

Accounting for the Unity of Experience in Dilthey, Rickert, Bradley and Ward

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I.

The history of philosophy differs from other kinds of history mainly in its attempts to understand historical change exclusively through the examination and evaluation of philosophical arguments. Of course, nobody writing the history of philosophy is likely to deny that philosophical arguments are given by people and that the context and aspirations of the philosopher will shape her arguments. Despite this concession it remains common practice to ignore such contributions in the reconstruction of a historical figure's philosophical views. Reflecting an extreme version of this approach, Scott Soames has recently written in response to criticism of his *Philosophical Analysis in the Twentieth Century*,

if progress [in philosophy] is to be made, there must at some point emerge a clear demarcation between genuine accomplishments that need to be assimilated by later practitioners, and other work that can be forgotten, disregarded, or left to those whose interest is not in the subject itself, but in history for its own sake. The aim of my volumes was to contribute to making that demarcation (Soames 2006, 655).

The limitations of this conception of history for resolving questions about long-standing philosophical distinctions like Erklären/Verstehen are easy to see. As Peter Simons has argued concerning the equally vexing distinction between analytic and continental philosophy, “No individual or movement, no dramatic event is solely or simply responsible for the opening up of the analytic-continental rift. A constellation of circumstances, compounded by political and historical events, accidents of human destiny, are responsible” (Simons 2001, 307). Thus opposing what he calls the “more or less deterministic internal explanations” typically prized in the history of philosophy, Simons uses the evidence that “the rift is an accident” (Simons 2001, 296) to conclude that “what we make of the divide is our business” (Simons 2001, 308),

i.e. the distinction has no lasting philosophical significance. More generally, it appears that we are unlikely to find arguments of the sort that Soames is after that will clearly vindicate the course that the history of philosophy happened to take.

While Simons' position is certainly more interesting and historically informed, we can see him as simply accepting the other side of the coin offered by Soames. That is, unless a distinction can be supported by conclusive philosophical argumentation or is, as Soames says of Kripke's distinction between necessity and analyticity, "almost irresistible" (Soames 2003, 354), that distinction becomes void of philosophical interest.<sup>1</sup> Both alternatives are unavailable for a philosopher who wishes to understand the opposition of Erklären and Verstehen. On the one hand, nobody is likely to be able to come up even with a univocal characterization of this distinction, let alone a conclusive philosophical argument for its presence. On the other hand, we cannot embrace an explanation of the distinction and its significance that rests content with an enumeration of the various historical contingencies that led to its inception. For if such an account exhausts the point of Erklären/Verstehen, then it really does seem to lack continuing philosophical significance.

The main goal of this essay, then, is to begin to offer a way of tackling the history of such philosophical distinctions that avoids these two extremes. My working assumption is that the Erklären/Verstehen distinction is motivated by a philosophical problem and that we can better understand the distinction by seeing both how various ways of drawing it can contribute to a solution to that problem and how the problem was solved by those who neglected to draw the distinction in question. This turns our focus away from simply considering the reasons that some particular philosopher offers for drawing the distinction in their own special way. But, the hope is, it restricts the resulting account to properly

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<sup>1</sup> See also Leiter 2004.

intellectual issues, most especially the issue of whether or not the distinction really solves the problem it set out to solve.

The problem that I focus on in connection with the Erklären/Verstehen distinction is what I will call the unity of experience, and in the next section I will explain why I take Mill's empiricism to have raised this problem in an especially forceful way. In section three I then turn to a consideration of how Dilthey and Rickert, in very different ways, proposed to account for the unity of experience by invoking the opposition between Erklären and Verstehen. This sets the stage for a consideration, in section four, of two British philosophers, Bradley and Ward, who sought to account for the unity of experience without making any appeal to Erklären versus Verstehen. I conclude by arguing that it is unlikely that the distinction in question is necessary to solve the unity of experience problem and that accepting it can blind the historian to the interesting similarities and differences between philosophers like Dilthey, Rickert, Ward and Bradley.

## II.

Historians continue to quarrel over the causal significance of the publication of Mill's *System of Logic* (Mill 1963) in 1843 for the Geisteswissenschaften debates later in the nineteenth century, often emphasizing independent developments within the sciences themselves as well as properly German philosophical traditions (Anderson 2003). In line with the orientation described in the last section, I do not propose to enter into these questions. Instead, it will be sufficient for our purposes to establish a point that is much weaker than the claim that the Geisteswissenschaften debates would not have occurred if Mill had not published his *Logic*. I argue only that Mill's *Logic* posed the problem of the unity of experience in an especially clear and urgent way.

What is this problem? Simply put, the problem of the unity of experience is to explain how experience can contribute to scientific knowledge. As we will see, Mill offered a surprisingly crude account of the connection between experience and scientific knowledge. Many feel, upon encountering this proposal, that there must be some aspects of experience that Mill is ignoring which may be loosely characterized as the unity of experience, and it is these features of our experience that are in fact crucial to the integration of experience and knowledge in the sciences. Different solutions to the problem of the unity of experience will draw attention to different features of our experience that Mill supposedly missed, and use these features to explain how experience fits with scientific knowledge. One might suspect that there is, in the end, no single problem of how to relate our experience to scientific knowledge given that there is no agreement on what experience or scientific knowledge amount to. Still, I hope to show that this sort of problem can serve as a useful framework for our historical investigation.

Early on in his *Logic* Mill offers an argument for a sweeping conclusion about not only the extent of our scientific knowledge, but also the range of circumstances that we can even describe. His premise is an epistemic one: “of the outward world, we know and can know absolutely nothing, except the sensations which we experience from it” (Mill 1963, vol. 7, 62; I, iii, § 8). This argument quickly follows:

For if we know not, and cannot know, anything of bodies but the sensations which they excite in us or in others, those sensations must be all that we can, at bottom, mean by their attributes; and the distinction which we verbally make between the properties of things and the sensations we receive from them, must originate in the convenience of discourse rather than in the nature of what is signified by the terms (Mill 1963, vol. 7, 65; I, iii, § 9).

Let us call this combined epistemological and semantic claim “phenomenalism”.

