

Wilhelm Dilthey and the Neo-Kantians Wilhelm Windelband and Heinrich Rickert engaged in a life-long controversy about the distinction between the human and the natural sciences, about the epistemological foundations of history, and about the methods of psychology.

In this paper, I defend two theses about this exchange, one historical, the other systematic. The historical thesis is that the explicit debate between Dilthey and the Neo-Kantians on the issue of science classification was driven by a deeper, although seldomly acknowledged concern with “psychologism”. (Broadly construed, “psychologism” amounts to the view that moral norms and logical principles are reducible to psychological processes.)

The systematic thesis is that precisely those features of Dilthey’s thinking which invited charges of “psychologism” also allowed him to solve the central epistemological problems of his foundational project. In particular, three of Dilthey’s theses appeared as “psychologistic” and potentially “relativistic” to his Neo-Kantian critics. First, Dilthey thought of epistemology and logic as inseparable from psychology, and devised an account of primitive logical operations which he regarded as immanent in the structure of experience. Second, he claimed that historical objects are “psychic life that has become objective”, and that historical meaning is ultimately constituted by what is experienced as meaningful within inner experience. And third, he provided a theory of psychological development according to which values emerge from their functions within psychic activity. The first thesis seemed to reduce logic to psychological acts. The second thesis seemed to reduce historical meaning to psychological experience. And the third thesis seemed to reduce values to psychological functions.

But what seemed like a dangerous “psychologism” in the eyes of his critics, for Dilthey worked towards grounding the objective statements of human science in the certainty of inner experience. The continuity between primitive logical operations and formal logic bridged the gap between immediate experience and scientific statements about this experience. And the idea that historical objects and values are constituted by psychic activity allowed for inner experience to provide reliable epistemic access to the meaning structures of the historical world.