**The history of philosophy and the puzzles of life.**

**Windelband and Dilthey on the ahistorical core of philosophical thinking**

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1. Introduction

Towards the end of the Nineteenth Century, the German philosophical community struggled with a philosophical “identity crisis” (Schnädelbach 1984, 5-11). The success and proliferation of the special sciences had raised fundamental questions concerning the objects, methods and social functions of philosophy vis à vis empirical science. Additional pressure came from the professionalization of the study of history. Since the early Nineteenth Century, historians had become increasingly vocal about their authority over the interpretation of all things historical. The human-historical world, they insisted, should be studied by empirical historiography, not by philosophy, which tended to impose distorting schemes on the historical process (see for example Ranke 1831-32/1975, 74-78).

Philosophers, in turn, drew connections between “historicism” and “relativism”. They worried that, when applied to philosophical questions, the methods of professional history would turn into a destructive force undermining the basis for rational and normative discourse (Windelband 1883/1924; Husserl 1911; Rickert 1924). Taking up a slogan that was first formulated by Ernst Troeltsch and Karl Heussi in the 1920s and 30s (Troeltsch 1922; Heussi 1932), Charles Bambach describes the period after 1880 as marked by a “crisis of historicism”.[[1]](#endnote-1) The rise of historical thinking had philosophers grapple with “problems of epistemological nihilism, cultural dissolution, and historical relativism” (Bambach 1995, 53).

When speaking of “historicism”, philosophers usually referred to the historicization of beliefs and values in general. Less attention was devoted to the historicization of philosophical systems and doctrines. Nevertheless, a “crisis of the historicization of philosophy” occurred within the broader “crisis of historicism”. As philosophers began to emulate the methodological rigour of professional historians when studying the past of their field, they developed an acute sense for the cultural determinants of philosophical thinking (Geldsetzer 1968; Hartung 2015). The simultaneous decline of speculative metaphysics diminished the prima facie plausibility of progressivist narratives about the history of philosophy. The thought emerged that all philosophical systems and their supposedly universal knowledge claims might be relative – relative to culture, national context and historical period.

This paper analyses the contribution of the historicization of philosophy to late nineteenth century debates over relativism. It studies the “crisis of the historicization of philosophy”, and the dominant philosophical strategies against it, by focusing on two key figures of the period – Wilhelm Windelband and Wilhelm Dilthey.

Windelband’s and Dilthey’s respective philosophical projects can be read as two paradigmatic attempts of dealing with the problems and pressures that, at the time, were shaping philosophical discourse. Both were concerned with clarifying the relations between the various special sciences, and saw a role for philosophy in illuminating their methodological foundations. Both endorsed non-metaphysical philosophies and evoked Kantian Criticism as a model for how philosophical analysis should proceed. Both believed in the significance of history for revealing the meaning of human life and culture and sought to revise the Kantian approach such as to make room for the acknowledgement of humanity’s essential historicity. And both struggled with the question as to how historical insights can be reconciled with the supposedly universal knowledge claims of philosophy.

Analysing the similarities and differences between Windelband and Dilthey, the present paper shows that both thinkers’ meta-philosophical reflections were shaped by a concern with historical relativism. It argues that despite the fundamental differences between their philosophical projects, Windelband and Dilthey both answered to a perceived “crisis of the historicization of philosophy”. It uncovers the striking similarities in their proposed answers: by defining philosophy in terms of the relationship between conceptual thinking and life, both authors sought to uncover an ahistorical core of philosophical thinking, and in this way, to block the route to relativism. The paper concludes that, although Windelband and Dilthey succeeded in averting historical versions of relativism, they did so at the cost of incurring a relativism vis-à-vis philosophical systems. This relativism turned out to be rooted not in the historicity of philosophy, but in the timeless essence of philosophical reasoning itself.

2. Transcendental absolutism and immanent universalism

Windelband and Dilthey not only clashed over the demarcation of the natural and the human-historical sciences (Dilthey 1883/1989; 1895-96/2010; Windelband 1894/1924). More fundamentally, their views on the goals and methods of philosophy were radically different, if not diametrically opposed. It would be premature to describe this conflict in terms of the opposition between Kantianism and historicism. While Windelband indeed positions his transcendental philosophy against the full-on historicization of reason that, in his view, leads to relativism, he also tries to incorporate central insights of historicism into his philosophy (Beiser 2008; Kinzel 2017; Ziche 2015). Conversely, Dilthey’s “critique of historical reason” (Dilthey 1883/1989, 165) combines an acknowledgment of the inherent historicity of reason with the recognition that historical knowledge needs a strong epistemological grounding so as not to disintegrate into relativism (Makkreel 1975, 53). The historicist elements in Dilthey’s philosophy are balanced by a strong universalism about the structure of human life and experience. In the following, I seek to capture the fundamental differences between Windelband’s and Dilthey’s philosophical projects not in terms of Kantianism and historicism, but in terms of what I will call *transcendental absolutism* and *immanent universalism*. As I will show, this opposition implies further differences in how Windelband and Dilthey address the problem of relativism.