Phenomenalism is maintained not only as all that science requires, but as all the metaphysics

that is possible for beings like us. The facts of experience, thought of as discrete sensations standing in various relations of association, stand as the ultimate epistemological and metaphysical foundation of all the sciences. Laws concerning their succession and coexistence are all that science should hope for.

If we take Mill's phenomenalism seriously, then we have a nearly trivial argument for an extreme form of the unity of science. For if all we can even talk about, and so therefore all that we can know about, are laws concerning the coexistence and succession of a unified kind of thing, our sensations, then all sciences will take on essentially the same form. They will give laws that purport to govern these sensations. Much of the *Logic* can be seen as further articulating this picture by arguing that a small group of methods suffices to establish all the laws that we can ever hope to know. But it should not be surprising that the same methods are employed across the sciences if we have already accepted that sensations are the subject matter of the sciences quite generally. To be sure, Mill allows himself some wiggle room by contrasting "the convenience of discourse" which presumably may invoke entities besides sensations with "the nature of what is signified", but the impression remains that all genuine science is a science of sensations.

The unsatisfactory features of Mill's phenomenalism were to occupy Mill's critics for decades, and it seems that these criticisms have been so effective that a contemporary philosopher finds it hard to believe that Mill really meant to defend it. To return to the problem of the unity of experience, there is a glaring gap between any plausible interpretation of the range of our sensations, or more broadly our experience, and the sorts of things that the mature and successful natural and human sciences give us information about. For one who feels this gap, it is hard to even know where to begin when confronted by an advocate of

phenomenalism. For surely, unless the phenomenalist proposes to reconstruct all of science so that it will meet the strictures imposed by phenomenalism, the phenomenalist owes us some account of exactly how the discrete sensations making up our experience can hope to contribute to the knowledge of all the different sorts of things that the sciences invoke. The suspicion shared by Mill's critics is that this was simply not possible. As we will see, Dilthey, Rickert, Bradley and Ward offered four different accounts of what was missing and how these missing aspects could integrate experience and scientific knowledge.

Interestingly enough, Mill himself seems to have overstepped the bounds of his phenomenalism, both in his discussion of chemistry and in the concluding book of the *Logic*, "On the Logic of the Moral Sciences". For in both chemistry and the moral sciences like psychology and history, Mill argued that our sensations could combine to form entities of a new kind whose causal laws were not reducible to the laws that govern the original sensations. As our concern for much of this essay will be psychology, I will focus on what Mill has to say here. After beginning with the confident assertion that "The subject, then, of Psychology is the uniformities of succession, the laws, whether ultimate or derivative, according to which one mental state succeeds another – is caused by, or at least is caused to follow, another" (Mill 1963, vol. 8, 852; VI, iv, § 3), Mill goes on to clarify how a complex mental state might relate to the simple sorts of sensations invoked by empiricists. Comparing the process of chemical composition discussed earlier in the *Logic* to the case "when the seven prismatic colours are presented to the eye in rapid succession [and] the sensation produced is that of white", Mill notes that

so it appears to me that the Complex Idea, formed by the blending together of several simpler ones, should, when it really appears simple, (that is, when the separate elements are not consciously distinguishable in it,) be said to *result from*, or *be*

*generated by*, the simple ideas, not to *consist* of them (Mill 1963, vol. 8, 854; VI, iv, § 3).

Psychology, then, and the other moral sciences, can make progress only by granting this sort of “mental chemistry” and tailoring its methods to help us understand how it works.

The possibility of this sort of chemical composition greatly weakens the kind of unity that Mill can ascribe to the sciences, and in the end it seems in tension with his phenomenalism. For if new sorts of entities can result from the combinations of simpler entities, then there is no hope for a single category of entities whose laws can be used to explain all natural phenomena. Instead we will have a series of increasingly complex entities where each level obeys its own collection of causal laws, and there is no prospect of reducing these higher-level laws to the laws governing the simpler entities. The tension with phenomenalism becomes clearer when we see Mill speaking of entities arising through this sort of chemical composition that have no clear connection to our sensations. For example, Mill includes beliefs and desires in his psychology, but unless these are included in the category of sensations, phenomenalism has been violated even in the case of psychology. If phenomenalism fails even here, what chance is there that our talk of bodies or social phenomena could be reduced to talk of sensations?

Even allowing chemical composition, and thereby weakening somewhat his conception of the unity of science, Mill’s empiricism raised in a particularly urgent form what I have been calling the problem of the unity of experience. If we accept Mill’s account of the relation between experience and scientific knowledge, then we have great difficulty understanding how scientific knowledge is even possible. For example, how can we know about the origins of the solar system if all we experience are sensations? The four writers that I will turn to next proposed to bridge the gulf between our experience and scientific

knowledge by emphasizing the unity of our experience that they claimed Mill had missed. But, as we will see, no consensus emerged on what exactly the unity of experience amounted to or how it contributed to scientific knowledge. Our four philosophers chose instead to argue that experience or scientific knowledge or both had unanticipated features which would facilitate their integration.

### III.

The most direct way to resolve our problem of how experience relates to scientific knowledge is to insist that we are always directly in contact with the subject matter of science, i.e. a unified, law-governed natural world. This sort of naïve realism bridges our gap by fiat and is not pursued by any of the writers we will consider. But we can see Dilthey as opting for the next best option in writings like *Introduction to the Human Sciences* (Dilthey 1989) and “Ideas Concerning a Descriptive and Analytic Psychology” (Dilthey 1977).<sup>2</sup> For Dilthey insists that our experience always begins with an original awareness of a unified structure which combines not only our representations, but also our feelings and volitions. This “original nexus, a unity which is not put together out of separate elements and functions” (Dilthey 1977, 104/224),<sup>3</sup> is what a genuinely scientific psychology must begin with. As our experience starts with such a unity, psychology employs a different method than a science like physics. For while the subject matter of psychology is given as a whole system, the subject matter of physics lies outside of our immediate experience and so initially lacks the systematic character required by science. To resolve this, Dilthey argues, physics must employ a series of hypotheses in an effort to explain those regularities that we do have access to in our otherwise disjointed experience of the physical world:

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<sup>2</sup> I am indebted to Uljana Feest for providing me with her (Feest forthcoming). This paper was instrumental in helping me to see a connection between Dilthey and what I am calling the problem of the unity of experience.

