

Tradition and truth

Dilthey and Gadamer on the history of philosophy

Anders Odenstedt

Introduction

This paper deals with the efforts of the German philosophers Wilhelm Dilthey (1833–1911) and Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900–2002) to determine the nature and value of the study of philosophy's history. Gadamer describes Dilthey, a major representative of nineteenth-century hermeneutics, as one of the first proponents of an approach to the history of philosophy that is *neutral* in the sense of not assessing the truth and falsehood of the philosophical claims of the past but that rather approaches them in a historical way. Dilthey, Gadamer holds, sees the philosophical claims of the past as expressions of their historical contexts, not as succeeding *or* failing to describe their subject matters. Although the fairness, or at least the completeness, of this description of Dilthey can be questioned, his approach to the history of philosophy may nevertheless partly be understood as the result of a fundamental change in the perception of the past which began in earnest in the second half of the eighteenth century.

What did this change amount to? To begin with, a tendency to take an interest in the past *as past* emerged at this time. This process is often described as a transition from a view of history that stressed its *exemplifying* character as *magistra vitae*, to an approach that dwelt upon the alleged otherness of remote historical epochs and their inability to instruct the present.¹ A heightened sense of the variability of historical contexts emerged at this time, and this increasingly led to the notion that such contexts do not involve mere examples of a general human nature, the study of which might be of use to current concerns.² Historical phenomena now came to be described as possessing a value in themselves, quite independently of their ability to provide examples and a corresponding instruction in the present.³ By contrast, an example, as invoked by earlier history writing, possesses its value in virtue of something else, which it exemplifies. To be sure, even if historical contexts were examples in this sense, there could still be differences between them. But during the second half of the eighteenth century, the view increasingly emerged that such differences cannot be understood as mere variations on transhistorical themes, and that what gives a historical context its identity and value is precisely what distinguishes it from other contexts.

The decline of tradition

According to Gadamer, a corresponding change in the perception of the Western philosophical, religious and aesthetic traditions occurred at this time insofar as they increasingly ceased to be understood as authoritative. Gadamer argues that there is a stress on historical factors in nineteenth-century hermeneutics which follows from this decline in the authority of tradition. Instead of asking what a traditional claim says about its subject matter, the interpreter explains it in a genetic fashion as arising from its historical context. The views and concerns of the past are thus approached with a form of alienation (*Fremdheit*):

Where misunderstandings have arisen or where an expression of opinion alienates [*befremdet*] us because it is unintelligible, there natural life in the subject matter intended [*das natürliche Leben in der gemeinten Sache*] is impeded [*gehemmt*] in such a way that meaning is given as the opinion of another [...] The real problem of understanding obviously arises when, in the endeavor to understand the content of what is said, the reflective question arises: how did he come to such an opinion? For this kind of question reveals an alienation [...] and ultimately signifies a renunciation of shared meaning.⁴

In everyday dialogue – which Gadamer here calls “natural life” – the subject matter of claims is stressed. This means that one either trusts the claims of the other as supposedly accurate descriptions of their subject matters, or finds reasons to doubt their accuracy. By contrast, nineteenth-century hermeneutics, Gadamer holds, treats claims as expressions of contextually induced opinions, and neither trusts nor doubts. Subject matter is disregarded insofar as what was once intended as metaphysical or theological claims, for example, are treated as sources of information about their authors and influences of their historical context. Instead of asking if a claim is true or false, the interpreter asks in what contextually induced ways its author came to his or her opinions. Thus, Gadamer holds, there is a relation between a decrease in the authority of claims and a genetic approach towards them: “Genetic inquiry, whose goal consists in explaining a traditional opinion [*überlieferte Meinung*] on the basis of its historical situation, only appears where direct insight into the truth of what is said cannot be reached because our reason sets itself in opposition.”⁵

Dilthey assumed that the historian may understand authors better than they understood themselves.⁶ Dilthey uses the term *Genialität* to describe an ability to detect influences which authors themselves did not notice.⁷ According to him, “the task of historical analysis is to discover, in the concrete goals, values and modes of thought, the consensus [*die Übereinstimmung in einem Gemeinsamen*] which rules the epoch.”⁸ On this view, the historian can detect contextual influences which were unnoticed by individuals situated in the historical context in question. Why is this so?

The tacitness of shared, fundamental presuppositions causes the cognitive heterogeneity of a context to be overestimated by its members. To detect this shared basis, the detached stance of an outsider is required, and this is what the historian achieves.