Windelband‘s brand of Neo-Kantianism answers to the perceived identity crisis of philosophy by saving it a special role “above” the sciences (Beiser 2014, 492-500). As a “critical science of universal values“ (Windelband 1882b/1924, 29), philosophy is a second order discipline. It determines the “system of axioms” (Windelband 1883/1924, 107) – the system of universal and necessary values – that governs discourse in science, culture and politics, thus securing the possibility of rational discourse in these areas.[[2]](#endnote-2)

Central to Windelband’s philosophical project is a distinction between the factual and the normative. He introduces this distinction as a formal one between two fundamental and irreducible types of cognitive operations: judgments and evaluations. While judgments involve a synthesis of ideas, evaluations express the relation between the evaluating consciousness and the represented object (Windelband 1882b/1924, 29). But for evaluations to have normative force, they need to express not just the subjective attitude of the evaluating subject. Rather, according to Windelband, the validity and normative force of particular evaluations derives from their correspondence to absolute values. Accordingly there is a system of *absolute* – that is necessary and universal – values, and this system is grounded *transcendentally*. Windelband also refers to this system as “normal consciousness”, which is distinct from and determines empirical consciousness (Windelband 1882a/1924).[[3]](#endnote-3)

We may refer to this position as *transcendental absolutism.* Transcendental absolutism sets philosophy the goal of revealing the system of absolute norms. Windelband stresses that philosophy can do so by purely formal means, because absolute norms are teleologically necessary. They are “norms which ought to be valid if thinking wants to fulfil the purpose of being true, volition the purpose of being good, and feeling the purpose of capturing beauty, in a manner that warrants universal validation” (Windelband 1883/1924, 109, see also Windelband 1882a/1924, 74). It is only when drawing on a formal, non-empirical method that philosophy can preserve the essential distinction between the factual and the normative.

It is both with respect to the issue of transcendentalism, and with respect to the distinction between the factual and the normative, that deep differences arise between Windelband and his contemporary Dilthey. As many commentators have stressed, Dilthey explicitly sought to overcome the dualisms of Kantian philosophy. He questioned the distinction between intuition and understanding, between theoretical and practical philosophy, as well as that between the transcendental and the empirical (Ermarth 1975, 149-152; Makkreel 1975, 223-224). For Dilthey, philosophy is not a formal enterprise, but a more hybrid endeavour. While philosophy does play a foundational role for the “human sciences”, its methods are continuous with those of empirical disciplines, in particular with those of descriptive psychology, anthropology, and history (Patton 2015).[[4]](#endnote-4)

Hence, Dilthey’s philosophical project is “transcendental” only in a loose sense. While his foundational enterprise of the 1880s and 90s concerns itself with the conditions of possibility of knowledge in the human sciences, Dilthey finds these conditions not in a transcendental realm, but rather contained in the dynamic structure of “lived experience”. Dilthey’s central concept in this context is the “psychic nexus”. The “psychic nexus” integrates the human faculties, “the intellect, the life of the drives and feelings, and the activity of the will“ (Dilthey 1894/2010, 154) into a structured totality. This totality is relational because the „life-unit“ finds itself conditioned by a surrounding „milieu“ and conversely, acts upon this „milieu“ (Dilthey 1894/2010, 172). At the same time, it is also purposive and teleological, because all processes of psychic life are directed towards reaching a state of congruence with the surrounding milieu (Dilthey 1894/2010, 183).

