticism in a notion of 'reflexive' historical consciousness capable of bringing to a higher awareness the immediate facts of existence (Makkreel & Rodi, 2019). In the last years of his life, he maintains that he has not abandoned the project of sketching a new philosophical grounding that would establish the universal validity of the *Geisteswissenschaften*. Like Meinecke, who claims that the wounds inflicted by the relativization of values can be remedied

[7] In Dilthey's view, it is precisely the support of history that would solve the problem of relativism. By showing that some things, including philosophical validity, are not subjected to change, Dilthey does separate historical conditionality from validity. It is what will lead Husserl to recognize that the differences in their respective projects are superficial and that they are indeed united in a common effort (Heidegger et al., 2003).

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through historicism (Meinecke, 1972), Dilthey believes that the historicist understanding of the world is the highest degree of reflective awareness we can achieve. As shown in the previous section, Dilthey's and Rickert's appreciation for individuality and their shared critique of the illusion of a transcendental subject of knowledge reveal the critical and heuristic potential of the historicist tradition. These epistemological lessons are supplemented by another, more practical, one: that historicism discloses the essential and inescapable condition of diversity and plurality that constitutes the socio-historical world.

In the reception of Dilthey's work in particular, it is the attention to the nature of modern historical consciousness that resonates most among some of his most well-known followers, including Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer in Germany, Raymond Aron in France, and Robin George Collingwood in England. Historical consciousness, as Gadamer reminds us, is both a privilege and a burden (Gadamer, 1996). As he puts it, historical consciousness is the full awareness of the "historicity of the present and the relativity of our opinions" (Gadamer, 1996, p. 23). For that reason, it is simultaneously productive and destructive. It opens the door to a wealth of knowledge and provides the means of comparing epochs, beliefs, cultures, and values; but it also challenges our belief in the universal validity of our own culture, institutions, values, and actions. The modern historical consciousness is an awareness that others have lived in different ways at other times and other places in the world (Dilthey, 1996b). The fundamental disposition that derives from this new historical inclination is a hermeneutical openness in the face of the complexity of the socio-historical world. As such, it offers a normative potential insofar as it is accompanied by a sense of the importance of a critical outlook on the past (Dilthey, 2019a, p. 144). This is why Dilthey speaks of a 'liberation' initiated by the historicist worldview.

However, possessing an historical consciousness also means noting the relativity of one's own beliefs and the changing character of cultural and moral norms. As such, it could potentially lead to a form of historical scepticism that, if not tempered, could turn into nihilism, a danger Rickert identifies early on. In a speech he gives in 1903, Dilthey also recognizes the inescapable — and somewhat tragic — character of modern historical consciousness:

> An apparently irreconcilable antithesis arises when historical consciousness is followed to its last consequences. The finitude of every historical phenomenon — be it a religion or an ideal or a philosophical system — accordingly, the relativity of every kind of human apprehension of the totality of things is the last word of the historical world-view. Everything passes away in the process; nothing remains. And over against this both the demand of thought and the striving of philosophy for universally valid knowledge assert themselves. (Dilthey, 1996a, p. 389)

The awareness of finitude — combined with the all-encompassing character of historicity — means that there is no way out of history in Dilthey's view. This does not mean, however, that one should fall into despair. It is precisely the constant challenge of historicism, to be overcome not once and for all, but through a constant re-negotiation between the recognition of our historical limitation and the projection

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of universality, that creates immanent sources of meaning. Dilthey thus envisions a dynamic foundation for self-knowledge and the understanding of the historical world. The very notion of a critique of historical reason expresses this tension between the exercise of purging history from any metaphysical illusions, while acknowledging all that remains for an objective philosophy of the social sciences after undergoing this critical process.