Dilthey on metaphysics and life

As a result of this approach, Gadamer holds, the claims of the past are not dealt with in terms of *what* they were meant to say. That is, they are dealt with as historical sources and not as claims to truth of relevance to the present. Gadamer refers to this approach as *historicism* (*Historismus*).⁹ But the fairness of this description may be questioned in the case of Dilthey. As the aforementioned studies show, the concept of historicism has been used in various ways. It has been used to denote a tendency to explain the genesis of beliefs by invoking their historical context, but also to refer to a form of relativism, according to which the very validity of beliefs is relative to their context. It should be noted that Dilthey held that objectivity in the historical sciences is possible and that he was no relativist in this domain.¹⁰ But things are different in metaphysics; Dilthey speaks of metaphysical modes of thought as "showing themselves" (*sich erweisen*) to be historically conditioned.¹¹ However, Dilthey is not a relativist in the sense just mentioned of holding that the validity of metaphysical claims is relative to their context. By "relative" (*relativ*) he rather means "one-sided" or "partial".¹² According to Dilthey, historical context circumscribes metaphysical inquiry in such a way that only one aspect (*Seite*) of reality is focused upon. In this sense, Dilthey does not hold that metaphysics is a historical source alone, as Gadamer claims.¹³ Dilthey speaks of the "pure light of truth" that is "broken in different rays" by the variability of contexts and their limited outlooks.¹⁴ He distinguishes between three main types of metaphysical systems; objective idealism (for instance, Hegel, Spinoza, Leibniz), idealism of freedom (Kant, Bergson), and naturalism (atomism, Hobbes). These types all capture aspects of human life; objective idealism the experience of value, idealism of freedom the experience of willing and naturalism the experience of being determined by nature. In this sense, metaphysics is not a contextual product but due to life as such.

But Dilthey describes context as *fragmenting* the grasp of truth, arguing that metaphysical systems exist "side by side" but that history "selects among them".¹⁵ Now, this can be taken to mean that at a certain time context selects one type of metaphysical system and makes it dominant, while not wholly eclipsing the other types. Dilthey thus argues that life brings all types of world view forth but that the unconditional positing (*unbedingte Setzung*) of one of them as exclusively valid is a result of the confinement (*Einschränkung*) of the spirit of the times in question.¹⁶ But

Dilthey's views in this respect remain unclear. For instance, Dilthey seems to imply that idealism of freedom has predominated in historical contexts which may be taken to be widely different, such as Europe in the first decades of the twentieth century (Bergson), and Europe in the last decades of the eighteenth century (Kant). Moreover, different types of metaphysics may be understood as coexisting in one and the same context without one of them achieving a clear predominance over the others. Thus, it might be argued that the objective idealism of Hegel, which had widespread appeal, coexisted with naturalist assumptions in the natural sciences at this time.

Application *contra* contextual analysis

Gadamer sometimes recognizes that Dilthey cannot be understood as holding a view according to which metaphysics is a purely contextual phenomenon insofar as it springs from life as such.¹⁷ Nevertheless, legal and theological hermeneutics have, Gadamer points out, traditionally been concerned with application (*Anwendung*) rather than contextual analysis, and thereby differ from the approach that he often ascribes to Dilthey.¹⁸ An effective law is not seen as a historical phenomenon but is *applied* to current concerns. And an authoritative religious text is not seen as a historical source but as a claim with the potential to influence the reader. According to Dilthey, however, the use of the past for current purposes in theological and legal hermeneutics, and the corresponding tendency to see historical texts as possibly providing answers to current questions, easily result in anachronism and should be avoided if history is to achieve scientific status. The present sense of the variability of historical contexts is what prevents us from believing that the past is applicable to current concerns, and has also permitted the historical sciences to achieve objectivity.¹⁹ Describing this view of Dilthey's, Gadamer writes:

This, then, is the clear hermeneutical demand: to understand a text in terms of the specific situation in which it was written [...] A person trying to understand a text, whether literary critic or historian, does not [...] apply [*anwenden*] what it says to himself. He is simply trying to understand what the author is saying, and if he is simply trying to understand, he is not interested in the objective truth of what is said as such, not even if the text itself claims to teach truth.²⁰

Criticizing historicism, Gadamer says the following:

I must allow tradition's claim to validity, not in the sense of simply acknowledging the past in its otherness [*Andersheit*], but in such a way that it has something to say to me. This [...] calls for a fundamental sort of openness. Someone who is open to tradition in this way sees that [...] [historicism] is not really open at all, but rather, when it reads

its texts "historically", it has always thoroughly smoothed them out [*nivelliert*] beforehand²¹

What does this *Nivellierung* mean? It means, Gadamer holds, that claims are put on the same level of interest in being seen as equally conditioned by their historical context. If subject matter and relevance to current concerns are no longer to serve as criteria by which the object of historical study is chosen, each claim becomes of equal importance as a witness to the spirit of its age. And any subject matter will be seen as worthy of inquiry as long as the historian conducts his research in a disinterested way. The historian is thus supposed to subdue his own presuppositions and concerns, and this also gives rise to the *Fremdheit* mentioned above. As Gadamer puts it:

Understanding the word of tradition always requires that the reconstructed question [...] merge [*übergeht*] with the question that tradition is *for us*. If the "historical" question emerges by itself, this means that it no longer arises as a question. It results from the cessation of understanding – a detour in which we get stuck. [...] Only in an inauthentic sense can we talk about understanding questions that one does not pose oneself – e.g., questions that are outdated and empty. We understand how certain questions came to be asked in particular historical circumstances.²²

According to Gadamer, Dilthey sees the study of history as providing, not potential instruction, but a quasi-aesthetic pleasure in the expressions of the past. The aesthetic quality of this experience lies in the fact that it neither assents nor doubts, and thus resembles the way in which, e.g., the reading of a novel may be unaffected by both belief and disbelief. Dilthey sometimes seems to hold that the historian can *feel*, e.g., the intensity of religious strife in the Reformation era but that he cannot *be* in the relevant psychological states himself.²³ And when arguing in this way Dilthey indeed comes close to being a historicist in Gadamer's sense of this term. The historian can, Dilthey tells us, re-live (*nacherleben*) the past and put himself (*sich versetzen*) in the context in question. Dilthey distinguishes between mental content (*Inhalt*) and mental act (*Akt*).²⁴ The historian reconstructs the content of the beliefs of historical figures, without performing the same mental acts of, e.g., affirmation as they performed. Thus, one can understand the content of metaphysical and religious claims of the past, without thereby being able to make them oneself in the sense of affirming their validity, or even to raise the question whether they are valid.²⁵ Similarly, one can understand the desires of people situated in historical contexts different from one's own, without being able to wish along with them, as it were. And one can understand the motives of actions of historically remote people without being able to perform the same

actions oneself, or wish to be able to perform them, or (finally) even understand the fact that they were indeed performed.²⁶

To be sure, this neutrality is not the only strand in Dilthey's thought. For Dilthey also says the following:

The anarchy of philosophical systems continually provides one of the most compelling reasons for skepticism. Historical consciousness [*geschichtliches Bewußtsein*] of the limitless variety of such systems contradicts the claim each of them makes to universal validity in a manner which supports the skeptical spirit much more powerfully than any systematic argument. An infinite, chaotic variety of philosophical systems lies behind us and spreads around us. They have always excluded and fought each other and there is no hope of making a decision in favor of any one of them.²⁷

When arguing in this way Dilthey does not imply that certain metaphysical claims are mistaken insofar as they fail to describe their subject matter, or even primarily that metaphysics as such is misguided since its claims cannot be justified. Rather, he points to the fact that there is historical diversity and change in this respect and draws a skeptical conclusion from this fact. Accordingly, Dilthey pursues history with what might be called a practical intent and does not consistently recommend a neutral reconstruction of the claims of the past in the manner outlined above.²⁸ Dilthey thus sees metaphysics as a futile endeavor in virtue of the historicity (*Geschichtlichkeit*) of thought. On this view, metaphysics should be replaced by a historical classification of traditional ways of conducting such inquiry.²⁹ As a result of this replacement, "historical consciousness rises above the systematic effort [of metaphysics]".³⁰ When arguing in this way, Dilthey implies that historical consciousness has a shattering effect on man's view of his intellectual powers and that it is far from an aesthetic, disengaged frame of mind.

Through historical consciousness, Dilthey argues, metaphysical controversy becomes a question of "inner existence" (*innere Existenz*).³¹ What was once intended as claims concerning the ultimate constitution of reality as such is treated by Dilthey as expressions (*Ausdrücke*) of human life and its historicity. Metaphysical claims are sources of information about man's inner existence (his contextually induced beliefs and aspirations), not about their purported subject matters. The metaphysicians of the past saw themselves as dealing with timeless issues transcending the human sphere, but Dilthey approaches their claims as sources of increased *self-knowledge* on the historian's part. As Dilthey says: "all questions concerning the value of history are fundamentally answered by the fact that man knows *himself* in it."³² This claim does not, as the aforementioned strand in Dilthey's thought, invoke an alleged *Eigenwert* of historical phenomena. The value of history is now said to lie, not in history itself but in the self-

knowledge that it provides man. This self-knowledge does not rest on the possibility of the past to provide instruction in virtue of its exemplifying character. According to Dilthey, the transhistorical features of the past from which we can learn are more general than that and involve, e.g., the very fact that human life is subject to the force of historical circumstances.

However, Dilthey sees yet another value in historical study, namely, its ability to arrest the stream (*Fluss*) of life and thus to raise the dead into a sort of communion with the living through recollection (*Erinnerung*).³³ Dilthey thus seems to illustrate a point that has often been made in this context, namely, that the rise of the historical sciences in the nineteenth century may be understood as a means of compensating for a loss of religious belief at this time, and that historical study thereby became seen as a way of approximating to eternal life, the hope of which had been destroyed by historical consciousness.³⁴ Indeed, Dilthey argues that historical consciousness is destructive of religious, metaphysical and moral belief and that the resulting lack of conviction causes pain (*Schmerz der Inhaltlosigkeit*).³⁵ But history is to heal the wounds it itself has inflicted.

