

Gábor Boros:

*Body and Mind in Two Discourses on Method:
Descartes, Dilthey, and Misch*

My point of departure is a historical fact: in his monumental *History of Autobiography*,¹ Georg Misch praises Descartes' *Discours de la méthode* as the finest example of intellectual autobiography in the 16th–17th centuries – without, however, providing us with a detailed analysis of the *Discours* either as an autobiography or as a philosophical treatise.²

Within the genre of the literary biography that was made dominant by the humanists, there were some who presented *themselves* and developed the report on their studies and the deliberations concerning the choice of profession in the direction of a history of personal progression. The highest achievement among them is Descartes' "Discours de la méthode". Their shared basic character is the constructive structure of their steps: they begin with the doubt concerning the traditional knowledge; afterwards, they turn directly to life itself, to learn the real truth from life's unadulterated sources; and finally they acquire a fixed theoretical standpoint and a firm basis in moral life.³

¹ *Geschichte der Autobiographie*, Vol. I in 1907, Vol. IV, second half in 1969. The whole – unfinished – work comprises almost 4000 pages. Only the first volume was translated into English.

² The research was supported by the Hungarian Scientific Research Fund (OTKA 125012 'The Cartesian Mind between Cognition and Extension').

³ *So treten nun innerhalb der durch die Humanisten zur Herrschaft gebrachten literarischen Biographie die Selbstdarsteller auf, welche den Studienbericht und die Erörterung der Berufswahl in die Richtung der Entwicklungsgeschichte fortbilden. Ihr Höhepunkt liegt in Descartes' "Discours de la méthode". Ihr gemeinsamer Grundzug ist der konstruktive in den Stufen: zu Beginn der Zweifel am Bestande des überlieferten Wissens, dann das unmittelbare ans Leben Sichwenden, um aus seinen unverfälschten Zügen die lautere Wahrheit zu erkennen, endlich der Gewinn einer festen Position des Denkens und sittlichen Lebens* (Misch 1969, 733).

Considered from the point of view of literary history, this description is certainly correct.⁴ Yet, the *Discours* has a rather complex texture, far from being a simple autobiographical narrative. Descartes' enormously popular work, the English title of which is *Discourse on Method*, was not even an autonomous treatise but solely the introduction to his "Essays" on Geometry, Dioptrics, and phenomena in the air. Even its widely used title is a later invention. It deals least of all with a method that could be made operational in scientific research. This role can, if at all, be attributed to the unfinished and, in the whole 17th century unpublished, *Rules for the Direction of the Mind*.⁵ The special attraction that the *Discours* exerts on its readers can to a great extent be traced back to the doubtlessly autobiographic character of the first two or three parts that lend to the whole work something of the character of a Faustian text narrating the exceptional self-realisation of the author. Obviously, it is this attractive feature of the text that explains why Misch celebrates the *Discours* as the height of autobiographical literature in the early modern period, in a work that is dedicated to the history of autobiography.⁶

And so in 1637, *Descartes* stood out with his "Discours de la méthode"; it was perfectly clear-cut and witnessed the noble reign of reason and will; a portrait of French *esprit* that has been forming in those years, so that Descartes himself had a great influence on its formation. What appeared here was the self-realisation of a great thinker, which was elevated to conscious-

⁴ Especially if we also recall the well-known letter of Guez de Balzac to Descartes in 1628, reminding him of his promise to write *l'histoire de Votre esprit*: *Au reste, Monsieur, souvenez-vous, s'il vous plaît, de l'Histoire de Votre Esprit. Elle est attendue de tous nos amis, et vous me l'avez promise en présence du Père Clitophon, qu'on appelle en langue vulgaire Monsieur de Gersan. Il y aura plaisir à lire vos diverses aventures dans la moyenne et dans la plus haute région de l'air; à considérer vos prouesses contre les géants de l'École, le chemin que vous avez tenu, le progrès que vous avez fait dans la vérité des choses, etc.* (Descartes 2009, 26).

⁵ *Les quatre règles de la méthode énumérées dans la partie II, ainsi que les réflexions qui les accompagnent et qui portent en particulier sur l'ordre des mathématique, sont une formulation très simplifiée de certains des préceptes proposés dans les Regulae. Ce n'est en fait que dans les Regulae que l'on trouve un exposé réellement circonstancié, quoique inachevé, de la méthode nouvelle : dans le Discours Descartes se donne l'occasion « de dire quelque chose « de la méthode, non de l'expliquer tout entière* (Descartes 2009, 26).