Based on this conception of a dynamic, purposive and self-adapting “psychic nexus” Dilthey objects to Kant’s distinction between epistemology and psychology, as embraced by Windelband.[[5]](#endnote-5) He argues that the synthesis of the facts of consciousness cannot be achieved by a transcendental method, but only by the living totality of the psychic nexus (Dilthey 1894/2010, 126). Therefore, the principles of knowledge should be sought by way of “self-reflection” (Dilthey 1880-1890/1989, 278). Different from traditional epistemology, “self-reflection” attends to the totality of psychic life (see also Lessing 2016, 105-106). It grasps lived experience in its raw state of primary connectedness and seeks to disclose the principles of reason *from within* this dynamic totality. Dilthey’s philosophy is, at its core, a philosophy of *immanence*.[[6]](#endnote-6)

Consequently, normativity too is rooted in the living psychic nexus. Dilthey argues that all values are first and foremost “life-values”. They emerge when the “life-unit” represents the enhancing or inhibiting effects of the surrounding milieu by attaching to it positive and negative feelings (Dilthey 1894/2010, 177). Dilthey also allows for values to develop historically.[[7]](#endnote-7) The dynamic activity of the psychic nexus creates new values, and the moral-historical development of humankind leads to the development of “higher” values (Dilthey 1894/2010, 180-181).

Nevertheless, the historicist elements in Dilthey’s thinking are balanced by strong universalist convictions. Dilthey postulates a human commonality that “is expressed in the selfsameness of reason, in sympathy as part of the life of feeling, and in the mutual commitments of duty and justice” (Dilthey 1910/2002, 163). He also argues that the differences between individuals are explicable in terms of mere quantitative differences in their character traits (Dilthey 1894/2010, 151-152). It is unclear whether he believes in the universality of values, given that he thinks of them as historical entities (see also Makkreel 1975, 243). But he clearly holds that all values, even those that vary from culture to culture, are rooted in a common ground – they can all be traced to the dynamic structure of the living psychic nexus. And this structure is indeed universal. We may refer to this position as *immanent universalism.* While ethical values and the principles of reason are strictly immanent to lived experience, they also share a universal basis in the dynamic structure of psychic life.

3. The challenge of relativism

Unsurprisingly, the deep disagreements between Windelband’s and Dilthey’s philosophical projects also translate into differences in their approaches to relativism. Both authors draw connections between certain forms of historical thinking and relativism. But they differ on how exactly historical thinking causes relativism, and consequently, on what a solution to the problem would look like.

As emphasized above, Windelband insists on a firm distinction between the factual and the normative. And in his view, relativism emerges precisely when this boundary is violated: it results from the attempt to derive the “system of values” not from formal considerations, but from empirical facts about human psychology or history. Windelband gives two reasons for why this strategy is futile. First, empirical generalization from psychological or historical facts are only approximations. They can never reach the universality and necessity that is characteristic of absolute norms (Windelband 1883/1924, 114). Second, empirical generalization cannot discriminate between true and false, or right and wrong. Psychological laws cause both true and false beliefs, historical cultures embrace both right and wrong behaviours. Hence, for the genetic method, all beliefs and actions have to appear as equally justified. “For [the genetic explanation], there is no absolute measure; it must treat all beliefs as equally justified because they are all equally necessary by nature” (Windelband 1883/1924, 115). Windelband concludes that “*relativism* is the *necessary consequence* of the purely empiricist treatment of philosophy’s cardinal question” (Windelband 1883/1924, 116). Note though that is not historical thinking as such that causes relativism, but rather historical thinking that oversteps its boundaries to address non-empirical issues of justification and normativity (see also Kinzel 2017).

From Windelband’s perspective, Dilthey’s philosophy of immanence seems like a clear case of the genetic method overstepping its boundaries. And indeed, Windelband accuses Dilthey of relativism, albeit indirectly. He urges that the “critique of historical reason” needs to draw on absolute values: “it has to be Criticism, and as such it needs a standard” (Windelband 1883/1924, 122). The implication is that Dilthey’s philosophy lacks such a standard and that for this reason, it leads to relativism.[[8]](#endnote-8)

And yet, Dilthey does not see himself as a relativist. He thinks of his foundational project as preserving and explicating the validity of knowledge in the human sciences (Dilthey 1883/1989, 50), he presents his theory of world-viewsas a solution to the problem of relativism (Dilthey 1907/1954, 66), and in his famous *Rede zum 70. Geburtstag* of 1903, he declares his life-long devotion to solving the conflict between “historical consciousness” and universal knowledge claims (Dilthey 1903/1990, 9).[[9]](#endnote-9) For Dilthey, it is not the violation of the boundary between the factual and the normative that leads to relativism. Instead, relativism emerges as a by-product of the historicist destruction of human universals.