Expression and truth

Gadamer describes Dilthey's aforementioned theory of expression (*Ausdruck*) in the following way:

What the expression expresses is not merely what is supposed to be expressed in it – what is meant by it – but primarily what is also expressed by the words without its being intended – i.e., what the expression, as it were, "betrays" [*verrät*].[...] Thus *for the historian it is a basic principle that tradition is to be interpreted in a sense different than the texts, of themselves, call for*. He will always go back behind them and the meaning they express to inquire into the reality they express involuntarily. Texts must be treated in the same way as other available historical material – i.e., as the so-called relics of the past. Like everything else, they need explication – i.e., to be understood in terms of not only what they say but what they reveal.³⁶

According to Gadamer, this approach occurs in other situations as well: "Where a person is concerned with the other as individuality [*Individualität*] – e.g., in a therapeutic conversation or the interrogation of a man accused of a crime – this is not really a situation in which two people are trying to come to an understanding."³⁷ In therapeutic sessions and interrogations, utterances are treated as expressions of unconscious drives, or as betraying something which the suspect himself does not intend to communicate. This manner of proceeding structurally resembles the historicist approach, which treats knowledge claims as unintended expressions of their context. The suspect's utterances are seen as revealing the suspect *himself*, in much the same way as Dilthey sometimes understands meta-

physical claims as sources of increased *self*-knowledge on the part of the historian of philosophy, and as unintended means of knowing the *authors* of such claims and their historical context. Gadamer says the following in a passage that merits quotation at length:

we may wonder [...] whether [historicist contextual analysis] is adequate to describe the understanding that is required of us. The same is true of a conversation that we have with someone simply in order to get to know *him* – i.e., to discover his position [...] This is not a true conversation – that is, we are not seeking agreement [*Einverständnis*] on some subject [*Sache*] – because the specific content of the conversation is only a means to get to know the [...] other person. Examples are oral examinations and certain kinds of conversation between doctor and patient. [...] In a conversation, when we have discovered the other person's standpoint [...] his ideas become intelligible to us without our necessarily having to agree with him; so also when someone thinks historically, he comes to understand the meaning of what has been handed down [*die Überlieferung in ihrem Sinn*]. In both cases, the person understanding has, as it were, stopped trying to reach an agreement. [...] The text that is understood historically is forced to abandon its claim to be saying something true.³⁸

To be sure, Gadamer partially admits the validity of Dilthey's presumption (briefly mentioned above) of understanding authors better than they understood themselves, but he does so with an important qualification that separates him from Dilthey: "The better understanding that distinguishes the interpreter from the writer does not refer to the understanding of the text's subject matter [*Sache*] but simply to the understanding of the text – i.e., of what the author meant and expressed. This understanding can be called 'better' insofar as the explicit, thematized understanding of an opinion as opposed to actualizing its content implies an increased knowledge."³⁹ Gadamer here seems to invoke Husserl's and Dilthey's distinction between mental content and mental act. When understanding the content of an opinion without performing the act of affirming its validity, one gains a better grasp of things which tend to be concealed to an individual who performs this act, and these things may include contextual factors. But this does not mean that the interpreter understands the subject matter better than the author. Or, to put it differently, the fact that claims depend upon their respective contexts (on this Dilthey and Gadamer agree) does not permit the conclusion that the true, unintended subject matter of metaphysics is its context, or even human life as such.

How is this claim to be understood? To begin with, one should note that Gadamer, despite speaking of agreement on a subject matter in the passage quoted above, is by no means blind to the fact that historical distance may make it difficult or even impossible to reach such agreement, and even to identify the subject matter of a text. According to Gadamer,

"it is certainly correct that we have to understand what the author intended 'in his sense.' But 'in his sense' does not mean 'as he himself intended it.'"⁴⁰ One may thus fail to agree on a subject matter, and criticize the views of the author, while still agreeing with him or her on the importance of this subject matter. Or one may deny the importance or even the existence of the subject matter while still holding that the text is of lasting *concern* in terms other than those of the author.⁴¹ For instance, the historicity of thought makes it impossible for the modern individual to perceive the gods of Greek mythology as real persons in the intended sense. But this does not mean that the myths should be understood as historical sources. They are still of value, Gadamer tells us, in describing, e.g., forces such as love and hate, to which human life is still subject.⁴² Or one may be unsure whether one has managed to identify the subject matter while still abstaining from interpreting the text in question as an expression of context alone. A text may appear unintelligible in such a way that contextual analysis is seen as required in order to understand it, but this does not mean that its presumption to teach truth, or to be of lasting concern, is dismissed.

