



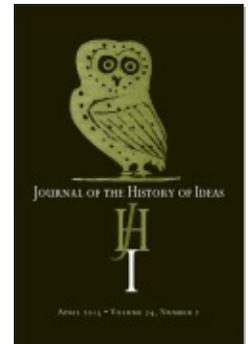
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Dilthey's Philosophy of Religion in the "Critique of Historical Reason": 1880-1910

Benjamin D. Crowe

Religion was a theme of reflection throughout the many stages of Dilthey's long career. From his years as a student in Heidelberg and in Berlin (1852-64) onwards he continually thought, wrote, and taught about religion. His earliest major work was an intellectual biography of F. D. E. Schleiermacher, the most important theologian of the nineteenth century. Dilthey's later essays on intellectual history, written during the 1880s and 1890s, include detailed discussions of many significant religious thinkers from Luther and Zwingli to the Tridentine theologians and Giordano Bruno. During the later stages of his career, as he worked towards a "theory of world-views [*Weltanschauungslehre*]," Dilthey examined the nature and history of religion in some detail, as well as the relation between religion and other cultural phenomena such as art and philosophy. One of his final writings, "The Problem of Religion" (1911), is entirely devoted to the topic. The situation was no different during the most decisive period of his career, during which the *Einleitung in die Geisteswissenschaften* was published (1883) and numerous drafts of the complete project were composed (1880-94).¹

¹ Dilthey's works are cited parenthetically in the text, using the following abbreviations. Note that, where applicable, the pagination of the English translation has been given as well, following the "/". GS, I: *Gesammelte Schriften, Vol. I: Einleitung in die Geisteswissenschaften* (Göttingen, 1966); GS, II: *Gesammelte Schriften, Vol. II: Weltanschauung und Analyse des Menschen seit Renaissance und Reformation* (Göttingen, 1957); GS, V: *Gesammelte Schriften, Vol. V: Einleitung in die Philosophie des Lebens, Erster Hälfte: Abhandlungen zur Grundlegung der Geisteswissenschaften* (Göttingen, 1957); GS, VII: *Gesammelte Schriften, Vol. VII: Der Aufbau der geschichtlichen Welt in den Geisteswissenschaften* (Stuttgart, 1958); GS, VIII: *Gesammelte Schriften, Vol. VIII: Weltanschauungslehre: Abhandlungen zur Philosophie der Philosophie* (Göttingen, 1962); GS, XIX: *Gesammelte Schriften, Vol. XIX: Grundlegung der*

Given these facts, it is somewhat surprising that commentators have seldom examined Dilthey's philosophy of religion. In this essay I hope to fill out our understanding of Dilthey's thought by delving into this largely untouched thematic area. However, given the sheer volume of Dilthey's work in the philosophy of religion, I have chosen to restrict the scope of the sources that I draw upon in constructing my account. The majority of the material treated here comes from the *Einleitung in die Geisteswissenschaften*, composed between 1880 and 1894, consisting of a published portion (Books 1-2) and various drafts and manuscripts of the remaining portions (Books 3-6). Aside from his writings on intellectual history and the theory of world-views, these texts contain Dilthey's most sustained treatments of religion. I will also refer to the later *Der Aufbau der geschichtlichen Welt in den Geisteswissenschaften*, which was written during the final years of Dilthey's life. Dilthey bills this work as a "continuation of the first volume of my *Introduction to the Human Sciences* of 1883" and as a vital component of his ongoing "critique of historical reason" (GS, VII, 117; SW, III, 139).

The core of Dilthey's philosophy of religion during the period here under consideration is what I call the "immanence thesis," which is a "hermeneutical hypothesis" that Dilthey employs in interpreting various phenomena of religious life. The claim is that the subject matter and source of religion is human life rather than a transcendent reality beyond the bounds of human experience. Put another way Dilthey's view is that religious myths, symbols, concepts, and practices are all ways of articulating the immanent meaning or sense of historical life. This thesis grounds the positive role that religious experience and the history of Christianity play in Dilthey's project in the *Einleitung*, i.e., the grounding of the human sciences in what he later called a "whole, full, and unmutilated" picture of human life (GS, VIII, 171). The "immanence thesis" also provides clues regarding Dilthey's own religious position, which, though certainly not Christian (or even theistic) "in the specific sense," nonetheless bears affinities with Romantic pantheism as well as with the "world-view" that Dilthey later calls "objective idealism."

In the decades since his death in 1911 commentators have explored virtually every facet of Dilthey's complex *opus*: hermeneutics, epistemology, psychology, aesthetics, and the theory of world-views, but one topic that has remained largely undiscussed is Dilthey's philosophy of religion. For the most

Wissenschaften vom Menschen, der Gesellschaft, und der Geschichte (Göttingen, 1997); JD: Clara Misch (ed.), *Der junge Dilthey* (Stuttgart, 1960); SW, I: Rudolf A. Makkreel and Frithjof Rodi (eds.), *Selected Works, Vol. I: Introduction to the Human Sciences* (Princeton, 1991); SW, III: Rudolf A. Makkreel and Frithjof Rodi (eds.), *Selected Works, Vol. III: The Formation of the Historical World in the Human Sciences* (Princeton, 2002).

part religion is relegated to Dilthey's biography, sometimes with an accompanying nod in the direction of his voluminous work in intellectual history.² When Dilthey's positive contributions to the philosophy of religion are discussed, the focus has generally been on the material relating to the "theory of world-views" to the exclusion of materials from earlier periods in Dilthey's career.³ In what follows I wish to contribute to our already rich understanding of Dilthey's work by examining his positive philosophy of religion as it develops during one of the most fecund periods of his career, viz., the period immediately surrounding the publication of the *Einleitung in die Geisteswissenschaften* (1883).