As Dilthey observes, the historical perspective reveals a never-ending conflict of belief-systems, with no prospect of eventual resolution. In his view, the mere empirical fact of unresolved conflict already calls into question the “objective validity” of each particular world-view (Dilthey 1960a, 3). But more than that, insight into the variability of human forms of life also calls into question the existence of universal human commonalities. As Dilthey puts it, “the human type came apart in this process of development” (Dilthey 1960b; 77, see also Dilthey 1960a, 6). Taken together, these two factors – undecidable conflict and lack of human commonalities – lead to relativism. The historical-developmental perspective

is necessarily connected with knowledge about the relativity of every historical form of life. The absolute validity of any particular form of life, constitution, religion or philosophy disappears before the view that embraces the whole world and all pasts. (Dilthey 1960b; 77)

Note also that for Dilthey, it is not history as a method or a form of explanation that causes relativist problems. Rather, is it by providing a synoptic grasp of all pasts – a survey of the *totality* of human differences – that history undermines the belief in human universals and hence leads to relativism. Because Dilthey gives a different account of the causes of relativism than Windelband, he can also propose a different solution. In his view, a stronghold against relativism needs to be built not from transcendentalism, but from universalism. What is required is not a formal method for uncovering absolute values, but rather an account of the universal structure of human life.

4. Philosophy and the puzzles of life

Despite the deep differences between their philosophical projects, and despite the fact that, in line with these differences, Windelband and Dilthey promise different solutions to relativism, in their meta-philosophical reflections, a surprising convergence occurs. Here, the two authors respond not only to the historicization of life and culture in general. Rather, they address the more specific questions that are raised by the historicization of philosophical thinking.

By the mid Nineteenth Century, the professionalization of the study of history had made possible a new way of thinking about the history of philosophy: the thought had emerged that philosophy itself might be relative to time, historical culture, and nationality (see Ranke 1831-32/1975, 76). The simultaneous demise of speculative metaphysics had scattered philosophers’ confidence that the historical variance of philosophical systems could be viewed in terms of the teleological self-realization of reason. Emulating the methodological rigour of professional historians, philosophers’ accounts of the history of their field had become less biased, philologically more accurate and more context sensitive (Hartung 2015). As a result, philosophers themselves were more prone to viewing the history of philosophy in the same way historians did: as contingent and relative.

Being practicing historians of philosophy themselves, Windelband and Dilthey were acutely aware of a “crisis of the historicization of philosophy” that occurred within the broader “crisis of historicism”. In their meta-philosophical reflections, both authors address the fact that the methods, subject matters and goals of philosophy have undergone massive changes over the course of history. Both raise the question as to whether there even is a general conception of philosophy that is applicable throughout all history (Dilthey 1907/1954, 24-25; Windelband 1882b/1924, 6-19; 1891/1912, 3-5).[[10]](#endnote-10) And both seek out an affirmative answer to this question by pointing to an ahistorical core of philosophical reasoning. As I will show, this answer is also meant to solve the conflict between the historicity of philosophical systems on the one hand, and philosophical claims to universal validity on the other. In this way, it is meant to block the road to historical relativism about philosophy.

Dilthey’s account of the ahistorical “essence” of philosophy is based in his philosophy of life which, in turn, takes up and elaborates some of the psychological concepts that he developed in earlier years. In particular, the concept of “lived experience” remains central in Dilthey’s meta-philosophical account. Here too, Dilthey stresses that the dynamic system of psychic life is teleologically driven towards adapting the “life-unit” and the surrounding “milieu” (Dilthey 1907/1954, 34-35; 1960a, 15-16). In this dynamical process, beliefs and life-values are constantly put to the test and adapted to changing circumstances. But Dilthey thinks that life needs stability. Such stability can only be gained by transforming the changing world of apperceptions and evaluations into valid, justified knowledge (Dilthey 1907/1954, 35). “Life-experience” then, is the consolidated and stable interpretation of experience that emerges when an individual’s drives and feelings and the objects that they are attached to become encapsulated in general knowledge (Dilthey 1960b, 79). Life-experience achieves a supra-individual status. It is extended in custom and tradition and gains in clarity and certainty as it is handed down throughout the ages (Dilthey 1960b, 79-80).

And yet, the different elements that compose life-experience are not always coherent with one-another. “The soul tries to compose into a whole the life-relations and the experiences that are based in them, and fails … Strange contradictions arise, which become ever more apparent in life-experience and which are never resolved“ (Dilthey 1960b, 80-81). The stable interpretation that is given in and by the knowledge of “life-experience” is always threatened by inherent tensions. Dilthey refers to these tensions as “world- und life-puzzles” (Dilthey 1907/1954, 346).