Errors of historicism

Dilthey, Gadamer holds, mistakenly sees historicity as irreconcilable with truth. Indeed, Dilthey speaks of the relation between "the finite [the contextually determined] and the absolute."⁴³ But this claim may be understood as invoking what Dilthey sees as the fragmenting role of context mentioned above, rather than as a wholesale denial of contextually determined claims to truth. In this respect as well, Gadamer's critique of Dilthey seems slightly misconceived. In any case, Gadamer argues that Dilthey treats what should be a mere means of understanding, namely, a historical sense, as an end in regarding claims as *mere* expressions of context and not as possible sources of insight. Against this approach, Gadamer insists that there is no opposition between historical and philosophical concerns: "the hermeneutically trained mind will also include historical consciousness. It will make conscious the prejudices [*Vorurteile*] governing our own understanding, so that tradition, as another's meaning [*Andersmeinung*], can be isolated [*abhebt*] and valued on its own. Understanding begins [...] when something addresses us. This is the first condition of hermeneutics. We know what this requires, namely the fundamental suspension of our own prejudices".⁴⁴

Similarly, there is, Gadamer tells us, a danger of "appropriating [*anzueignen*] the other in one's own understanding and thereby failing to recognize his or her otherness [*Andersheit*]."⁴⁵ Gadamer thus suggests that detached self-perception from other points of view is the proper goal of the study of the history of philosophy insofar as it permits questioning of

habitual prejudices, and that the otherness of the past both may and should be reconstructed (*rekonstruiert*).⁴⁶ Now, one may ask how this squares with Gadamer's view mentioned above, that understanding an individual in a historical way illegitimately keeps his or her claims at a distance. But Gadamer does not recommend historicist alienation. According to Dilthey, awareness of the contextually determined and parochial nature of meta-physical claims to universality in the past should lead us to regard current claims of this kind with suspicion.⁴⁷ This is not a case of seeing the familiar from other points of view in such a way that their *content* becomes a challenge. Rather, their *status* as historically conditioned is seen as providing reasons for a detached attitude towards the claims of one's own context as well insofar as they may be presumed to be conditioned in a similar way. By contrast, when Gadamer stresses the importance of heeding the otherness of the past, he does not recommend meta-reflections of this kind, but rather an attempt to reach a better understanding of the subject matter.⁴⁸ Once again, Gadamer criticizes historicism for seeing the history of philosophy as a source of increased *self-knowledge*.

However, there is an ambiguity in Gadamer's critique of historicism. Gadamer alternately seems to hold (i) that historicists have a defective notion of truth and rationality, on the one hand, *and* (ii) that they overlook the fact that context-dependent prejudices quite simply may be true and rational, on the other. When arguing in accordance with (ii), Gadamer says the following: "it is necessary to fundamentally rehabilitate the concept of prejudice and acknowledge the fact that there are legitimate [*legitimate*] prejudices."⁴⁹ But Gadamer also makes the following claim, corresponding to (i): "Whether a given traditional text [*das Überlieferte*] is a poem or tells of a great event, in each case what is transmitted re-emerges into existence just as it presents itself." Thus, in historical study, "there is no being-in-itself [*Ansichsein*] that is increasingly revealed [...]; as in genuine dialogue, something emerges that is contained in neither of the partners by himself".⁵⁰ When arguing in this way, Gadamer suggests that Dilthey's effort to understand the content of the claims of the past in a contextual way is misguided since it rests upon a mistaken view of objectivity, according to which, e.g., historical texts have a fixed meaning that should be reconstructed. According to Gadamer, history is not something that should be reconstructed, it is a mediation (*Vermittlung*) between the past and the present.⁵¹

When affirming (i), Gadamer also argues that "a person who reflects himself out of a living relationship [*Lebensverhältnis*] to tradition [in the historicist way] destroys the true meaning [*Sinn*] of this tradition".⁵² What would a living relationship to the history of philosophy amount to? Not the reconstruction of the philosophical claims of the past in a contextual way. If they were approached in this way, they would lose their contemporary relevance in terms of their subject matters or concerns and could

at most serve as sources of increased self-knowledge on the historian's part in the way described by Dilthey. The meaning of tradition is thus not something fixed that should be reconstructed in the present. Precisely this attitude, Gadamer holds, characterizes declining traditions in which the hermeneutical problem of how to understand the past arises. By contrast, members of a living tradition apply the past to the present and are, in this sense, confined to the horizon of their times, as Dilthey himself puts it.