The pivot around which Dilthey's philosophy of religion turns from the 1880s and 1890s until the end of his life is a specific claim about the proper interpretation of religious myths, symbols, concepts, and practices. Dilthey never explicitly reveals the status of this claim to us, nor does he indicate to what domain of inquiry it belongs. The most plausible way to understand it, however, is as a hermeneutical hypothesis, i.e., as a kind of "cipher" for guiding the interpretations of the data of religious life that Dilthey himself provides, often in brief, programmatic, or provisional discussions. This hermeneutical hypothesis is explicitly asserted in the so-called "Berlin Plan," which is generally regarded as Dilthey's last attempt to work out the unpublished portion of the *Einleitung*, constituting Books III-VI. The precise dating of this text is unclear, though it almost certainly dates from the early 1890s. In a section entitled "The Philosophy of Reality and of Life," Dilthey writes: "[Poetry, religion, and metaphysics] all express the same life, some in imagery, others in dogmas, still others in concepts. Even dogmas, correctly understood, *do not deal with something transcendent*" (GS, XIX, 307; SW, I, 464).

The claim here is that poetry, religion, and metaphysics are "united" in that they are all "expressions" of life. In the case of religion the claim is further specified with the assertion that religious dogmas "do not deal with something transcendent." The point seems to be that the fundamental teachings of great religious systems are not genuine assertions about a supernatural realm and its links with mundane reality but are rather "expressions" of historical "life," a reality that falls under the purview of experience. This claim I call "the immanence thesis," since at its core lies a denial of "transcendence," of anything other than empirically available historical reality, as the reference point for religious myths, symbols, and practices.

² See, for example, H. P. Rickman, *Dilthey Today: A Critical Appraisal of the Contemporary Relevance of His Work*, 9; *Wilhelm Dilthey: Pioneer of the Human Studies* (Berkeley, Calif., 1979), 25; Theodore Plantinga, *Historical Understanding in the Thought of Wilhelm Dilthey* (Lewiston, N.Y., 1992), 20.

³ This is the case for several prominent English-speaking commentators. See H. A. Hodges, *Wilhelm Dilthey: An Introduction* (New York, 1969), 92-93; Rickman, *Wilhelm Dilthey*, 44; Plantinga, *Historical Understanding*, 81-82.

My choice of terminology here is partly rooted in the work of Otto F. Bollnow, who like many others interprets Dilthey under the general rubric of the “philosophy of life.” Thinkers who are grouped together under this classification rarely have much in common beyond the fact that they are much interested in the category of “life” as an experienced reality as opposed to a merely biological phenomenon. Bollnow suggests that there are two further classifications into which any individual “philosophy of life” might fall, theistic or non-theistic. Kierkegaard, for example, belongs in the former classification, for he most certainly orients his reflections on “life” towards a “‘transcendent’ point lying outside of it,” i.e., the God of mainstream Christianity.⁴ On the other hand Dilthey is notable for the “strict immanence of [his] interpretation” of “life” and so falls within the non-theistic classification.⁵ However, as Bollnow correctly points out, a non-theistic “philosophy of life” is not necessarily lacking in religious pathos. Indeed, Bollnow goes so far as to characterize Dilthey’s position as a variety of pantheism “for which the idea of the immanence of meaning [*Sinnes*] in the phenomenon [*Erscheinung*] defines the comprehensive world-picture.”⁶ Dilthey is quite comfortable with this language of “immanence” and “transcendence,” as is clear from the longer quotation above. The link that Bollnow makes between the character of Dilthey’s “philosophy of life” and pantheism is also suggestive and will be examined in more detail at the end of my discussion.

The “immanence thesis” is revisited a bit later on in the text of the “Berlin Plan”:

What the dogmas of the theologian and the formulae of the metaphysician ultimately express in conceptual and historical symbols is the *sense of life*. Indeed, even the images of the transcendent, which, like landscapes on a wall, are painted on the edges of reality and broaden it, *are only symbols of this inscrutable sense of life*. (GS, XIX, 329; SW, I, 489-90, emphasis added)

Again the claim is that particular data of religious life, e.g., doctrinal formulae, are not to be viewed naively in terms of what they purport to say. Rather than having some reference to a transcendent reality, religious teachings are simply expressions of some meaning that is wholly immanent to human life. This idea seems to have originated quite early in Dilthey’s career. A diary entry from his intellectually tumultuous student days includes the following assertion: “Every effort of comprehension goes out from the world of the here and

⁴ Otto F. Bollnow, *Dilthey: Ein Einführung in seine Philosophie* (Stuttgart, 1955³), 16.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 16-17.

now; man, who constantly lives in this world and is moved to inquiry by it, *does not live in the transcendent*" (JD, 152, emphasis added).

As a student Dilthey absorbed the spirit of radical critics of German Idealism, who particularly objected to its "alleged otherworldliness." Later in life Dilthey characterized his primary motive in his early years as "in the spirit of the great Enlightenment, to hold faithfully to experiential reality as the one world of our knowledge" (GS, V, 418). Under the influence of the rebirth of neo-Kantian "critical philosophy" during these years and that of his own humanism Dilthey began to find the traditional metaphysical claims of theism to be untenable. Indeed, as some have previously noted, in considering the problem of historical meaning Dilthey came explicitly to reject both the classical theistic view of history with its attendant ideas of providential governance and the metaphysical "philosophy of history" characteristic of the grand systems of German Idealism. The basic reason for Dilthey's rejection of these approaches is precisely the fact that they refer the meaning of the historical process to something extra-historical.⁷ As many have noted, on Dilthey's view, the meaning of history is immanent to the historical process itself and is totally available to empirical historical science.⁸ However, while commentators have certainly recognized the significance of something like the "immanence thesis" in Dilthey's philosophy of history, they have not seen the fact that this thesis also forms the core of a positive theory of religion.