“World-views” then, are attempts to solve these life-puzzles, and philosophy is – among religion and poetry – one of the three domains in which such world-views are formulated. Philosophy differs from these other domains in that it is concerned with justification and generalization. Dilthey thus defines philosophy primarily by way of its functions – the function of testing taken for granted presuppositions, of justifying their universal validity and of connecting the different elements of life in a coherent system (Dilthey 1907/1954, 61-62). Dilthey has now reached an answer to the question as to what constitutes the essence of philosophy. This essence consists in the application of rigorous conceptual thinking to the puzzles of life.

The notion of philosophy that is present in Windelband’s *Einleitung in die Philosophie* (1914) is surprisingly close to Dilthey’s. While Windelband is far from developing a philosophy of life, or a typology of world-views, and puts a much stronger emphasis on the rational dimension of philosophical thinking than Dilthey, both authors attribute a similar function to philosophy.

The starting point of Windelband’s *Einleitung* is the observation that everyday life and culture already contain general views about the world and the concepts to express these views. There is a “metaphysics of the nursery and fairy tale”, “world-view of religious dogma” and the “life-picture that we enjoy in the work of the poet and the artist” (Windelband 1914, 2). In addition, the special sciences take up ideas that have been formed in everyday life and transform them into scientific concepts. The subject matter of philosophy initially consists in the “thought-content which is provided by life itself and by the insights of the special sciences” (Windelband 1914, 6).

But philosophy does not just build on life-experience and its concepts. Instead, it critically assesses these ideas and concepts. At the beginning of philosophical reflection stands an experience of shock or unsettling in which taken for granted assumptions collapse (Windelband 1914, 8). This experience calls for a critical assessment of everyday ideas and concepts. According to Windelband, the essential function of philosophy thus consists in questioning and rethinking the concepts and ideas of everyday life and science. By thinking through these concepts, philosophy tries to re-achieve stability and certainty It seeks to provide a theoretical and practical footing in the world (Windelband 1914, 19).

While Dilthey’s central concept is that of the “world-view”, Windelband thinks of philosophy in terms of its “problems”. According to Windelband, philosophical problems spring “with objective necessity” from the “vigorous and uncompromising rethinking of the preconditions of our spiritual life” (Windelband 1914, 8). While he does not give a very detailed account of how this process of rethinking creates “philosophical problems”, there are some suggestive hints. He writes that the conceptual presuppositions that philosophy critically engages are often unproblematic in the domains in which they have first emerged. These different concepts and motifs remain unproblematic, as long as they remain isolated from one another. But like Dilthey, Windelband stresses that philosophy strives for connection, unity and justification (Windelband 1907/1924, 11). The emergence of the philosophical problem is tied to the demand for organizing a complex network of ideas and concepts in a coherent and unified manner. And the “inadequacy and contradictory imbalance” of the contents given to philosophy by life and science creates the “age-old puzzles of existence” (1891/1912, 10). The parallels to Dilthey’s “life-puzzles” which arise from the inherent contradictions of life-experience are evident.

4. The ahistorical core of philosophical thinking

Windelband and Dilthey share a definition of philosophy as consisting in the application of rigorous conceptual thinking to the puzzles of life. But the most important agreement between them is that philosophy has an ahistorical core. For both authors, there are some basic structures – world-views in the case of Dilthey, philosophical problems in the case of Windelband – that reoccur throughout the history of philosophy. And therefore, there can be no real progress in philosophy (Windelband 1891/1912, 7, 10; 1914, 10, 17; Dilthey 1907/1954, 65). This thought, the idea of an ahistorical core of philosophical thinking, preserves a general notion of philosophy that remains constant through historical change. But it achieves more than that.

Windelband argues that by rethinking the concepts of everyday life and science, philosophy also expresses the “necessary forms” of reason (Windelband 1891/1912, 8). He refers to Hegel to elucidate the point. Hegel was right, he argues, that the categories of reason express themselves in the historical process. But he was wrong to assume that the succession of philosophical systems follows a necessary trajectory that carries systematic significance (Windelband 1891/1912, 9, see also 1905, 176-177). Windelband thinks that in the history of philosophy is shaped by a combination of rational and cultural factors – “temporal causes and timeless reasons” (Windelband 1905, 189).