Gadamer questions the distinction between creation and reception. According to Gadamer, the author is her own interpreter insofar as she can never be sure about the exact meaning of her claims or about the source of her intentions. This is so for a reason that historicists also invoke, i.e., that thought depends upon its historical context in a way which can never be made fully transparent. Every claim, Gadamer tells us, has contextually induced, pre-given assumptions (pre-suppositions) on which it does not reflect.⁵³ In this sense, creation is reception. But reception is creation insofar as interpreters are co-responsible for the production of the significance (*Sinn*) of historical texts. But, and here Gadamer parts company with Dilthey, this does not imply that the interpreter may understand such texts better than their authors in the sense of being able to dismiss the very concern with subject matter and replace it with superior historical consciousness: "Perhaps it is not correct to refer to this productive element in understanding as 'better understanding'. [...] It is enough to say that we understand in a *different way, if we understand at all*."⁵⁴ This does not mean that any interpretation is as good as any other.⁵⁵ But it does mean that there are no uniquely correct interpretations which application (*Anwendung*) in the aforementioned sense prevents from being achieved.

Concluding remarks

Dilthey's approach to the history of philosophy departs from a previous, traditional view, according to which this history is *universal*, i.e., a single developmental process.⁵⁶ However, the view that the history of philosophy is universal may occur in various forms. It has been held that all philosophical systems from the pre-Socratics to the present gradually approximate to a timeless truth and that nothing is wholly left behind in this process (Hegel). Less radically, it has been argued that positions replace each other in the history of philosophy in virtue of inherent difficulties in the discarded views, and that this is what holds the different stages together. Even less radically, it has been argued that the history of philosophy is tied together by the fact that the positions that it contains deal with the same subject matters. In Dilthey all these three views are absent. To be sure, Dilthey holds, as we have seen, that metaphysics deals with recurring aspects of human life. But the three types of metaphysical systems which correspond to these anthropological constants (idealism of freedom,

objective idealism and naturalism) do not replace each other in the history of philosophy according to a developmental pattern.

For instance, the emergence of idealism of freedom in Kant does not amount to a step towards a timeless truth in which insights of his predecessors are preserved. Nor can this emergence be understood as responding to an inherent difficulty in naturalism, which was simply discovered to require abandonment. Naturalism and idealism of freedom are not in themselves contingent, but the choice between them is. But do they not both deal with the same subject matter, namely, human life as such? However, life is not a subject matter exhaustively described by naturalism, idealism of freedom and objective idealism in conjunction. Rather, these types of metaphysics are irreconcilable. Naturalism, for instance, does not hold that *certain* actions are determined by nature but professes to explain human activity *in toto*. In this sense, the subject matter of the three types of metaphysics is not the same. Human life is not a subject matter which can be described by all types of metaphysics in a consistent way.

Now, what is Gadamer's reaction to these claims? On the one hand, when arguing that Dilthey has a defective notion of truth and rationality, Gadamer rejects all three traditional approaches to the history of philosophy mentioned above, while still holding that this history should not be understood in merely contextual or anthropological terms. On the other hand, when arguing that Dilthey overlooks the fact that context-dependent presuppositions may be true, Gadamer would seem to affirm the validity of a more traditional approach, at least in the sense of holding that the history of philosophy deals with recurrent subject matters of lasting concern.

Summary

Tradition and truth: Dilthey and Gadamer on the history of philosophy. By Anders Odenstedt. This paper deals with the views of the German philosophers Wilhelm Dilthey and Hans-Georg Gadamer on the study of philosophy's history. **Gadamer criticizes Dilthey for relating to the Western philosophical tradition as if it were an object of historical research lacking relevance to current concerns.** Gadamer calls this approach to history *historicism* (*Historismus*). Dilthey thus tended to argue that the metaphysical claims of the past should not be understood in terms of their subject matters. Rather, they should be understood as unintended expressions (*Ausdrücke*) of their historical context. According to Gadamer, however, the history of philosophy should not exclusively be approached in this way. Gadamer agrees with historicism that thought depends upon its context. But he nevertheless holds that historicism mistakenly sees this dependence as a reason for denouncing philosophical claims to validity. In this paper, the fairness of Gadamer's critique of Dilthey is questioned. It is argued that Dilthey did not consistently assume that the question of

the subject matter of, e.g., historical texts is wholly subordinate to the question of their contextual sources.

Noter

1 On this issue, see Peter Hanns Reill, *The German enlightenment and the rise of historicism* (Berkeley, 1975), ch. 1, and Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures past: On the semantics of historical time*, trans. Keith Tribe (1979; Cambridge, Mass., 1985), 21–38.

2 The departure from the generalizing stress on examples in history is illustrated by the German philosopher and historian Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803). According to Herder, “the creator of all things does not see as a man sees. He [the creator of all things] knows no classes; each thing only resembles itself.” Quoted in Isaiah Berlin, *Vico and Herder: Two studies in the history of ideas* (London, 1976), 164, Berlin’s trans.