Far from being a merely localized opinion, found in only one period of his long career, the "immanence thesis" is a stable element of Dilthey's philosophy of religion throughout his life. Perhaps its most emphatic assertion comes from the *Aufbau* text, composed at the end of his life: "Religious genius is not to be found in the dreams of sentimental souls about otherworldliness; rather, life itself experienced according to its true nature—full of hardship and a singular blend of suffering and happiness throughout—points to something strange and unfamiliar, as if it were coming from invisible sources, something [pressing in] on life from outside, yet coming from its own depths" (GS, VII, 266; SW, III, 285). Here, Dilthey goes so far as to ascribe a kind of normative force to the thesis. Not only does it provide the key to a correct interpretation of religious data, but it also furnishes the norm for genuine "religious genius." Enduring achievements in religion enable people to overcome their alienation from life, from "their own essence" (GS, VII, 266; SW, III, 285). In this way, according to Dilthey, true religiosity eschews both otherworldly obscurantism and shallow worldliness.

⁷ See Hodges, *Wilhelm Dilthey*, 54.

⁸ See Rickman, *Wilhelm Dilthey*, 109; Plantinga, *Historical Understanding*, 20-21, 75; Bollnow, *Dilthey*, 34-35. Needless to say, Dilthey does not conceive of historical science after the fashion of positivism, i.e., as being concerned merely with the "facts."

Further clarity can be achieved by recognizing that his advocacy of the “immanence thesis” places Dilthey within a broader tradition of post-Kantian philosophy of religion. In the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781) Kant claims to have demolished religion as a metaphysical system, and his successors took him to be as good as his word. Later, in *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone* (1793), Kant criticizes and repudiates other aspects of religious life, such as liturgical practices and ecclesiastical institutions. In both that work and in his works on moral philosophy Kant essentially reduces the significance of religious teachings to ways of consolidating moral life. If Kant’s conclusions are indeed cogent, then it follows that the traditional understanding of religious teachings, as referring to a transcendent reality must be reconsidered.

Albrecht Ritschl and his school basically followed the Kantian line, arguing that religious teachings are expressions of moral judgments, not metaphysical judgments.⁹ Schleiermacher, too, basically accepts Kant’s position on the relation between religion and metaphysics, but he rejects the reduction of religious teaching to moral judgment. Instead, he argues: “[Religion] does not wish to determine and explain the universe according to its nature as does metaphysics; it does not desire to continue the universe’s development and perfect it by the power of freedom and the divine free choice of humanity as does morals. Religion’s essence is neither thinking nor acting, but intuition and feeling.”¹⁰

Religious teachings, e.g., those regarding the nature of God, are taken by Schleiermacher to be expressions of complex religious “intuitions” and “feeling,” which have been shaped by the power of the imagination.¹¹ Religion itself is primarily an experience that involves these intuitions and feelings. The things that religious people say or do are dispensable expressions of this experience. Thus, “Miracles, inspirations, revelations, feelings of the supernatural—one can have much religion without coming into contact with any of these concepts.”¹² Or, more starkly, in a statement later echoed by Dilthey, Schleiermacher asserts that “you must also admit that one religion without God can be better than another with God.”¹³

A similar view also shows up in the work of William James, who in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* asserts that “feeling is the deeper source of religion, ... philosophic and theological formulas are secondary products, like translations of a text into another tongue.”¹⁴ Religious teachings reflect the

⁹ Dilthey rejects what he calls “Ritschlian theology,” though he does not indicate what it is that he rejects about it, nor who among its numerous adherents and expounders he is criticizing (GS, XIX, 305f./463).

¹⁰ Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers* (Cambridge, 1988), 101.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 136, 138.

¹² *Ibid.*, 132.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 137.

¹⁴ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (Cambridge, 1985), 341.

attempt to communicate personal experiences in the idiom of the day. As James puts it, "The philosophic climate of our time inevitably forces its own clothing on us."¹⁵ He rejects the "intellectualism in religion" that attempts to construct religious teachings solely on the basis of "non-subjective facts." Appealing to the empiricist tradition and to the work of C.S. Peirce, James concludes that the "metaphysical" attributes of God, e.g., "necessariness," "immateriality," and "simplicity," are simply "destitute of all intelligible significance."¹⁶ As for what it is that comprises the actual content of religious experiences, James posits a "subconscious self" or the "subconscious continuation of our conscious life."¹⁷

Another contemporary of both James and of Dilthey, George Santayana, also argues in favor of a similar view. In *Reason in Religion* (1905), the third part of *The Life of Reason*, he articulates the following position:

The only truth of religion comes from its interpretation of life, from its symbolic rendering of that moral experience which it springs out of and which it seeks to elucidate. Its falsehood comes from the insidious misunderstanding which clings to it, to the effect that these poetic conceptions are not merely representations of experience as it is or should be, but are rather information about experience or reality elsewhere....¹⁸

Dilthey's "immanence thesis," then, can be seen to belong to a family of views commonly held in post-Kantian philosophy of religion, according to which meaning of the data of religious life does not consist in reference to a transcendent reality. While many agreed on this general point, there seems to have been some difference of opinion as to what the things that religious people say and do are actually all about. Kant, the Ritschlians, and perhaps Santayana, held that religious teachings express moral judgments or are somehow or other reducible to terms of moral life. Schleiermacher, James, and Dilthey hold that religious teachings are expressions of a *sui generis* experience but are still not to be taken as objective claims about metaphysical entities.

While Dilthey's position certainly parallels the general trends in post-Kantian philosophy of religion, there are some important qualifications. The first of these is a general theoretical commitment that might be termed "expressivism."¹⁹ On this Dilthey seems to agree with James. For Dilthey religious experience, in order to become communicable and to find a place within

¹⁵ James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 342.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 351.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 402-3.

¹⁸ George Santayana, *Reason in Religion* (New York, 1982), 11.