<sup>3</sup> References to Dilthey 1977 include the page number of the German original in Dilthey 1959, vol. 5.



hypotheses do not all play the same role in psychology as in the study of nature. In the latter, all connectedness [Zusammenhang] is obtained by means of the formation of hypotheses; in psychology it is precisely the connectedness which is originally and continually given in lived experience [Erleben]: life exists everywhere only as a nexus or coherent whole. Psychology therefore has no need of basing itself on the concepts yielded from inferences in order to establish a coherent whole among the main groups of mental affairs (Dilthey 1977, 28/144).

Psychology should become descriptive or analytic rather than imitating physics through cycling through hypotheses in an attempt to explain mental phenomena. Analysis, beginning with the given unity of our experience, can productively distinguish the different aspects of our mental life that are initially combined.

Dilthey has a complicated position concerning when hypotheses will enter into his analytic psychology and what function they will serve. Beginning with hypotheses is pointless because no system can ever be confirmed or refuted (Dilthey 1977, 29/145 & 104/224). One suggestion for why this happens in psychology, and not in physics, is that the original unity of our experience makes any system of hypotheses superfluous, and so it has no function to serve in conferring unity on our experience, unlike in physics. The situation is apparently quite different, however, once an initial analysis is made of our experience and its different aspects. For at that point analytic psychology can take on the hypotheses considered in the explanatory psychology that Dilthey attacks: “Descriptive and analytic psychology ends with hypotheses, whereas explanatory psychology begins with them” (Dilthey 1977, 57/175). By ending with hypotheses Dilthey may mean that these hypotheses are formulated only after analysis delivers the general and shared structures of human experience. This fits with his practice later in the “Ideas” essay, where after distinguishing different aspects of our mental life, he propounds what can only be called a hypothesis: that the qualitative differences in character that we find across individuals are due entirely to the quantitative combinations of a

fixed list of these different aspects (Dilthey 1977, 110/230). Presumably if we had not followed Dilthey in his careful analysis of the given nexus of our experience, this hypothesis would not be possible to formulate, let alone evaluate.

Unsurprisingly, Mill's approach to psychology is singled out as a particularly useless example of explanatory psychology that begins with hypothetical elements and tries to reconstruct the original unity of lived experience through hypothetical mechanisms of association and combination. At least in this case, Dilthey has a fairly plausible diagnosis of why an explanatory psychology can never lead to a well confirmed system of hypotheses. His criticism focuses on the possibility of the chemical composition discussed in the last section: sensations can combine so that the result appears simple and where the result obeys new causal laws. But if we allow without restriction the possibility of this sort of combination, our hypotheses become so flexible that we can handle whatever patterns within our experience we happen to encounter. Such an appeal "allows us to depend on certain regular antecedents and to fill the gap which separates them from the subsequent state by the psychical chemistry. But the latter cannot fail as well to reduce to zero the degree, already quite low, of persuasive force which this construction and its results have" (Dilthey 1977, 44/160).

Once Dilthey's analytic psychology is in place, it is a short step to the full blown distinction between the natural and the human sciences, and the associated thesis that explanation is central to the natural sciences while understanding is the proper goal of the human sciences. For as Dilthey had argued in the earlier *Introduction to the Human Sciences*, psychology lies at the basis of all the human sciences like history, and in a somewhat different fashion, also sets limits on what the natural sciences can achieve. One helpful summary of the distinction is that

We explain [erklären] by purely intellectual processes, but we understand [verstehen] through the concurrence of all the powers of the psyche in the apprehension. In understanding we proceed from the coherent whole which is livingly given to us in order to make the particular intelligible to us. Precisely the fact that we live with the consciousness of the coherent whole, makes it possible for us to understand a particular sentence, gesture or action. All psychological thought preserves this fundamental feature, that the apprehension of the whole makes possible and determines the interpretation of particulars (Dilthey 1977, 55/172).

That is, the distinctive cognitive attitude of understanding extends not only throughout psychology, but also to the interpretation of the actions and utterances of others that are central to history, legal theory and aesthetics. In each case, we exploit the assumed similarities between the given lived nexus of our own experience and the structure of the mental life of the people we are interpreting. By contrast, in the natural sciences, we are forced to begin with the hypothetical properties of elements like atoms whose features we are not intimately aware of. These “heuristic constructions” (Dilthey 1989, 199/365)<sup>4</sup> remain, in the end, constrained by the structure of inner experience. In particular, Dilthey argues that natural science results from abstracting out the intellectual aspects of our experience and projecting them onto the world, as when we assume that the natural world is governed by a system of universally valid causal laws (Dilthey 1989, 202/369).<sup>5</sup> Natural scientific explanation is, then, not only distinct from the understanding of the human sciences, but the former is radically dependent on the latter. For nothing that we can put into our hypotheses concerning genuine reality can transcend the materials that we can abstract out of our original lived experience.

Dilthey’s dissatisfaction with any broadly neo-Kantian solution to the problem of the unity of experience is revealed in his remark that even the theory of knowledge smuggles in psychological facts, and so is not actually independent of psychology: “it is evidently impossible to connect the spiritual data which form the matter of epistemology without

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<sup>4</sup> References to Dilthey 1989 include the page number of the German original in Dilthey 1959, vol. 1.

<sup>5</sup> The same strategy is employed in Dilthey’s criticism of metaphysics.

relying on some idea or other of the psychic nexus ... Thus it happened that the fundamental concepts of Kant's critique of reason belong throughout to a definite psychological school" (Dilthey 1977, 32/148), in particular the defective explanatory approach of faculty psychology. The most sophisticated neo-Kantian reply to this charge was offered by Rickert in his *Limits of Concept Formation in Natural Science* (Rickert 1986).<sup>6</sup> While conceding that Dilthey was right to deny the unity of the sciences, Rickert claims that "Dilthey ... unfortunately did not succeed in providing a *clear conceptual* analysis of the essential feature of his principle of demarcation" (Rickert 1986, 146). While the differences between Dilthey and Rickert are not our main concern, the contrast is useful in showing how Rickert's way of drawing the Erklären/Verstehen distinction figures into his own solution to the problem of the unity of experience.