3 Dilthey thus speaks of “the intrinsic value [Eigenwertes] of every historical phenomenon”; quoted in Calvin G. Rand, “Two meanings of historicism in the writings of Dilthey, Troeltsch, and Meinecke”, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. XXV (1964), 508, Rand’s trans. amended.

4 Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and method*, trans. and eds. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall. 2nd ed. (1960; London, 1989), 180–181, trans. modified; in Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Gesammelte Werke*, Band 1. *Hermeneutik I. Wahrheit und Methode: Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik*. 6th ed. (Tübingen, 1990), 184.

5 Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Philosophical hermeneutics*, trans. and ed. David E. Linge (Berkeley, 1976), 46; in Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Gesammelte Werke*, Band 2. *Hermeneutik II. Wahrheit und Methode: Ergänzungen, Register*. 2nd ed. (Tübingen, 1993), 122.

6 For this view, see Wilhelm Dilthey, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. 7. *Der Aufbau der geschichtlichen Welt in den Geisteswissenschaften*, ed. Bernhard Groethuysen (Leipzig, 1927), 217.

7 *Ibid.*, 216–17.

8 *Ibid.*, 155, my trans.

9 Gadamer, *Truth and method*, 572; Gadamer, *Gesammelte Werke* 2, 471. For discussions of the concept of historicism, see Friedrich Jaeger and Jörn Rüsen, *Geschichte des Historismus: Eine Einführung* (München,

1992), Otto Gerhard Oexle, *Geschichtswissenschaft im Zeichen des Historismus: Zu Problemgeschichten der Moderne* (Göttingen, 1996), Georg G. Iggers, *The German conception of history: The national tradition of historical thought from Herder to the present* (1968), 2nd ed. (Middletown, Conn., 1983), esp. 295–98, and idem, “Historicism: The history and meaning of the term”, *Journal of the history of ideas*, Vol. LVI (1995), 129–52.

10 See, for instance, “Der Briefwechsel Dilthey-Husserl”, *Man and world*, Vol. I (1968), 434.

11 Wilhelm Dilthey, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. 8. *Weltanschauungslehre*, ed. Bernhard Groethuysen (Leipzig, 1931), 6.

12 *Ibid.*, 222.

13 Although Dilthey sometimes makes claims that seem partly to justify Gadamer’s description of him as a contextualist and historicist, as we shall see.

14 Dilthey, *Weltanschauungslehre*, 222, my trans.

15 Wilhelm Dilthey, *Dilthey: Selected writings*, ed. and trans. H. P. Rickman (Cambridge, 1976), 141.

16 Dilthey, *Der Aufbau*, 173.

17 Gadamer, *Gesammelte Werke* 2, 103.

18 Gadamer, *Truth and method*, 308 f.; Gadamer, *Gesammelte Werke* 1, 313 f.

19 Dilthey, *Der Aufbau*, 144–45.

20 Gadamer, *Truth and method*, 334–35; Gadamer, *Gesammelte Werke* 1, 340. Similarly, the German historian Leopold von Ranke (1795–1886) says the following in a passage that has become famous: “To history has been assigned the office of judging the past, of instructing the present for the benefit of future ages. To such high office this work [Ranke’s *Latin and teutonic nations*] does not aspire: It wants only to show what actually happened [*wie es eigentlich gewesen*].” Quoted in Stephen Bann, *Romanticism and the rise of history* (New York, 1995), 20, Bann’s trans.

21 Gadamer, *Truth and method*, 361, trans. slightly modified; Gadamer, *Gesammelte Werke* 1, 367. For a somewhat extended

discussion of Gadamer's views in this respect, see my "Gadamer on context-dependence", *The Review of Metaphysics*, Vol. LVII (2003), 78–80.

22 Gadamer, *Truth and method*, 375; Gadamer, *Gesammelte Werke* 1, 381, italics added. Similarly, to understand another person in a historical way illegitimately keeps his or her claims "at a distance" (Gadamer, *Truth and method*, 360; Gadamer, *Gesammelte Werke* 1, 366).

23 For the example of the Reformation, see Dilthey, *Der Aufbau*, 216.

24 *Ibid.*, 22.

25 In this sense, Gadamer's view that Dilthey neglects the question *what* claims attempt to say and their content remains slightly misconceived. Dilthey recommends precisely a stress on content, albeit in a neutral, contextualist mode. Or, to be more specific, Dilthey recommends a stress on the content of claims, but holds that the modern historian cannot believe that metaphysics and religion may grasp their purported *subject matters*, or even that these subject matters exist.

26 This approach strikingly resembles what the German philosopher Edmund Husserl (1859–1938) calls the suspension of the natural attitude. According to Husserl, the natural attitude is the unreflective attitude in which the validity of everyday beliefs is simply taken for granted. When engaging in reflection, I discard, not the content of these beliefs as such, but rather their influence on me. Or, in other words, the content of my mental life remains the same, but I no longer perform the same mental acts of, e.g., affirmation as before. See Husserl, *Cartesian meditations*, trans. Dorion Cairns (1931; Dordrecht & Den Haag, 1973), § 8.