¹⁹ For a critical examination of expressivist accounts of religious teachings, see George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (London, 1984).

intelligible discourse, must “express” itself in ways that are understandable.²⁰ As Dilthey describes the process, religious experience must, in order to achieve “clear consciousness,” explicate itself in terms of the “representational nexus” of nature, which, with its categories of “space, time, substance, and causality,” is universally accessible (GS, I, 257). In Kantian terms religious experience has to be “schematized” under more general concepts, symbols, or modes of thought in order to be successfully communicated to others. The development of dogmas or religious teachings is best seen as a process of “externalization” (*Veräußerlichung*) (GS, I, 257). This means not only that religious symbols and ideas derive from immediate personal “lived experience” (*Erlebnis*), but also that they are expressed by means of our normal object language, which refers to concrete spatio-temporal physical objects and their interactions. Thus, via “externalization,” an experience of a reality immanent to history, i.e., human life, gets expressed in such a way that it seems to be knowledge of a metaphysical nature. For example, the content of a personal “lived experience” is expressed in the concept of an *ens perfectissimum*. This concept is, then, incorrectly taken to refer to an actual being that transcends empirical-historical reality. Dilthey also seems to regard such expressions as imperfect, asserting the primacy of experience over dogma in a way reminiscent of Schleiermacher. He writes, “Life is never absorbed without remainder into a representation [*Vorstellung*]. Rather, lived religious experience always remains what is eternally inward; it finds no adequate expression in myth or in a representation of God. The same relation is found at the higher stages, between religion and metaphysics” (GS, I, 141).

The limited nature of religious expressions is also an issue that Dilthey revisits in the *Aufbau*. Here, he once more argues that the vital heart of religion is a “frame of mind” or affective intellectual disposition that seeks coherence, meaning, and satisfaction in relation to an “invisible” reality. Without this vital core “religion is merely tradition and custom” (GS, VII, 267; SW, III, 286). This inner vitality exceeds all expressions of it, particularly those that take the form of dogmatic theses. In this vein, Dilthey contends that Bach’s choral works, not theological tomes, provide the best window onto the religious life of the Baroque age (GS, VII, 184; SW, III, 204-5).

How does Dilthey’s “expressivism” fit with the “immanence thesis”? Clearly, there is no necessary link between the two positions. Dilthey’s expressivism involves two elements, (1) the claim that religious teachings rest upon experiential foundations, and (2) the claim that religious teachings are imperfect “representations” or “expressions” of the content of the experiences

²⁰ Dilthey’s notion of “expression,” as a technical term in his thought, only develops after the period here under consideration. See Rudolf A. Makkreel, *Dilthey: Philosopher of the Human Studies* (Princeton, N.J., 1975), 292-94.

in question. One could consistently hold both of these theses while at the same time maintaining that the experiences in question are genuine experiences of something that is somehow “transcendent.” This kind of move seems to underlie many forms of so-called “negative theology.” With the “immanence thesis” in place, however, Dilthey has to reject any traditional theistic form of expressivism about religious teachings. While they are indeed rooted in experience, religious teachings are merely “symbols” of the “sense of life.”

Like Kant and Schleiermacher, Dilthey rejects the notion that religion has anything to do with metaphysics. For Dilthey metaphysics is a “pervasive scientific attitude” that has dominated Western intellectual history (GS, I, 125; SW, I, 175), and its hallmark is the transcendence of experience and the positing of an “ultimate unconditioned framework” (GS, I, 131; SW, I, 181). While foreign to metaphysics, religious experience tends to be subsumed under it, or interpreted in terms of its categories, much to the detriment of the latter (GS, I, 256-57). “The mixture of Christianity with ancient science affected the purity of religious experience” (GS, I, 353; SW, I, 186). Modernity, beginning with the Reformation, witnessed the gradual separation of religious life from metaphysics. With the rise of modern science and critical philosophy, metaphysics is reduced to an edifying spectacle (GS, I, 358; SW, I, 191-92). Given his commitment to the historical antipathy of religion and metaphysics, Dilthey also endorses to the denial of the claim that religious teachings have any metaphysical significance whatsoever.

A further point of clarification is needed regarding Dilthey’s views on the cognitive status of religious symbols, concepts, and doctrines. The issue here is not so much the origin of these data of religious life but rather their content. The “immanence thesis” straightforwardly entails the claim that the cognitive significance of religious teachings is not what it has been taken to be, i.e., a matter of true assertions about a transcendent reality. Further qualifications, however, are possible here. While religious teachings, on the “immanence thesis,” cannot claim to provide knowledge of transcendent reality, might they still have some cognitive significance? Are they the sorts of things that could be true or false? The “immanence thesis” by itself does not appear to entail any commitments on this issue. Dilthey could hold, for example, that religious teachings tell us about human nature not so much through what they say, but rather through the fact that they are said. Thus, while lacking an intelligible sense on their own, they might reveal something about human psychology. This is the line that Freud, for example, seems to take. On his view the existence of religious teachings reveals the persistence of infantile urges in adults.

It is entirely consistent with the “immanence thesis,” however, to deny this type of non-cognitivism, and this is precisely the move that Dilthey seems to make. While in his view religious teachings are not properly speaking metaphysical truths, they may nevertheless convey some truths about “life.” Simi-

larly, even if they are revisable and imperfect expressions of a more basic experience, so long as the experience in question is actually the experience of something, religious teachings could still, in some sense, be true. While he maintains both the “immanence thesis” and a species of “expressivism,” he is emphatically not a non-cognitivist about religious teachings. This is a position that has some important consequences for Dilthey’s overall philosophical project. Dilthey’s rejection of non-cognitivism opens up the possibility that religion could play a more *positive* role in his philosophical project.