Much of Rickert's book concerns what he calls methodology, by which he appears to mean the systematic and largely logical investigation of the presuppositions of the various sciences (Rickert 1986, 65). Chapter 5 is occupied with epistemology proper, where Rickert argues that the presuppositions of the various sciences are in fact met. For Rickert, all scientific representations depend on concepts which are derived from experience. Here there is an apparent agreement with Dilthey, but Rickert will argue that a central feature of experience that Dilthey missed points to the need for significant non-experiential assumptions in order to account for scientific knowledge. For Rickert claims that experience does not begin with the basic unity that Dilthey invoked, but that instead experience presents us with an infinitely complex manifold of individuals. This complexity has two aspects. On the one side, each individual that we experience is related in numerous ways to other individuals. But,

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<sup>6</sup> All quotations are from the fifth edition of 1929, abridged and translated by Guy Oakes. I draw liberally on Oakes' helpful introduction.

on the other side, even if we consider one individual by itself, we realize that it has infinite internal complexity. The richness of our experience precludes any attempt to develop a science that would reproduce or copy the natural world in all of its fine detail, and Rickert argues more generally that any approach to scientific knowledge in terms of correspondence with reality is bound to fail. Instead, the natural scientist sets herself the goal of producing laws which are universally valid in the sense that they hold for all events of a certain kind. This goal requires that the scientist abstract from the character of the individuals that she experiences by developing concepts that group them together in appropriate ways. The natural scientist, then, must de-individualize her subject matter and consider the natural world as composed of entities of different types, but which have no further specific features. This is the price that the natural scientist must pay if she is to generate any effective scientific representations consistent with her goals.

In taking up this generalizing attitude, Rickert argues, the natural scientist runs into certain limits on what she can scientifically comprehend. For the natural scientist is precluded from taking a scientific interest in the particular individuals that she began with. To take an example that Rickert sometimes appeals to, the natural scientist cannot consider Luther as an individual, but only as an entity of a particular type. For example, a natural scientific psychologist could include Luther in her research only as a more or less arbitrary subject for the verification of her psychological laws. But what of our interest in Luther as that particular person who revolutionized the practice of religion? If we restrict ourselves to the natural sciences, then we must reject such questions as unscientific.

Rickert is not willing to accept this consequence, and argues instead that there is an alternative sort of goal that the scientist can adopt when she works in what Rickert calls the

historical sciences.<sup>7</sup> Here the goal is basically the opposite of the natural sciences. Instead of thinking of the individuals as instances of a kind, and seeking general regularities, we investigate the individual as such and try to understand its origins and effects. Immediately, though, Rickert confronts a problem based on the infinite complexity of our experience that he took as an initial premise. Wouldn't this make a historical science of individuals impossible? For example, in Luther's case, there are so many features of Luther, his origins and his effects, that it seems like any genuine scientific understanding of Luther is ruled out.

It is here that Rickert appeals to values. Values for Rickert are not individuals that we experience, and so in this sense they are "not real" or, as he prefers to put it, values are "nonreal [*irreal*]." It is only when individuals are related to nonreal values that they can be considered as objects of scientific historical investigation.<sup>8</sup> The connection between the individual and the value gives the historian a non-arbitrary basis to select only certain features of the individual. These are the features that are responsible for the individual being related to the value that the historian is interested in and they confer a unity on that way of considering the thing. It is helpful to return to our example of Luther at this point. The value in question here is religious value, and quite clearly not all of Luther's features are significant to the history of religion. The historian of religion, then, would try to discern the features that were responsible for Luther's importance in the history of religion, and to this extent ignore some features of Luther the individual. Still, this sort of abstraction is completely different from the generalizing tendency of the natural scientific psychologist. The historian is still interested in

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<sup>7</sup> Rickert prefers the terms "historical science [Geschichtswissenschaft]" or "cultural science [Kulturwissenschaften]" to Dilthey's "human science [Geisteswissenschaft]". See Makkreel 1969, cited by Feest forthcoming.

<sup>8</sup> Rickert opposes ordinary individuals to in-dividuals which result when ordinary individuals are related to values. I will not follow this terminology in my exposition.

that particular person for his own sake, we might say, and would never slip into considering Luther merely as a representative of a general type.

It is only after distinguishing the natural and historical sciences in this way that Rickert turns to the connection between the historical sciences and minds along with the distinction between explanation and understanding (Rickert 1986, 157-174). A central point of his discussion is that Dilthey misunderstood the basis of this distinction because he did not appreciate the logical presuppositions of the genuinely historical or cultural sciences. The root of the unity presupposed in the historical sciences is not any basic unity of our lived experience, but only the relations to values that confer the requisite unity on historical individuals. Among other things, Rickert concludes that psychology should be classified as a natural science whose special task is to uncover the laws which regulate our experiences.

Still, there is a connection between how individuals are related to values and our minds. Rickert argues that these value relations invariably involve minds grasping nonreal values, or as he often puts it, nonreal meanings. It is not that history exclusively concerns itself with minds, as non-mental things like buildings or oceans can stand in relations to values. But these relations all turn, in the end, on acts of valuation by minds and it is these acts which the historian must presuppose when determining what is of historical significance. Historical understanding is just the attempt to grasp these nonreal meanings, and should be opposed to the sort of explanation sought by the natural sciences:

We have pointed out the distinctive “unity” of the nexus or the “totality” characteristic of nonreal meaning in contrast to merely real existence. The distinctiveness of the understanding [Verstehen] of an object, in comparison with the explanation [Erklären] of that object, is also determined on this basis. This is the only way the expression “understanding” acquires a thoroughly precise meaning. Meaningful wholes can be understood only *as* unities or totalities. ... The object of understanding as a nonreal meaning configuration always remains a whole or a unity. Realities, on the other hand, are decomposed into their parts for the purpose of explanation. Or, in explanation, the

path leads from the parts to the whole; in understanding, it proceeds in the opposite direction, from the whole to the parts (Rickert 1986, 159).