As recapitulated above, Windelband’s *transcendental absolutism* posits an absolute, and hence timeless, system of values which can be discovered by philosophy. But in his historiographical texts, Windelband identifies the ahistorical stratum of philosophical reasoning with problems, not with absolute values: despite historical change, the same “age-old puzzles of existence” reoccur again and again. “Certain differences of world- and life-attitudes reoccur over and over again, combat each other and destroy each other in mutual dialectics.” (Windelband 1914, 10) Windelband argues that this persistence of philosophical problems is an indication of them being given “necessarily” and “objectively” (Windelband 1914, 11).

However, he also suggests that philosophical problems – and, one needs to add, problem-solutions – are necessary because the “material” of ideas and concepts given by life and the special sciences contains “the objective presuppositions and logical coercions for all rational deliberation about it” (Windelband 1891/1912, 10). The necessity of philosophical problems is thus a form of logical necessity that derives from the normative laws of rational thinking. Hence, the “system of absolute norms” is part of the explanation as to why philosophical reasoning has an ahistorical stratum. Because philosophical problems are a product of the application of the “timeless” determinations of reason, they themselves have an ahistorical character: the “stock of philosophical problems” is the “necessary content of rational consciousness in general” (Windelband 1914, 17). The goal of the historiography of philosophy, and its contribution to systematic philosophy, consists in separating the historically contingent from the ahistorical, essential and necessary (Windelband 1905, 189).

The common depiction of Dilthey as an unfailing historicist obscures the fact that he too saw the goal of the historiography of philosophy in revealing an ahistorical essence of philosophy. Just like Windelband, Dilthey conceptualizes the history of philosophy as a combination of contingent and timeless factors. But in line with his *immanent universalism* Dilthey has the historiography of philosophy search not for absolute norms, but rather, for the universal ground on the basis of which conflict and historical change occurs (Dilthey 1960a, 13).

According to Dilthey, there are three basic world-view-types which permeate all the different and historically specific formations of philosophical thinking (Dilthey 1960b, 86). Dilthey gives the following rationale for restricting his typology to three basic types: philosophical thinking seeks to grasp the world only under one of the three basic categories of life: knowledge, feeling or volition. Because of its conceptual nature, it tries to derive a complete system from one of these categories, but this system cannot fully represent all aspects of life in their interconnectedness (Dilthey 1907/1954, 65-66). This gives rise to three basic world-view-types. “Naturalism” tries to make life intelligible from the standpoint of causal knowledge, “objective idealism” is dominated by feeling and understands the world from the perspective of value and meaning, and “idealism of freedom” makes the autonomy of the self and volition into the central categories of its world-view (Dilthey 1960b, 100-118).

This argument remains somewhat sketchy, and Dilthey admits that the typology is tentative and based on intuition a well as on his experience as a historian of philosophy (Dilthey 1960b, 99). But whether by way of explicit argument or intuition, the goal of the typology is straightforward. It serves to show that even when philosophical views are shaped by contingent historical factors, there is nevertheless an essential continuity that unites all philosophical systems. By expressing one of three basic types, each philosophical system participates in the ahistorical nature of philosophical reasoning.[[11]](#endnote-11)

There are important differences between Windelband and Dilthey. Windelband emphasizes the rationality of philosophical thinking, Dilthey emphasizes its limitations vis-à-vis the complexity of life. Windelband puts the emphasis on normativity, while Dilthey puts a stronger focus on the dynamic and productive capacities of life. Windelband’s account is consistent with a *transcendental absolutism* about norms, while Dilthey’s fits with his *immanent universalism*.

And yet, both accounts serve the same goal. They seek to reveal a core of philosophical reasoning that is immune to historical change. This yields not only a general concept of philosophy that is applicable to all historical periods. It also promises a solution to the conflict between philosophy’s historicity and its claims to universal validity. Dilthey addresses this promise explicit. He declares that the relativity of world-views is not the “last word” of the historical mind that has studied them all and that his own theory of world-views presents “in opposition to relativism, the relation of the human mind to the riddle of the world and of life” (Dilthey 1907/1954, 66). For Windelband too, the historiography of philosophy can avert the “hopeless relativism” which means “the end of philosophy” (Windelband 1905, 187). It can do so if it separates temporal causes and timeless reason, contingent cultural factors and the “normative determinations” that shape philosophical thinking at all times (Windelband 1905, 189). The shared assumption is obviously that the road to relativism can be blocked if philosophy is revealed to have an ahistorical core.

5. An ahistorical relativism

In very general terms, both Dilthey and Windelband can claim to have avoided relativism about the history of philosophy. To the extent that Dilthey has shown that there is a universal structure of life that is the basis for all conflicting philosophical systems, he has blocked what – on his own account – is one of the main motivations for relativism. He has blocked the dissolution of universal human commonalities. And to the extent that Windelband has shown philosophical problems to emerge from the timeless determinations of reason, he has upheld his conception of an absolute, non-relative system of values.