In the published portion of the *Einleitung*, before clarifying the nature of religious teachings as “expressions,” Dilthey asserts the cognitive value of religion in general. He states that “the deep mystery of this religion lies in the relation of the experience of one’s own condition to the work of God in the heart [*Gemüt*] and in destiny. Religious life has its own universally valid knowledge here, the capacity for the representation of an elusive realm” (*entzogenes Reich*) (GS, I, 257). Here, Dilthey clearly speaks as if religious life actually does convey some knowledge about some element of reality. The key claim here is that religion involves valid cognition of one’s “inner” or mental life. This includes not just one’s intellectual nature but more importantly the affective nature that Dilthey here calls the “heart” or “temperament” (*Gemüt*). Dilthey’s own “critique of historical reason” relies on the analysis of the whole reality of human nature, intellectual, affective, and volitional. That religion has “universally valid knowledge” about this otherwise “elusive realm” makes it a useful ally in Dilthey’s own project.

Dilthey’s rejection of non-cognitivism about religion is solidified in the “Berlin Plan.” Here, the target is “subjectivism,” the claim that religion is concerned simply and solely with subjective states of feeling in an individual.

Religion evaporates into a dream of bliss, which in the subject reduces to habitual religious practice and its experiential effect. This is the principle of Catholic religiosity, of the Pietists and the Moravian Brethren; it completely restricts truth in the religious domain to the subject. It is what connects Ritschlian theology, phenomenism, and the moral theory that all reflection on action refers back to the pleasure of the subject. Thus the final consequences of the principle of subjectivity are related to one another (GS, XIX, 305-6; SW, I, 463).

Ignoring Dilthey’s attack on particular religions, one can still see that a definite claim about the cognitive status of religious teachings is being made here. Religion is reduced to a feeling of pleasure in the individual.²¹ Religious

²¹ This is a view that is typical of what Dilthey later calls “naturalism” (GS, VIII, 100-106). See Michael Ermarth, *Wilhelm Dilthey: The Critique of Historical Reason* (Chicago, 1978), 329-30.

beliefs, rituals, and institutions are simply ways of producing the relevant feelings. Dilthey is clearly uncomfortable with this claim. His worry is grounded in the fact that “truth” in the “religious domain” is thus restricted. Indeed, in the view under consideration here “truth” is not a relevant category at all. So once again, while he maintains both the “immanence thesis” and a kind of “expressivism,” Dilthey soundly rejects non-cognitivism.

Dilthey's repudiation of non-cognitivism is clearly not linked with a desire to defend a traditional form of religious belief, for doing so would surely be incompatible with his “immanence thesis.” Rather, Dilthey's concerns are rooted in his interest in investigating “categories and concepts of life,” which are not empty abstractions but are the actually mechanisms whereby human ideas can be connected into something resembling an intelligible whole. Unlike Kantian categories these are not a priori constructs that are applied to life “from the outside,” as it were, but rather comprise the structure and coherence immanent to the overall “nexus of life” (GS, XIX, 288; SW, I, 449). These categories of life are intrinsic to the “lived experience [*Erlebnis*]” of life, and function as ways of making life understandable.²² In opposition to categories of reason, which simply reflect our ways of organizing the world through certain principles, Dilthey argues that there are deeper, “real categories” (GS, XIX, 361). These are grounded in the “nexus of life” itself. Life is simply articulated in “certain characteristics [*Züge*] and lines” that permeate it. The mark of these categories is that their content cannot be fully fathomed in thought, whereas formal categories, such as identity, are “fully transparent and unambiguous” (GS, XIX, 361).

Religious teachings, for example, mythic stories, are meant to “express” these “life-categories and life-concepts” (GS, XIX, 290; SW, I, 450). Hence, Dilthey wants to reject all attempts to “subjectivize” religion, i.e., to reduce it to expressions of desires and feelings. Here again he singles out the Ritschlian school for criticism:

Finally, the life-categories of sense, meaning, and purpose as applied to the course of the world are the belief in providence, revelation, predestination, etc., of the Middle Ages. It is a gross injustice that now, in the case of Kaftan and others, religion is explained by the mere need for salvation—[without] an account being given of the presuppositions of [this need]. Religion is inherent in the apprehension of the world as a life-nexus that has structure, meaning, and sense. (GS, XIX, 290; SW, I, 450)

²² Dilthey's understanding of the “categories of life” expanded significantly in later years. See Rudolf A. Makkreel, *Wilhelm Dilthey*, 382-84; Ermarth, *Wilhelm Dilthey*, 165-66.

Dilthey clearly rejects the idea that religion is to be explained solely in terms of subjective desires. The desire for salvation, he suggests, is itself dependent on a prior “apprehension of the world as a life-nexus” with a determinate structure. Religion grows out of the primitive, immediate experience of life as an ordered whole. It employs a variety of images in an attempt to articulate or express the categories of “structure, meaning, and sense.” Thus, it is not the case that religion is devoid of cognitive content, at least on Dilthey’s account. While not concerned with the cognition of an otherworldly reality, religion successfully articulates the general features of the “life-nexus.” The cognitive dimension of religion also figures into Dilthey’s important discussions of “understanding” (*Verstehen*) in the *Aufbau*. One of the most basic forms of understanding is that which is directed at our own lives, grasped and interpreted in terms of “real categories” immanent to life itself (GS, VII, 196; SW, III, 218). Religious autobiographies such as Augustine’s *Confessions* are particularly valuable exemplars of this mode of understanding (GS, VII, 198; SW, III, 219-20). Far from being a mute conglomeration of subjective feelings, such a work constitutes “the highest and most instructive form of the understanding of life” (GS, VII, 199; SW, III, 221).