So, an explanation of an event like Luther's nailing of his 95 theses to the door of the Wittenberg Church might focus on the physics of the hammer impacting the nail, and how the resulting physical system was stable, i.e. why the paper stayed on the door. This explanation would begin with a series of events of various physical kinds and culminate in a feature of the whole. This is of course probably not what someone asking a question about this event is likely to be interested in. Instead, the historical significance of the event can only be understood when we grasp its relation to religious value, and this relation depends on treating that event as a unified whole. In virtue of this particular unified whole standing in its relation to religious value we can begin to understand how it came about and what its historical effects were.

Just like Dilthey, then, Rickert makes a connection between wholes or unities and the distinction between explanation and understanding. Both agree that understanding must begin with a unity of some sort that is then decomposed, while explanation starts with distinct parts that are connected together in the process of explanation. On the explanation side, Dilthey and Rickert agree furthermore that this alignment of the parts into a whole in natural science proceeds via laws. But when it comes to understanding, Rickert breaks decisively with Dilthey. For the unity involved in understanding for Rickert is not given in lived experience, but continually made and remade by the acts of valuation of minds. This forces Rickert to give some account of what his nonreal values are and how they can enter into the real world of human minds. Here is a distinctively philosophical project which Rickert sees as the subject matter of epistemology or the theory of knowledge, rather than Dilthey's scientific analytic psychology.



#### IV.

I turn now to two other responses to the problem of the unity of experience. Bradley and one of his critics, James Ward, sought to move beyond Mill's conception of the relation of experience to scientific knowledge, but neither invoked anything like the distinction between *Erklären* and *Verstehen* that were central to the proposals of Dilthey and Rickert. As we will see, though, there are important similarities between the views of Bradley and Rickert, on the one hand, and Dilthey and Ward, on the other. The former pair agree that the unity required for scientific knowledge is not given, but made, while the latter pair insist that the unity cannot be made, but must instead be given.

Bradley agrees with Mill, Dilthey and Rickert that all thought begins with experience and that all the materials assembled in judgments must be extracted from experience. But he supplements this picture with two additional commitments which not only undermine Millian empiricism but anything approaching what Dilthey or Rickert would accept. The first commitment seems somewhat benign: Bradley claims that our experience is initially non-cognitive in that it involves only a feeling for a unified mass of experience. For Bradley, the description of experience of Mill and Rickert that both accept of a plurality of entities, be they sensations or individuals, applies only to a second stage of experience. Bradley then raises a second point. What, in the end, licenses us to take the distinctions that *we* introduce into our undifferentiated mass of experience as genuine? That is, if we separate out a general feature, or what Bradley would call an idea, then we need some additional reason to think that this feature could exist independently of the mass of experience with which we began. Here we can see Bradley departing from Dilthey's assumption that an analysis of the nexus of lived experience will reveal the genuine structures of our mind. On the contrary, Bradley argues

that all such abstraction or analysis of experience involves distortion and mutilation. Using the term “analytic judgment of sense” to refer to judgments that are composed of ideas that are directly abstracted from an experience, Bradley notes

But *a-b* by itself has never been given, and is not what appears. It was *in* the fact and we have taken it out. It was *of* the fact and we have given it independence. We have separated, divided, abridged, dissected, we have mutilated the given.<sup>9</sup> And we have done this arbitrarily: we have selected what we chose. But, if this is so, and if every analytic judgment of sense must inevitably so alter the fact, how can it any longer lay claim to truth? (Bradley 1922, 94)

It is hard to know why Bradley feels he is entitled to adopt the opposite assumption to the empiricist here when he goes from simply questioning the Humean claim that what is distinguishable is separable to asserting that what is distinguishable is never separable. On his behalf we could offer the following argument: an honest examination of our experience reveals that the empiricist assumption is never vindicated, but that instead any abstractions that we introduce into our cognition change the character of what is abstracted. For example, if I start with the perception of a red apple and then isolate an idea of red, the latter is a different thing than the red apple that I began with. Even the redness has been changed to the extent that before it was a feature of a fairly coherent and stable entity, but now it is a free-floating idea that clearly could not exist on its own as a genuine entity.<sup>10</sup>

As this argument suggests, the individuality and unity of a thing plays a central role in Bradley’s philosophy. The abstractness and generality of ideas and judgments are sufficient signs that they cannot capture the genuine features of reality. Instead, each judgment *p* must take on the conditional form that if certain unspecified conditions obtain, then *p*. Thought,

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<sup>9</sup> Here there is a footnote to Lotze 1888, II., viii.

<sup>10</sup> Compare “The whole that is given us is a continuous mass of perception and feeling; and to say of this whole, that any one element would be what it is there, when apart from the rest, is a very grave assertion. We might have supposed it not quite self-evident, and that it was possible to deny it without open absurdity” (Bradley 1922, 95-96).

then, is the attempt to uncover these conditions and incorporate them into the judgment, and thereby to make the judgment truly unconditional and categorical. This quest can never be successful because at each stage we will still have a judgment made up of abstract ideas, and we are never able to apply these abstract ideas to reality unconditionally due to the distortions that abstraction introduces.

The preoccupation with the unity and individuality of the real further informs Bradley's metaphysics of the Absolute. His famous regress argument against relational judgments deploys this conception of the real to devastating effect. Suppose, Bradley says, that we judge that two things  $a$  and  $b$  stand in some relation  $R$ :  $aRb$ . The elements of this judgment are general, abstract ideas. So, as ideas, there must be something more concrete in virtue of which the alleged relational fact obtains. If we think of  $R$  as an external relation, or as a relation that relates  $a$  to  $b$  irrespective of the internal features of  $a$  and  $b$ , then we must assume that the more concrete basis of the relational fact includes a new relation  $R'$  which relates  $a$  to  $R$ . This generates a regress. At the same time, if we think of  $R$  as an internal relation, then the required more concrete basis of the relational fact will involve not just  $a$  and  $b$ , but also the internal features of  $a$  and  $b$  that are responsible for the tie to  $R$ . Our alleged relational fact  $aRb$  then becomes  $a(a')R(b')b$ . But now a different sort of regress arises in which  $a$ ,  $a'$ ,  $b'$  and  $b$  are dissolved into further relational facts, e.g. the relation between  $a$  and  $a'$ .