But something about this response seems unconvincing. Rudolf Makkreel finds the theory of world-views to be “the least satisfactory part of Dilthey’s philosophy” (Makkreel 1975, 345). In his view, the analysis of world-views is based on psychological concepts that are more static than those employed in his other writings (349). He thinks that Dilthey is incapable of solving the problem of relativism, because his world-views express “fixed cognitive differences” and resist all transformation (352). Ermarth offers a more positive assessment of the theory of world-views*.*  He thinks of Dilthey’s world-views as coherent and stabilizing but not self-enclosed and static. They are driven by an inner dialectic that compels them to revise their initial premises (Ermarth 1975, 329-332). Michael Ermarth also emphasises the sharp distinction between world-views and hermeneutical science. While world-views are relative, the positive knowledge about them is not (334).

Ermarth is right to emphasise the distinction between the level of world-views and the level of their analysis. While this raises some questions of reflexivity – whether Dilthey’s can claim his own project to classify as philosophy without relativizing it – it allows us to appreciate that what Dilthey’s critics took to be breakdown of reason, he himself saw as a breakthrough of historical consciousness (Ermarth 1975, 324). Dilthey indeed believes that by showing how the plurality of philosophical systems is rooted in life, the historical consciousness can resolve “the harsh contradiction between the claim to universal validity in every philosophical system and the historical anarchy of these systems” (Dilthey 1960b, 78). By explaining how all the different philosophical systems and the conflicts between them come about, the theory of world-views occupies a standpoint above them and thus reaffirms the sovereignty of reason (Dilthey 1907/1954, 41, 66). Relativism is avoided for the universal historical standpoint. Johannes Steizinger has emphasized that in making this move, Dilthey also ends up attributing to the theory of world-views qualities that he denies to metaphysical philosophy: it is objective, all-encompassing and expressive of the sovereignty of reason (Steizinger 2017, 19-21).

But, and this is central, the problem of relativism has not been avoided on the level of philosophical systems. Ultimately, Dilthey’s theory of world-views defines philosophy in a way that attributes only relative validity to its claims. Each philosophical system justifies a world-view, expressing the manifoldness of life in a one-sided conceptual system that has only relative validity. The conflict between different – only relatively valid – world-views is eternal, just as the different world-view types are. By making philosophy into something ahistorical, Dilthey has thus merely removed the historical element of relativism. In his analysis, relativism is not a result of the historicization of philosophy, but rather built into the ahistorical relation of conceptual thinking to the puzzles of life.

It is no accident that Windelband’s account of philosophical problems has the same effect. As reconstructed above, Windelband thinks that philosophical problems are the necessary product of the norms of reasoning being applied to the conceptual materials found in life and science. For this reason, they reoccur throughout history. But while the system of absolute values which comprises the norms of rational thinking is absolute, the conflicting problem-solutions are not. Windelband does not envision his system of absolute values to lead to unequivocal decisions between different philosophical systems. Quite to the contrary, he, like Dilthey, accepts a picture of endless conflict.

Lutz Geldsetzer suggests that in branding genuine philosophical problems as unsolvable, philosophical problem-history is the “expression of modern relativism and scepticism” (Geldsetzer 1968, 167). And indeed, Windelband has done nothing to avoid the conclusion that the different philosophical systems that attempt opposing problem-solutions have only relative, but not absolute validity. Like Dilthey, he has made reoccurring conflict between philosophical systems that cannot claim absolute validity into a feature of the timeless structure of philosophical discourse.

Let us take stock. Both Dilthey and Windelband seek to reveal an ahistorical core of philosophical thinking. Both introduce something that grounds and to some extent explains the historical variety of conflicting philosophical systems – the universal structure of life in the case of Dilthey, an absolute system of norms in the case of Windelband. Both assume that the introduction of a universal or absolute *explanans* for philosophical conflict solves the problem of historical relativism. However, they both seem to miss that the *explanandum* in question – the conflicting philosophical systems – is not thereby rendered universal or absolute. The conflicting philosophical systems that emerge from the universal structure of life or from the absolute norms of reason have only relative validity. While the historical character of the *explanans* has been removed, relativism about the *explanandum* has not. Ironically, by de-historicizing philosophy, Windelband and Dilthey make the conflict between philosophical systems – each of which has only relative validity – into an eternal feature of philosophical discourse.