27 Dilthey, *Weltanschauungslehre*, 75, my trans. The concept of historical consciousness thus refers to awareness of the historical variability of thought.

28 As is pointed out in Hans Ruin, "Yorck von Wartenburg and the problem of historical existence", *The Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology*, Vol. XXV (1994), 116, and in Michael Ermarth, *Wilhelm Dilthey: The critique of historical reason* (Chicago, 1978), 25.

29 For Dilthey's own efforts in this direction, see *Weltanschauungslehre*, 75–118.

30 *Ibid.*, 161, my trans. Dilthey italicizes the whole sentence.

31 Dilthey, *Der Aufbau*, 216.

32 *Ibid.*, 250, my trans., italics added.

33 *Ibid.*, 329.

34 For a discussion of this issue, see Jaeger and Rüsen, *Geschichte des Historismus*, 78.

35 Dilthey, *Weltanschauungslehre*, 192, 198. See also Dilthey, *Der Aufbau*, 6.

36 Gadamer, *Truth and method*, 335–36, trans. slightly modified; Gadamer, *Gesammelte Werke* 1, 341–42.

37 Gadamer, *Truth and method*, 385; Gadamer, *Gesammelte Werke* 1, 389.

38 Gadamer, *Truth and method*, 303, trans. slightly modified; Gadamer, *Gesammelte Werke* 1, 308, italics added.

39 Gadamer, *Truth and method*, 192; Gadamer, *Gesammelte Werke* 1, 196.

40 Gadamer, *Philosophical hermeneutics*, 122; in Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Gesammelte Werke* 4. *Neuere Philosophie: Probleme, Gestalten*. 2nd ed. (Tübingen, 1999), 15.

41 *Ibid.*, 67.

42 Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Gesammelte Werke* 8. *Ästhetik und Poetik I: Kunst als Aussage* (Tübingen, 1993), 187.

43 Dilthey, *Der Aufbau*, 290.

44 Gadamer, *Truth and method*, 299, trans. modified; Gadamer, *Gesammelte Werke* 1, 304.

45 Gadamer, *Truth and method*, 299 n.; Gadamer, *Gesammelte Werke* 1, 305 n.

46 Gadamer, *Truth and method*, 17; Gadamer, *Gesammelte Werke* 1, 22–23.

47 Dilthey, *Weltanschauungslehre*, 75.

48 These claims invoke the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900). Nietzsche pointed to what he saw as an excess of historical learning in the nineteenth century and a corresponding inability to strongly identify with current concerns. The awareness of the mutability of historical contexts has, Nietzsche asserted, created a form of self-irony in the modern era; see Friedrich Nietzsche, *Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das Leben* (1874), in *Werke in zwei Bänden*, Vol. I, ed. Karl Schlechta (München, 1967), 136. By contrast, an authoritative culture has a circumscribed "horizon" (*Horizont*) of presuppositions and concerns that are not regarded as historical, transient phenomena (*ibid.*, 117). Indeed, Dilthey himself feared that historical study may be dangerous for similar reasons. He thus argued that "the productive energy" (*die produktive Energie*) of human endeavor is

due to the fact that individuals are "confined" (*eingeschränkt*) to the horizon of their times (Dilthey, *Der Aufbau*, 186).

49 Gadamer, *Truth and method*, 277; Gadamer, *Gesammelte Werke* 1, 281

50 Gadamer, *Truth and method*, 462; Gadamer, *Gesammelte Werke* 1, 466.

51 Gadamer, *Truth and method*, 290; Gadamer, *Gesammelte Werke* 1, 295.

52 Gadamer, *Truth and method*, 360; Gadamer, *Gesammelte Werke* 1, 366. Gadamer italicizes the whole sentence.

53 Hans-Georg Gadamer, "What is truth?", trans. Brice R. Wachterhauser, in *Hermeneutics and truth*, ed. Brice R. Wachterhauser

(Evanston, 1994), 42; Gadamer, *Gesammelte Werke* 2, 52.

54 Gadamer, *Truth and method*, 296–97; Gadamer, *Gesammelte Werke* 1, 301–2.

55 Gadamer, *Truth and method*, 95; Gadamer, *Gesammelte Werke* 1, 100.

56 For a discussion of this issue, see Gunter Scholtz, "Philosophiegeschichte und Geschichtsphilosophie: Braniß und Dilthey", in *Dilthey und Yorck: Philosophie und Geisteswissenschaften im Zeichen von Geschichtlichkeit und Historismus*, eds. Jerzy Krakowski and Gunter Scholtz. *Acta Universitatis Wratislaviensis* No. 1788 (Wrocław, 1996), 179–94.