Dilthey’s “immanence thesis” is modified by two further theoretical commitments, i.e., expressivism and the rejection of non-cognitivism. Dilthey’s philosophy of religion is also distinguished by its place within his overall philosophical project, a project that is usually described as the “Critique of Historical Reason.”²³ The “immanence thesis,” together with expressivism and the rejection of non-cognitivism, grounds the place of religion within Dilthey’s project. Dilthey’s guiding project in the *Einleitung* is to provide a systematic foundation for the “human sciences,” i.e., history, jurisprudence, political science, moral philosophy, theology, economics, etc. The direction this project takes rests upon his rejection of the dominant Lockean-Cartesian epistemology of the day, which he criticizes for being too narrowly intellectualist in orientation. “No 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” (GS, I, xviii; SW, I, 50).²⁴ An adequate epistemological grounding of the sciences of human life requires an approach that blends a more holistic psychology with history. Dilthey holds that “[i]n the real life-process, willing, feeling, and thinking are only different aspects. The questions which we all must address to philosophy cannot be answered by the assumption of a rigid epistemological a priori, but rather only by a developmental history proceeding

²³ See Ermarth, *Wilhelm Dilthey*; and Charles R. Bambach, *Heidegger, Dilthey, and the Crisis of Historicism* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1995), 127-85.

²⁴ Cf. a remark from the “Breslau Draft” (GS, XIX, 77/SW, I, 266).

from the totality of our being" (GS, I, xviii; SW, I, 51). In other words Dilthey wants to ground the human sciences in a more foundational science of "our total lived experience of the human world" (GS, XIX, 19; SW, I, 61), a project that he calls the "Critique of Historical Reason" (GS, I, 116; SW, I, 165).

The method by means of which this science carries out its tasks is "self-reflection" (*Selbst-besinnung*). Dilthey states his position quite clearly: "knowledge of the whole of socio-historical reality, which we found confronting us as the most general and ultimate problem of the human sciences, is attained successively in a system of truths resting on epistemological self-reflection" (GS, I, 95; SW, I, 144). "Self-reflection" can, Dilthey hopes, provide the kind of all-embracing epistemological foundation that encompasses all the faculties of human mental life, not just the intellect (G, XIX, 79; SW, I, 268). Self-reflection is itself grounded in a more primitive "inner experience," or "the capacity of knowing the nexus of our own existence and of the simple existence of human psychic life in general" (GS, XIX, 91; SW, I, 289).²⁵ In other words self-reflection analyzes the totality of the "facts of consciousness," the totality of mental processes and their objects, all of which is immediately accessible in "inner experience."

Within the framework of this overall project, religion, particularly the Christian religion, takes on a special significance in Dilthey's work. With the birth of Christianity the "consciousness of God," hitherto linked (at least in Greek thought) with the "rational beauty of the totality of the world," was now located within the "moving heart of man" (GS, I, 250-51). This allows for a hitherto unknown degree of reflection on "lived experience" (*Erlebnis*) and "inner experience" (*inner Erfahrung*) (GS, I, 251). Alongside of this, "historical consciousness" in the proper sense first emerged (GS, I, 253-54). In the later "Breslau Draft" Dilthey makes similar claims about the significance of religion within his overall project. "The distinction between outer and inner experience," he writes, "was initially established in the field of religious experience" (G, XIX, 81; SW, I, 270). In the margins Dilthey makes reference to Grimm's *Deutsches Wörterbuch*, vol. III (1862), where the entry includes a quote from Luther: "He is a proper doctor who is first instructed by God and then himself has experience" ("Das ist ein rechter Doktor, der erstlich von Gott gelehrt wird und darnach selber Erfahrung hat"). One of the key figures in these intellectual events was Augustine. For Augustine the external world is a matter of indifference. He wants to know only "God and the soul" (GS, I, 259); it is only this "inner world" that can be known with certainty. Hence, Augustine's reflections often begin with "the disclosure of reality in one's own inwardness" (GS, I, 259).

²⁵ Elsewhere, Dilthey calls this method the "method of inner experience" (GS, XIX, 283/SW, I, 443), clearly linking "self-reflection" with the concept of "inner experience."

In another draft, this one of Book VI, based on manuscripts from the early 1880s, Dilthey again comments on the role of Christianity in the historical rise of a “critical” philosophical standpoint. He observes that the “Christian religion” often involved the advocacy of a kind of “self-examination” (*Selbstprüfung*), along with an “analysis of motives and the rooting out of every kind of sinful inclination” (G, XIX, 206; SW, I, 376). While this is certainly a move in the right direction, Dilthey is not wholly uncritical of the achievements of Christianity in this regard. On the contrary he advocates the development of a critical science that is capable of avoiding the potential for self-deception that lies in this kind of introspective self-analysis (GS, XIX, 206-7).

Dilthey’s work on Schleiermacher also led to his interest in the dynamics of religious experience and its ability to disclose mental life in a more holistic way. Schleiermacher is credited with undermining a narrowly intellectualistic conception of religion characteristic of Protestant orthodoxy and many schools of philosophical theology, by articulating the role of “religious feeling” in matters as diverse as dogma, worship, and community structure (GS, I, 44f.; SW, I, 95). A similar comment can be found in the “Breslau Draft,” where Dilthey praises Schleiermacher for recognizing that theology is not a matter of “pure theory” but rather depends upon “an assertion about states of religious feeling” (GS, XIX, 78; SW, I, 267). A marginal note found in other supplementary material also indicates Dilthey’s appreciation for Schleiermacher’s work, while at the same time clearly pointing to the need to develop a more critical science of “inner experience,” “Schleiermacher’s immediate knowledge, inner experience as an organon. There is a contemporary theological school based on this. It excludes knowledge [*Wissen*], which is at root untenable. It is precisely knowledge that investigates inner experience and shows it to be permeated by processes of thought” (GS, XIX, 432).