The only resolution of these problems is to subsume any alleged relational fact into a whole that includes all the original constituents, but also whatever else is responsible for the relational appearance. If we apply this way out quite generally, we end up with Bradley's Absolute: a single thing that includes all appearances but only as aspects which cannot exist

separately. What drives the argument is clearly a conception of reality as a concrete individual along with the assumption that thought must restrict itself to the abstract and general:

The end, which would satisfy mere truth-seeking, would do so just because it had the features possessed by reality. It would have to be an immediate, self-dependent, all-inclusive individual. But, in reaching this perfection, and in the act of reaching it, thought would lose its own character. Thought does desire such individuality, that is precisely what it aims at. But individuality, on the other hand, cannot be gained while we are confined to relations (Bradley 1969, 158).

Bradley is optimistic that we can discern some features of the Absolute, in addition to its individuality. Above all, it must be experiential as this is the only way that Bradley sees how it can genuinely include all aspects of the appearances that we are aware of.<sup>11</sup>

Put in these stark terms, Bradley's contrast between appearance and reality seems to force one to reject science as wholly illusory. This is far from Bradley's intention, though (Mander 1991). What he wants to do is clearly to defend the autonomy of both science and metaphysics. The scientist has her tasks and she should carry them out without either aspiring to displace the metaphysician or being the victim of metaphysical interference. Mill, then, was on the right track when he insisted that metaphysical constructions are unnecessary for science and that they can do harm if they distract the scientist from her phenomena. Where Bradley would fault Mill is when Mill saddles the scientist with a distorted and impoverished conception of the experience that science must begin with. Bradley seeks to purge metaphysics from science, including the sensationalist metaphysics tacitly offered by Mill.

It remains unclear how the different sciences relate to one another and the Absolute. Bradley is attuned to the differences between a science like history and a science like physics, but at the same time he would also reject any bifurcation of the sciences of the kind we saw in Dilthey and Rickert. In *Appearance and Reality* Bradley argues that we can rank the different

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<sup>11</sup> Bradley took this to be a crucial difference with Hegel. See Wollheim 1959, 186-187.

special sciences in terms of the degree of truth of their judgments. No completed ranking or metaphysical “system” is presented by Bradley in this book or anywhere else, but he says enough to explain how the ranking would proceed and roughly where he would place the natural sciences and social sciences. Under the heading of a philosophy of nature, Bradley describes how such a ranking would proceed:

All appearances for metaphysics have degrees of reality. We have an idea of perfection or individuality; and, as we find that any form of existence more completely realizes this idea, we assign to it its position in the scale of being. And in this scale (as we have seen) the lower, as its defects are made good, passes beyond itself into the higher. The end, or absolute individuality, is also the principle. Present from the first it supplies the test of its inferior stages, and as these are included in fuller wholes, the principle grows in reality (Bradley 1969, 440).

Exactly why the sciences can proceed independently of this ranking is made clearer on the next page:

How the various stages of progress come to happen in time, in what order or orders they follow, and in each case from what causes, these inquiries would, as such, be of no concern of philosophy. Its idea of evolution and progress in a word should not be temporal. And hence a conflict with the sciences upon any question of development or of order could not properly arise ... Progress for philosophy would never have any temporal sense, and it could matter nothing if the word elsewhere seemed to bear little or no other (Bradley 1969, 441).

With this sharp separation of progress in metaphysics and change in time, Bradley opens up the possibility for a science of history that would stick just as closely to its phenomena as we will see he urged in the case of psychology. History would become scientific, then, only by freeing itself from metaphysical pretensions.<sup>12</sup>

So where does history sit in Bradley’s ranking of the sciences and what distinguishes it from these other sciences? There is good reason to think that Bradley would place history above physics and psychology, which occupy the first and second stages, respectively, but

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<sup>12</sup> Other discussions of the connection between science and metaphysics are Bradley 1969, 251, quoted in Wollheim 1959, and Bradley 1969, 109.

below the supra-scientific domain of religion. Physics occupies the lowest level because it deals with the world in the most abstract way. It attempts to describe phenomena merely in terms of their primary qualities, which for Bradley involves considering phenomena as disjointed and unconnected abstractions. The test of reality is always the extent to which the subject matter of the discipline approximates the unity and harmonious character of the Absolute. So, despite rejecting the metaphysical status of the soul, the soul conceived of as a relatively stable center of experience does better than the abstractions of physics: “compared with the physical world, the soul is, by far, less unreal. It shows to a larger extent that self-dependence in which Reality consists” (Bradley 1969, 316). Continuing upwards, Bradley tells us that a community of persons of an appropriate kind is in turn more real than an isolated soul:

a social system, conscious in its personal members of a will carried out, submits itself naturally to our test [of Reality]. We must notice here the higher development of a concrete internal unity. For we find an individuality, subordinating to itself outward fact, though not, as such, properly visible within it. This superiority to mere appearance in the temporal series is carried to a higher degree as we advance into the worlds of religion, speculation, and art (Bradley 1969, 333).

I take this social system to be the primary phenomenon of history: how did this system come about, in virtue of what is it sustained and how does the system develop over time are the main questions for the historian. Higher degrees of truth are no doubt possible if we transcend the domain of science and enter the superior realm of truth where Bradley situates religion and art. Even here ultimate truth is not to be found as an entity like God still remains an appearance that must be subsumed in the Absolute.<sup>13</sup>

The last philosopher that we will consider is James Ward, one of the fiercest critics of Bradley’s psychology and metaphysics. Despite his opposition to Bradley, Ward was clearly

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<sup>13</sup> Such a system of the sciences played a crucial role in Russell’s early idealist Tiergarten program. For extensive discussion see Griffin 1991.