The same criticist impulsion is at play in Rickert's theory of history. In "Of a System of Values," he argues that the full achievement of philosophy in the socio-ethical world is made impossible by the "inexhaustible material" from which it draws (Rickert, 1913, p. 313). Rickert's philosophy is bound to remain an "open system" (Rickert, 1913, p. 297) tethered to history because the socio-ethical realm is a constantly changing and moving landscape. Historical-cultural life functions on the principle of *Unabgeschlossenheit* or absence of closure; there is thus no ultimate 'sum' of knowledge one could finally achieve. To defend a close, rigid, philosophical system would be to assume that there is a known end to the historical process and to the individuality and novelty it produces (Rickert, 1913). Although he argues for the need of an *order*, he acknowledges that historical consciousness inevitably transforms philosophy as a discipline. The conclusion Rickert reaches puts him in a greater proximity with Dilthey than he might realize. He concludes that the human mind is a complicated affair, that what matters is cultivating a diversity of points of view and methods of studying the world, that logic cannot in the end elaborate a universal method, and that one should accept the limits of theoretical endeavours in the cultural sciences imposed by the singularity of its material (Rickert, 2010).

In light of these considerations, I argue that Dilthey and Rickert embrace a moderate historicism, to be distinguished from a more radical form. While most critics of historicism in the 1910s and 1920s have equated it with a doctrine of historical and moral relativism, the inquiry into Dilthey's and Rickert's epistemology and their confrontation with the challenge of historicism shows a nuanced reinterpretation of the implications of the historicist position.

What Dilthey in particular defends is indeed a salutary form of historicism, which recognizes the relativity and variability of cultural forms and of moral beliefs and which in turn protects from dogmatism, an enemy perhaps more dangerous than relativism. He conceives of historical life as a sphere permeated by plurality, and therefore by a certain level of relativity. But the essential point here is to distinguish the observation of relativity from the normative claim of relativism. As Aron points out in his discussion of critical philosophy of history, one can very well acknowledge an 'original' relativity that stems from the inexhaustible richness of reality, while rejecting the doctrine of relativism, which erroneously transforms this empirical relativity into an encompassing thesis about the anarchy of all worldviews (Aron, 1986). From this perspective, being a 'historicist' means cultivating a historical consciousness that admits to the plurality of valid stances toward life and allows for the ability to understand — and in turn to sympathize — with other systems of values. The critique of historical reason helps us accept the irreducible plurality of principles rather than pursue what Dilthey considers a vain search for a unique, single, overarching, and transcendental principle.

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IV. Conclusion: Reassessing the Relationship Between Philosophy and History

By evaluating Dilthey's and Rickert's 'elective affinities' with historicism, this article has demonstrated that the crisis of historicism can be interpreted in positive terms as a catalyst for a renewed reflection on the tasks of philosophy through the lens of historical consciousness. By reframing the project of a critique of historical reason as a productive reassessment of the historical character of the knowing subject and the philosophical value of the particular, we can develop a more nuanced interpretation of the epistemological and practical implications of the historicist doctrine.

The concerns about the damaging effects of historicism reveal an uneasiness with the task of finding a proper articulation between the domains of philosophy and history. By bringing to light the benefits of the crisis of historicism, including the reconsideration of the epistemological status of the particular and the ability of historical consciousness to fight dogmatism, the aim of this article is to reassess what the reproach of historicism entails. In doing so, we are in a better position to assess the way in which Rickert also shares some affinities with the historicist tradition.

Ultimately, neither Dilthey's nor Rickert's critical philosophy of history provides a fully satisfactory answer to the challenge of historicism. However, this does not mean that they are bound to adopt a sceptical or relativist stance, as Husserl suggests. Dilthey's lifelong attempt to provide a philosophical foundation for the human sciences leads to the recognition that the tension between historical and philosophical modes of inquiry — the root cause of the crisis of historicism — can be a productive one. Similarly, to the Kantian question, '*Was kann ich wissen*?,' the answer Rickert provides is bound to remain a limited and incomplete one. This limitation is not, however, altogether negative. Dilthey and Rickert's shared conception of concrete historical beings as agents of knowledge reveals, at the turn of the 20th century, the limits of an absolute and rigid view of theoretical knowledge that would neglect the 'category' of history. In that sense, the crisis of historicism brings a necessary and salutary interrogation about the practical meaning and value of philosophy in relation to the concrete problems of human existence.

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