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Historical Understanding in the Thought of Wilhelm Dilthey (Book Review)

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A quarterly faculty publication of
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suggested the role of family representative within the "one flesh" or organically unified marriage relationship as laid down in Genesis 1 and 2 (p. 168).

A third major thrust is to emphasize the *social* origins of and influences toward traditional sex roles, the *social* costs for both males and females of traditional sex roles, current *social* changes affecting the traditional sex role differentiation, and the biblical mandate toward a more biblically-driven *social* structure which would bring God's

Historical Understanding in the Thought of Wilhelm Dilthey, by Theodore Plantinga. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980. 205 pages. Reviewed by Nick Van Til, Professor of Philosophy.

No doubt it is a mark of distinction and honor when a doctoral dissertation is published by the degree-conferring institution. This work enjoys that distinction and honor. The work represents ten years of study which Plantinga began at the urging of Professor Evan Runner of Calvin College. For Plantinga as for many others Runner was the first philosophy mentor and inspiration.

Historical understanding for Dilthey, Plantinga writes, is more than anything else an understanding (*Verstehen*) of the persons who constitute the central characters in history and its unfolding. This requires an empathy for the psychological states of the persons studied, but it must not be a psychoanalysis. It must supercede psychology to become an understanding of the indications of character that come to expression particularly in the fine arts. In that respect one could suggest that Dilthey's emphasis is similar to that of Kenneth Clark in the BBC series on western civilization.

Further, according to Dilthey, understanding not only differs from individual to individual, but it is a special gift which has been conferred upon Germans (p. 108). Moreover, by the good exercise of that gift one can develop understanding to the point of *Besserverstehen*, that is, understanding some person in the past better than he understands himself. *Besserverstehen* is not to be equated with scientific analysis or psychoanalysis. *Besserverstehen* is the kind of understanding which supports the concept of history, initiated at least in part by Dilthey, *Geisteswissenschaften* is understanding the moving spirit which stands behind human actions.

Dilthey did not support the position of Auguste Comte concerning the place of the social sciences. He would not with positivistic intent make them an extension of the natural sciences.

redemptive power to bear upon the misunderstandings, inequities, and injustices that characterize much male-female interaction in contemporary society and among Christians.

In conclusion, this book is to be highly recommended, both for its currency (note their discussion of the ERA, women and the draft, and so on, in chapter 7) and its judicious handling of a number of controversial issues, many of which trouble the contemporary church and the Christian community.

While an empiricist, Dilthey did not capitulate to empiricism but felt there was a well-defined split between the natural sciences and the *Geisteswissenschaften*. But for all that, Dilthey did not read into history *Zeitgeist* (a special spirit for a specific age) or *Volksgeist* (a special spirit for a particular people). One might add that Dilthey's claim that the Germans had a special gift for historical understanding seemed to mitigate against his repudiation of special *Geists*.

Understanding is for the most part an understanding of a person's expression. For Dilthey "poetic imagination and creation—as exemplified by Goethe—was his model for expression in general" (p. 87). Dilthey chose poetry as the model of expression even though early in life he had confessed that music was his favorite form of expression. All those who particularly appreciate the fine arts can appreciate this emphasis, but there were critics who felt Dilthey neglected the social and economic aspects of history. For example, Dilthey took very little account of the work of Karl Marx.

Dilthey also brought to history a special interest in hermeneutics which he had acquired as the result of his special study of Schleiermacher, who had introduced the general science of hermeneutics and had applied it particularly as he renovated the more traditional and orthodox interpretations of the Bible. Moving his emphasis from language-oriented conceptions of hermeneutics to a greater emphasis on subjectivity and psychological factors, Dilthey regarded hermeneutics as a major component of the *Geisteswissenschaften* (p. 103).

For Dilthey interpretation is an on-going process. The past is always reinterpreted in view of the present. This may eliminate a certain kind of objectivity but

...historical understanding as conceived by Dilthey is objective in roughly the same way that the interpretation of texts is or can be objective: anyone who disputes an interpretation can check it against the sources in the light of the canons of autonomy or immanence and totality or coherence (p. 118).

This may not give universal validity, *Allgemeingültigkeit*, according to the prescriptions of the positivists but it will help maintain the kind of objectivity which those who want to approach history with the methodology of science may demand.

Some of Dilthey's followers as well as some of his critics may be surprised to learn that according to Plantinga's definitions Dilthey is neither a historicist nor a relativist. Plantinga segregates Dilthey from the historicists on the basis of the fact that Dilthey did not subscribe to the idea of progress in history. Even if it were the consensus of current scholarship on the subject, I would argue that progress is not the identifying *differentia* whereby we should recognize historicism. I think one can say that historicism is a variety of secular humanism but there are many secular humanists who do not believe in progress. The idea of progress is an article of faith arrived at from various directions. William James, for example, believed in meliorism. He could not subscribe to that belief on the basis of his radical empiricism. It came more from the direction of his "will to believe."

The fact that historicism is an "immanentism" in its denial of a transcendent source of truth and meaning cannot be the identifying mark of historicism either. If we take Dooyeweerd's cue, then we have to label all non-Christian positions as "immanentisms."

Dooyeweerd has the following to say about Dilthey's position:

Dilthey's empirical and irrational historicism, [sic] wanting to substitute the vivo [life in history, not merely life itself as in vitalism] for the cogito [self-consciousness as the basic reality as proposed by Descartes] as its archimedean point, thinks it can find the new foundation for philosophic reflection in historical life, which finds no resting place and glides along with the historic process in its historic rhythm (*New Critique*. Vol. II, p. 19).

The same estimate concerning whether or not Dilthey is a historicist could be used to question Plantinga's distinctions, which suggests that while holding to a concept of relativity, that

all events in history are relational, Dilthey was not a relativist. I think Dilthey himself, in a writing on his seventieth birthday, corroborated Dooyeweerd's estimate of his historicism and placed himself in the camp of those whom we would classify as holding a basic relativism when he concluded:

The historical world-view has broken the last chain not yet broken by philosophy and natural science. Everything is flowing, nothing remains. But where are the means to conquer the anarchy of opinions which threaten us (*New Critique*. Vol. II, p. 207)?

One could go on to add that Dilthey was so much the victim of his own historicism and relativism that death overtook him before he got around to formulating any kind of fixed view upon which one could fix as his philosophy. Also, on the basis of the foregoing, to sort out *relativity* to distinguish it from *relativism* seems like little more than a quibble.

Plantinga has done a solid piece of work in delineating the various permutations of Dilthey's thought while giving major focus to Dilthey's idea of understanding. We are the recipients of a valuable bibliography. An index is also a welcome addition by way of presenting a completely useful work.

While Plantinga makes an incidental reference as to the direction of his religious sympathies, there is no overall evaluation of Dilthey's thought from a Christian perspective, mostly, I suppose, because that is not part of the perspective of doctoral theses written for a secular university. Critique is generally limited to what one might call immanent concerns or the "in house" problems of scholarship.

Dooyeweerd sums up this problem of antithesis rather well. While recognizing that there are dialectic tensions within some of the secular philosophies which are worthy of note and understanding he concludes that

such tensions are radically excluded in the transcendental ground-idea of every really Christian philosophy. Therefore, in all philosophy that is rooted in the Christian transcendence point, there can be no question or principle of idealism or naturalism, moralism or aestheticism, rationalism or irrationalism, theism or mysticism, for all such -isms can be grounded only in an immanence-standpoint (*New Critique*. Vol. I, p. 123).

In spite of disagreements with Dooyeweerd elsewhere, here I readily agree.