no friend of Millian empiricism. But in his criticism of Mill Ward emphasized very different alleged aspects of experience than Bradley did, and these differences in turn informed Ward's claims about the shortcomings of Bradley's philosophy. Ward claimed that the core of our experience must involve an active self which attends to the objects that it is presented with.<sup>14</sup> By contrast, Bradley takes the self to be a provisional construction from immediate experience. Despite the centrality of this construction to the science of psychology, and the higher degree of truth of psychology in relation to physics, Bradley strenuously rejects the view that experience presupposes an active, non-experiential self. The self considered in experience is merely a selection and reorganization of what we get in our original felt experience. This becomes clear, for example, in his article "A Defence of Phenomenalism in Psychology," where phenomenalism is defined as "the confinement of one's attention to events with their laws of coexistence and sequence" (Bradley 1900, 364). In particular, the metaphysical notion of the soul has no place in psychology. For Bradley, psychology considers the experience of one individual after it has been divided into what is experienced and what is doing the experiencing. This opposition between the psychological subject and its objects is just as provisional as any distinction that is made within our undifferentiated experience, and so the psychological subject and its features have no connection to the metaphysical soul that would preoccupy some metaphysicians. When we take up a properly metaphysical attitude, Bradley thinks it is easy to argue that the world is not composed of distinct souls by applying his general argument against relations to the relations that would be required between distinct souls (Bradley 1922, 97 & Bradley 1969, ch. X).

Ward's argument against this derivative conception of the active self is brief and to the point: "Experience does not divide itself, but is so divided because of the interest of the

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<sup>14</sup> See Wollheim 1959, 132-138, who cites Brett 1962, 675-686.

subject in certain presentations and in certain relations of presentations” (Ward 1887, 569). That is, if we accept the original state of undifferentiated experience posited by Bradley, then we are hard pressed to say in virtue of what any of the complex structures that we actually encounter in the later stages of experience arise. Bradley’s whole discussion of abstraction and the distortions that it introduces is very hard to square with the view that the self is nothing but one of these abstractions. What is responsible for the different experiences we have if not the activity of the self? Ward thought that only the primitive activity of the self could help here, and that the function of the self in experience was one of the things that psychology should concern itself with:

In keeping with this rejection of the subject that acts and feels is Mr. Bradley’s further doctrine that activity, as well as feeling, is a mere presentation. Wundt’s theory of apperception he holds beneath contempt, and the present use of the term “activity” is, he insists, “little better than a scandal and a main obstacle in the path of English psychology”.<sup>15</sup> I should have thought the chief obstacle in the way of English psychology had been its neglect of psychical activity, and the chief merit of psychology in Germany had been essentially that very doctrine of apperception which, as developed by Wundt, Mr. Bradley is loath to criticize. He demands a definition of activity, and offers one of his own. For my part, I doubt if activity can be defined in terms that do not already imply it (Ward 1887, 569).<sup>16</sup>

Activity and other basic concepts of psychology must be taken as undefined or given, rather than built up out of supposedly passive experiences.

For Ward, then, the activity of the self is a basic presupposition of our experience, and without it the unity of experience would disintegrate, as would the ability of experience to underwrite scientific knowledge. Bradley’s response to this objection reveals the extent to which he has not really escaped Mill’s phenomenalism. In *Appearance and Reality* Bradley mocks an appeal to activity as basic:

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<sup>15</sup> The reference here is to Bradley 1886, 196.

<sup>16</sup> Or, more colorfully, Bradley’s “procedure is much like bleeding yourself to death to guard against blood-poisoning” (Ward 1887, 575).



In raising the question if activity is real or is only appearance, I may be met by the assertion that it is original, ultimate, and simple. I am satisfied myself that this assertion is incorrect, and is even quite groundless; but I prefer to treat it here as merely irrelevant. If the meaning of activity will not bear examination, and if it fails to exhibit itself intelligibly, then the meaning cannot, as such, be true of reality (Bradley 1969, 53).

As Wollheim has noted, with these sorts of arguments Bradley appears to be assuming that all that we can mean by “activity” must be spelled out in terms of experience (Wollheim 1959, 138). That is, all that I can talk about must have a basis in experience, or what Mill called his sensations. In this case, both Ward and Bradley agree that experience as it is usually understood does not include any constituent clearly answering to the activity of the self. For Bradley this implies that it is a meaningless concept, and to say that such a concept is simple is completely unhelpful. For Ward, as we have seen, psychology can and must appeal to basic concepts like activity that are responsible for our experience, even if they are not properly constituents of it.

The similarities between Ward and Dilthey on the unity of experience are now hopefully clear. Both find a unity to our experience that Mill denied. For Dilthey this unity is the entire nexus of what he called lived experience, while Ward appealed to the more traditional position that there must be an active self at the basis of experience. But when it came to scientific psychology, Dilthey and Ward seem to be in substantial agreement. Both would argue for a psychology that was at least initially occupied with analyzing the basic features of our experience. This sort of analysis was necessary because any constructive or synthetic approach would fail to do justice to the basic features of our experience. In fact, G. F. Stout, one of Ward’s students, called his first book *Analytic Psychology*, and largely

followed Ward's analytic methodology.<sup>17</sup> Unlike Dilthey, however, Ward went on to attempt to integrate this scientific psychology into an overarching metaphysics, and here again we find an apparent departure from Bradley. It cannot be said that Ward's attempts at a systematic metaphysics were that successful. One recent commentator has noted that it is not clear if Ward meant to defend a form of Absolute Idealism, or whether instead he preferred what is called Personal Idealism (Allard 2003, 53).<sup>18</sup> According to the latter, distinct selves, perhaps even including a personal God, standing together in some kind of harmonious relationship, provide the ultimate basis for reality. The debate between Absolute and Personal Idealism continued to divide the British neo-Hegelians and one of the central issues remained how our experience could be reconciled with a metaphysics emphasizing the individuality of reality.

V.

We have reviewed, at least in part, five accounts of the connection between our experience and scientific knowledge. Mill's phenomenalism, even supplemented by his "mental chemistry", sets up a gap between the experience which is supposed to be the basis of our scientific knowledge and the objects that the sciences seem to be invoking in their theories. The gap can be bridged in a number of ways by either putting more into experience or by altering our conception of the objects of science, or by some combination of these two strategies. Dilthey, to begin with, invoked an overarching unity in our lived experience which forces psychology to take on an analytic or descriptive form. With this analytic psychology at its basis, Dilthey's human sciences have as their goal a kind of understanding that is opposed to hypothetical natural scientific explanation. Rickert responds by isolating a different kind of

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<sup>17</sup> See Stout 1896, vol. 1, xi for the claim that "Whatever there may be of value in my work is ultimately due to his [Ward's] teaching." Neither Ward nor Stout show any awareness of Dilthey's conception of psychology.