Finally, in passages already referred to above in connection with Dilthey’s “immanence thesis,” the sense is that for Dilthey religious experience is a valuable source of insights for his own epistemological project. Recall that in Dilthey’s view previous attempts to ground the human sciences have faltered because of their narrow intellectualistic picture of human mental life. The “religious type,” Dilthey says at one point, possesses precisely the sort of “mature consciousness of reality” that is required for carrying out his own project (GS, XIX, 306; SW, I, 464). In a manuscript entitled “Leben und Erkennen” Dilthey is even more clear about the utility of religious life for his project:

The structure of psychic life in its life-relations [*Lebensbeziehungen*] to its milieu is expressed in concepts and propositions that have an average sort of validity and which circulate as life-wisdom [*Lebensweisheit*], and as religious or poetic truths. Modern psychology has not yet taken them up, but has willfully restricted itself; herein lies the

advantage of the older, Romantic and Hegelian psychology. (GS, XIX, 350)

Dilthey's claims about the significance of religious life for his "critique of historical reason" can be summarized in two points. First of all, as the very name of the project suggests, Dilthey is adopting a "critical" perspective, i.e., one that begins from the subject and the fact that all the truths of the sciences belong within the sphere of human mental life. That is, Dilthey starts from the "principle of phenomenality," the claim that all objects of knowledge are "facts of consciousness" and that this whole "inner world" "is the very thing itself" (GS, XIX, 83; SW, I, 271). Or as he puts it elsewhere, "All facts of consciousness have their existence only within consciousness: thus only the facts of consciousness are immediately given and certain for scientific analysis" (GS, XIX, 88; SW, I, 277). The epistemological grounding of the human sciences requires a thorough analysis of these "facts of consciousness," a project that Dilthey calls "self-reflection." The historical significance of Christianity is that, from the earliest times, it has made inner life an explicit subject of theoretical concern.

The second point about the significance of religion for Dilthey's "critique of historical reason" lies in his rejection of intellectualism. An adequate epistemological grounding of the human sciences requires an appreciation of mental life as a whole. While it is certainly not alone in this regard, religious experience, which weaves thought, feeling, emotion, and will together into a complex totality, provides just the sort of window onto this "life-nexus" that Dilthey needs in order to successfully complete his project. It is for this reason that Schleiermacher's work, which famously challenged the assimilation of religious life to theoretical and practical reasoning, is so highly praised by Dilthey. Both of these points can be clearly grounded in an interpretation of the "immanence thesis" that rejects non-cognitivism. In the "immanence thesis" the real subject of religious life and religious teachings is human life itself. In rejecting non-cognitivism Dilthey also commits himself to the claim that religion itself conveys truths about its subject matter. Thus, given his interest in a foundational science of human mental life, Dilthey finds religion to be a natural ally.

One final aspect of Dilthey's philosophy of religion, as it is articulated during the period surrounding the publication of the *Einleitung in die Geisteswissenschaften*, concerns the religious implications of the "immanence thesis," which can be understood historically within the larger context of post-Kantian philosophy of religion. This context was shaped by a shared agreement on the fact that Kant had successfully destroyed the traditional metaphysical claims made on behalf of Christianity. This agreement led to a variety of what might be characterized as "deflationary" accounts of religious teach-

ings. Stripped of metaphysical significance, the traditional doctrines of Christianity become either ideals that are useful for consolidating moral life or expressions of feelings that ultimately have their source in human life itself, rather than in a transcendent “beyond.” Such accounts, particularly of the latter sort, represent attempts to *naturalize* religion, in a loose sense of the term, i.e., to translate religious concepts into a domain susceptible of scientific explanation.

Is Dilthey’s philosophy of religion, centered as it is on the “immanence thesis,” a species of naturalism? If “naturalism” is taken simply to refer to the denial of supernatural realities as proper terms in a valid explanation, then the answer seems to be an affirmative one. In Dilthey’s own words “even the images of the transcendent, which, like landscapes on a wall, are painted on the edges of reality and broaden it, are only symbols of this inscrutable sense of life” (GS, XIX, 329; SW, I, 489-90). This seems to imply that, on Dilthey’s view, “God” is not a name for a particular being, but is at most a way of making sense of human life.

There is, of course, another, more robust sense in which the term “naturalism” is used by philosophers, including Dilthey himself. This is a view that Dilthey associates with figures like Comte, d’Alembert, Feuerbach, Moleschott, and Büchner (GS, I, 107; SW, I, 156; GS, VIII, 103). “Naturalism” in this sense is a more comprehensive world-view characterized by the claim that the natural sciences, such as biology or physics provide (at least in principle) an exhaustive explanation of reality as a whole. Dilthey objects to this position for several reasons. First of all, it fails to recognize the legitimacy of the “human sciences.” Second, and, in Dilthey’s mind more damagingly, this sort of claim is an “unscientific abstraction” that exceeds the bounds of what can actually be shown by the positive natural sciences themselves (GS, I, 107; SW, I, 156). Thus, while Dilthey rejects classical theism, he also repudiates “monistic” naturalism as yet another in a long series of misguided attempts to derive the “ultimate unconditioned framework” of empirical reality (GS, I, 131; SW, I, 181). He rejects “monistic systems of natural philosophy” just as much as he rejects the “sweeping speculative thought which not only transcends experience, but also admits of a realm of impalpable spiritual beings” (GS, I, 132; SW, I, 182).