This finding not only reveals that Windelband and Dilthey remained somewhat inconsequential in their dealings with relativism. It also attests to how firmly they and possibly many other late Nineteenth and early Twentieth Century philosophers – Rickert, the early Husserl and Ernst Troeltsch come to mind – associated historicism and relativism with one another. To Windelband and Dilthey, it seemed that the solution to the problem of relativism had to run via a solution to historicism. And conversely, the common expectation was that a solution to historicism would also block the road to relativism. Hence, it was assumed that the “crisis of the historicization of philosophy” could be solved by recourse to an ahistorical core of philosophical thinking. And because they equated historicism and relativism with one another, Windelband and Dilthey did not realise that, when immunizing philosophy from historicism, they incurred a relativism about philosophical systems: a relativism rooted not in the historicity of philosophy but in the timeless essence of philosophical thinking itself.

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1. Note that while Troeltsch and Heussi declared historicism itself to be in crisis, later commentators, including Bambach, suggest that it was in fact academic philosophy that felt troubled by the implications of the thorough historicization of human life, culture and reason (see also Beiser 2015, 24). Similar diagnoses have been put forward by Annette Wittkau (1992) and Otto Oexle (2007). However, Wittkau and Oexle focus not primarily on how the “historicism” debates unfolded in academic philosophy, but reconstruct the broader intellectual and cultural history. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Windelband uses the terms axioms, norms and values almost interchangeably, since it is not just the logical presuppositions of correct thinking that he has in mind, but also moral norms and rules of aesthetic judgment. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Even though Windelband seeks to avoid attributing metaphysical status to the realm of values, he does not go as far as Rickert to claim values to be “unreal” (Rickert, 1921). The question whether the realm of the normative has to be understood as a transcendental reality remains unresolved in Windelband. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Dilthey’s complex and multi-faceted oeuvre cannot be measured with one yardstick. There is serious debate concerning the unity and continuity of Dilthey’s writings. I cannot go into these issues in detail here, but I agree with Frithjof Rodi that Dilthey’s oevre is united by a set of common themes and argumentative patterns (Rodi 2003). I focus my paper on Dilthey’s conception of lived experience and the psychic nexus because of the continuity in these concepts: they are present already in the psychological writings from the 1880s and 1890s, and reappear in the philosophy of world-views from the 1900s. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. This has earned Dilthey the charge of “psychologism”. Heinrich Rickert rejected Dilthey’s conception of *Geisteswissenschaften* because it did not properly disentangle the epistemology of history from individual psychology (Rickert 1929,122-127). Troeltsch too criticized Dilthey’s “psychologism”, which in his view consisted in the attempt to derive knowledge about the spiritual-historical world from an “empiricism of immediate experience” (Troeltsch 1922/2008, 782, 791-793). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Rodi puts a strong emphasis on the thought of immanence in Diltheys philosophy and on this basis also highlights some of the continuities that unite Dilthey’s thinking from the 1880s to the 1900s (Rodi 2003). . [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Jacob Owensby has given a detailed reconstruction of Dilthey’s views on the relation between the individual life-unit and the socio-historical world, and provides a provocative take on the temporality of life (Owensby 1994). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Klaus Christian Köhnke has highlighted the authoritarian and anti-democratic undertones in Windelband’s rejection of relativism (Köhnke 1986, 416–427). Perhaps an additional factor to take into account here is the institutional rivalry with his contemporary Dilthey. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. It is only in his later writings that Dilthey puts forward *explicit* pronouncements regarding relativism. This raises the question as to whether these statements are responses to relativist tendencies in his earlier views. I do not have the space to argue for this point here, but I do not think this is the case. In my view, Dilthey’s views from the 1890s are no less universalistic than those from the 1900s. When it comes to relativism, his mature and his late work stand and fall together. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Both Dilthey’s and Windelband’s philosophies have undergone a series of shifts and transformations in the period from the early 1880s to their respective deaths in 1911 and 1915. I cannot give a diachronic account of their respective intellectual journeys in this paper. But let me note that the conflict between their views is more salient in their writings from the 1880s and 90s, while the convergence in views becomes more pronounced in their writings from the first decade of the twentieth century. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Husserl (1911) famously criticized Dilthey’s philosophy as a brand of “historicism” which leads to “extreme sceptic subjectivism” (Husserl 1911, 323-326). While the theory of world-viewsindeed faces problems of relativism, it also aims to identify ahistorical essences. This calls into question whether its characterization as form of “historicism” is adequate. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)