<sup>18</sup> See Ward 1925 for an unhelpful summary of Ward's mature metaphysics.

unity in our experience, namely the unity of experienced individuals that results from their relation to a nonreal value. Such historical individuals can be studied as individuals, and again a sort of understanding is possible here that is absent in natural science. When we turn to Bradley, a central theme remains the unity and individuality required for genuine knowledge. But Bradley is willing to give up the assumption so central to both Dilthey and Rickert that genuine knowledge is possible in the sciences. Instead, when compared to the perfect harmony and unity of the only individual there really is, the Absolute, the special sciences get by through a provisional construction of relatively unified and individual things. These constructions and the associated special sciences can be ranked in terms of their degree of truth, with physics at the bottom, followed by psychology in the middle and history towards the top. Ward responds by claiming that Bradley's conception of an experience that lacks an active self is incoherent and incapable of grounding any acceptable form of scientific knowledge, whether in psychology or elsewhere. Ward's own influential version of psychology puts the description of such basic elements of our experience in a central position.

How are we to react to these various positions, thought of as proposed solutions to our problem of the unity of experience, and the associated attitudes towards the Erklären/Verstehen distinction? The first, almost trivial, thing to say is that there is clearly no need to invoke the distinction if we are to offer a solution the problem of the unity of experience. Bradley and Ward made proposals, but these accounts do not lead inexorably to two different cognitive attitudes or any special division between the natural and human sciences. That said, it remains possible that all plausible or reasonable solutions to our problem might require something like the Erklären/Verstehen distinction. To start to support

this claim we would need to show that the moves made by Bradley and Ward were unpromising or unreasonable when compared to what we found in Dilthey and Rickert.

An obstacle to such a project is the fact that making the distinction introduces just as many philosophical complications as it promises to resolve. To focus first on Dilthey, it may be helpful to invoke the unity of the nexus of lived experience in order to help ground the human sciences, beginning with Dilthey's analytic psychology, and extending to history, legal theory and aesthetics. But the nexus of lived experience only complicates the story of how our experience relates to the objects studied in the natural sciences like physics. Here Dilthey offers nothing informative and it seems like he has backed himself into a corner by emphasizing the alleged gap between our lived experience and the objects of natural science. What results is an implausible picture of what sort of knowledge we can obtain in the natural sciences.<sup>19</sup> Rickert, on the other hand, faces significant obstacles to vindicating his account of nonreal values and how the acts of valuation of minds are even possible. Some kind of transcendental argument in their favor may be possible, but the prospects do not seem good (Rickert 1986, 221-225). Rickert, then, solves the problem of unity of experience only by trading it for an even less tractable problem. In both cases, we see that it is not easy to argue for the conclusion that the Erklären/Verstehen distinction is part of the best route to take.

I conclude by making an observation about the danger to the historian of philosophy in taking distinctions like Erklären/Verstehen too seriously when looking back at the history of philosophy and relating this observation back to the contrast and Soames and Simons that we saw in section I. While there is no point in denying the historical efficacy of such distinctions in philosophical debates, granting Dilthey's point that the distinction is necessary or inevitable

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<sup>19</sup> Indeed, one might suspect that this shortcoming infects the phenomenological tradition more generally. For a more optimistic assessment see Ryckman 2005, esp. ch. 5 & 6.

can lead the historian astray. If we think that something like Dilthey's distinction is inevitable, and we find a philosopher pointing to some differences between, say, history and the natural sciences, then we may ascribe to that philosopher the full apparatus of Dilthey's philosophy of the human sciences. This is what appears to have happened in Rubinoff's introduction to his edition of Bradley's 1874 essay "The Presuppositions of Critical History" (Bradley 1968). Bradley's focus is the evaluation of historical sources, especially the treatment of biblical texts by theologians like Baur and Strauss. They had argued that biblical texts should be treated as historical documents, which understandably resulted in somewhat skeptical conclusions about the veracity of the testimony they contained. Bradley essentially agrees, arguing that the historian is constrained by his own experience of the world to evaluate reports of extraordinary events in a critical fashion. Typically, this limits me to accepting reports of events that are analogous to what I myself have experienced. But Bradley also allows me to accept reports of new kinds of events by others "by means of an identification of consciousness" (Bradley 1968, 104). Rubinoff claims that "Bradley's answer is reminiscent of the one given by Droysen and Dilthey. It is that human experience is capable of being expanded by means of an 'imaginative' appropriation of new experience" (Bradley 1968, 42) and goes on to ascribe much of the apparatus we saw in Dilthey to Bradley. Against this interpretation, I note first that, as Rubinoff admits in a footnote (Bradley 1968, 42, fn. 74), Bradley does not talk of "imaginative appropriation". More importantly, when we turn to Bradley's discussion of identification of consciousness, we find nothing like Dilthey's account of the understanding of others or the nexus of lived experience that is its basis (Bradley 1968, 104-108).<sup>20</sup> Rubinoff has been led astray by thinking that an

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<sup>20</sup> Bradley does cite Droysen's *Grundriss der Historik*, but also adds that it "came too late to be of much use" (Bradley 1968, 78).

Erklären/Verstehen distinction is inevitable. So, it is no surprise to find him write, in another context, that “No serious attempt to define an autonomous science of human nature can succeed unless it proceeds according to a basic ontological distinction between historical and natural existence” (Rubinoff 1964, 83). Genuine understanding of the history of philosophy is not likely unless we are attuned to the dangers of these sorts of mistakes.

Should we follow Soames and Simons and conclude that because the distinction is not inevitable, and arose as a result of a variety of historical contingencies, that it is devoid of contemporary philosophical interest? Of course not. For while I have argued that a distinction between Erklären and Verstehen is not obviously part of the best solution to the problem of the unity of experience, it remains entirely possible that it can help us to solve that problem if suitably clarified and motivated. Those of us who wish to understand how our experience relates to scientific knowledge would do well to keep all options on the table and to continue to study the wide range of attempts offered by philosophers, both in the past and the present.

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