A more significant worry, at least in the context of my discussion here, is that metaphysics, whether idealistic or naturalistic, ultimately fails on account of a basic feature of the lived reality from which it originates. In Dilthey’s view life resists any and all attempts to be rendered in the terms of some allegedly “ultimate” explanation.²⁶ Once we abstract from metaphysics of any sort,

²⁶ Cf. Plantinga, *Historical Understanding*, 72. Owensby puts the matter thus: “Life-philosophy claims that praxis and discourse are made meaningful by finite, historically developed common contexts within which they occur. But there is no monolithic context with which everything will ultimately reside....” See Jacob Owensby, *Dilthey and the Narrative of History* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1994), 24.

whether theistic or naturalistic, there is, according to Dilthey, an irreducible remainder. He writes:

What remains is a meta-physical aspect of our life as personal experience, i.e., as moral-religious truth. Metaphysics—here we come to the end of a long-spun thread—which derived the life of man from a higher order, has not exerted its power on the basis of the inferences of theoretical reason, as Kant assumed in his abstract and ahistorical manner of thinking. The idea of the soul or of a personal God would never have emerged from such inferences. Rather, those ideas were grounded in inner experience; they developed in conjunction with it and with reflection on it, and they have survived in spite of that logical necessity that knows only about systems of thought and consequently can at most arrive at a panlogism. (GS, I, 384-85; SW, I, 218)

By rejecting “panlogism” and asserting the abiding reality of something “meta-physical,” Dilthey seems to be repudiating naturalism in the second sense. While the precise content of “panlogism” is unclear, the thrust of these comments suggests that proponents of this view maintain that everything (“pan-”) is susceptible of an exhaustive scientific explanation (“-logism”). Dilthey, on the other hand, seems to be clearly advocating the contrary view, i.e., that “personal experience” or “moral-religious truth” is irreducible, and, ultimately, inexplicable.

In the “Berlin Plan” Dilthey revisits this position, this time in connection with the “immanence thesis.” Once again the claim is that “the poet, the prophet, and the philosopher seek to elucidate the same reality, the same life” (GS, XIX, 306-7; SW, I, 464). But, Dilthey maintains that this “elucidation” has definite limits. He writes, “For this reality is intelligible, accessible to our thought. It is significant in its vitality, and yet at the same time unfathomable. It follows from this unfathomability of life that it can be expressed only in metaphor” (GS, XIX, 307; SW, I, 464).

It is not entirely clear what Dilthey means here by “unfathomable,” though one might safely assume that he means that life is incapable of receiving any sort of ultimate explanation. This impression is confirmed by a look at a passage towards the end of the “Berlin Plan,” where Dilthey asserts that “Knowledge cannot go behind life, of which it is a function. Life always remains the presupposition of knowledge, i.e., of the consciousness or knowledge contained in life. As a presupposition of knowledge itself, life is not analyzable by knowledge” (GS, XIX, 329; SW, I, 489).²⁷ In the roughly contemporaneous manuscripts for “*Leben und Erkenntnis*” Dilthey dwells on this position at some length.

²⁷ See Bollnow, *Dilthey*, 28-30.

The expression “life” expresses what is at once most familiar, most intimate, and most obscure to everyone; indeed, something wholly inscrutable. What life might be is a riddle that cannot be solved. All meaning, researching, and thinking arises from what is thus inscrutable. All knowing is rooted in something that can never fully be known.... What it might be cannot be expressed in a formula or an explanation. Thought cannot go back behind life, in which it occurs and in whose nexus it stands. (GS, XIX, 346-47)

What is the significance of this position for Dilthey’s overall philosophy of religion? First of all, recall that for Dilthey religious teachings are expressions of life that arise from the “categories” immanent to it. Hence, religious life harbors insights into an unfathomable, inexplicable, and irreducible reality. Clearly, this is not the sort of claim that would sit comfortably with those who are committed to naturalism in the second sense described above. Second, Dilthey’s views on “life,” expressed so forcefully in these passages from the 1890s, might themselves point to a kind of religiosity on Dilthey’s part. In the earlier, published portion of the *Einleitung* Dilthey says the following regarding the “meta-physical”:

These experiences are so personal, so peculiar to the will, that it is possible for an atheist to live within this meta-physical dimension, and for a Christian to miss it if his image of God is nothing more than a worthless dead shell. (GS, I, 385; SW, I, 219)

In Dilthey’s view, then, there is something real, which is at the same time inexplicable, and which cannot be identified with or confined within institutional religion. There are hints here of a kind of Romantic religiosity, a sort of “pantheism of life,” as it were.²⁸ Bollnow traces this “pantheism” to the influence of the *Sturm und Drang* movement on Dilthey’s intellectual development. In Bollnow’s reading, hallmarks of this movement included an “essentially pantheistic feeling for the world” (*Weltgefühl*), and the idea of a “universal life [*Allebens*] that flows through all reality....”²⁹ Among Dilthey’s views, Bollnow singles out the commitment to the unfathomability of life as a clear point of contact with the *Sturm und Drang* world-view.³⁰

These hints are filled out by the fact that in the “Berlin Plan” Dilthey introduces his views on life by making reference to the great pantheists of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, e.g., Giordano Bruno and Goethe (GS, XIX,

²⁸ Bollnow, *Dilthey*, 29.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 29.

³⁰ See *Historical Understanding*, 145-48.

329; SW, I, 489). During this same period, Dilthey composed a number of treatises dealing with Spinoza's pantheism (GS, II, 283-96), Giordano Bruno (297-311, 326-341), and Goethe in the age of the *Pantheismusstreit* (391-415). Dilthey himself links Goethe's brand of pantheism with the claim that there is an "unfathomable reality" (*ein Unerforschliches*) that limits the domain in which conceptual or scientific knowledge is possible (GS, II, 394). Clearly, Dilthey's interest in this form of religiosity was not simply a passing fancy. All the same, in the material directly linked to the *Einleitung in die Geisteswissenschaften* one must content oneself with much more vague suggestions of a developed religious world-view.

The material reviewed in this essay clearly warrants the view that Dilthey does have a determinate position on the philosophy of religion from the 1880s till the end of his life. The core of his position is the "immanence thesis," which is a claim about the best way to understand the content of religious teachings. Along with this goes a commitment to expressivism and a total rejection of non-cognitivism. All three of these commitments feed into Dilthey's views about the role of religious life in his larger project of a "Critique of Historical Reason," which ultimately informs his distinctive views.³¹

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³¹ Thanks are due to Rudolf A. Makkreel, for comments and suggestions on earlier drafts of this essay, as well as to an anonymous reviewer for *Journal of the History of Ideas*.