⁶ Cf. the preface to Descartes 2009, 54–55.

ness from the context of knowledge itself in the manner in which he grasped it.⁷

For the sake of historical accuracy, we must mention that, although published last, this part of the *History of Autobiography* was written first. The first concise manuscript version of Misch's history of autobiography was conceived, written, and handed in as a prize essay for the Prussian Academy of Sciences in 1904.⁸ The first part of this manuscript (literally *manu scriptum*) was printed in 1907, whereas the last one was published posthumously by the author's friends in two halves in 1967 and 1969, *nolens-volens* from the original version. Misch died before he could have revised and reconceived it as deeply and extensively as the earlier volumes, which grew in the meantime at least twice as voluminous as in the 1904 version. So, to all probability, Misch's treatment and evaluation of Descartes' text would have become more extensive and also more intensive than the present version we are left with. In my view, he would have taken as a point of departure what I am about to reconstruct in what follows.

There is, however, a more disturbing feature of Misch's treatment of Descartes the philosopher than his superficial acclaim of the *Discours* as an outstanding autobiography. To understand this feature, we must recall that the starting point and permanent basis of Misch's historical *chef-d'œuvre* was his teacher's and father-in-law's, i.e. Wilhelm Dilthey's emphatic concept of autobiography. This concept was emphatic in a double sense. First, it was worked out to capture the etymological sense of auto-bio-graphy, i.e. "life-as-narrating-itself". Second, it was also expected to be the cornerstone of the "objective" philosophical foundation of the historical sciences. It is worthwhile to have a look at Dilthey's ideas about autobiographies in order to clarify this double sense adopted and developed by Misch.

In what remains of his attempt at developing a critique of historical reason, one of Dilthey's several formulations of why he considered the concept of autobiography foundational reads as follows.

⁷ Und nun trat 1637 Descartes mit seinem "Discours de la méthode" hervor, durchleuchtet und klar, das Zeugnis von der Adelherrschaft der Vernunft und des Willens; das Abbild des französischen Geistes, wie er nun und nicht zum geringen Teil an Descartes sich formte, erschien hier der Entwicklungsgang eines großen Denkers, aus dem Zusammenhang der Erkenntnis selbst, wie er ihn begriff, bewußt gemacht (Misch 1969, 736).

⁸ Cf. Moreau 1996.

Let us consider autobiographies, which are the most direct expression of reflection (*Besinnung*) about life. (Dilthey 2002, 219)

A little later, we find a certain argument for this recommendation:

In autobiography we encounter the highest and most instructive form of the understanding of life. [...] The person who understands it is the same as the one who created it. [...] This results in a particular intimacy of understanding. The same person who seeks the overall coherence of the story of his life has already produced a life-nexus according to various perspectives, namely, in the ways he has felt the values of his life, actualized its purposes, worked out a life plan, either generically when looking back or prospectively when looking forward to a highest good. (Dilthey 2002, 221)

The reader of these almost randomly selected passages might suspect that it cannot be just *any* autobiography that fulfils Dilthey's strong requirements. Indeed, autobiographies he considered paradigmatic were the most eloquent and elaborate ones in European literature: Augustine, Rousseau, and Goethe are his main examples, and Misch would follow him also in this respect. But before turning to Misch, let me call to mind that it is also in the context of autobiographies where Dilthey introduces the categories he believes cover the appropriate understanding of the life of a finite human mind that experiences, conceives itself, and afterwards puts forward its findings and constructions in narratives fundamentally different from scientific communication. These categories would also prove to be of great importance for Misch's treatment of autobiographies.

Turning now to Misch, we can resume the last passages as providing us with the first formal layer of a plausible historical explanation of his decision to compose a history of autobiographies. He had an influential teacher and father-in-law, whose fragmentary ideas were put together, unfolded, and developed by him as his pupil and son-in-law in several ways. This can, however, be taken as the first layer because of the "material" aspect of the issue. In this account of Misch's extensive history of autobiography, with an all too short treatment of Descartes inserted, one will find another detail in need of an explanation. Although Misch himself was an excellent philosopher, involved in a profound debate with Heidegger about the most appropriate and fruitful way

of combining Dilthey and Husserl,⁹ he did not analyse and evaluate Descartes' work as a *philosophical* achievement, not even in the manner in which Heidegger criticized it in his *Being and Time*. A revealing sign in this respect is the nonchalant manner he talks about the dominance of reason *and* will, as if there were no significant difference between a philosophy wholly dominated by reason and another one according to which even eternal truths depend on (divine) free will, as is the case in Descartes. Beyond all doubt, Misch was aware of the difference, and that a *philosophical* treatment were to cover such and similar details. Still, he investigates the *Discours* in the same *historical* manner as the autobiographies of Cardano, Cellini, the Abbot Suger and numerous other historical individuals of little or no philosophical affinity, without addressing proper philosophical issues.

So, our earlier question needs to be raised and answered again at a second level, stressing its philosophical, rather than historical aspects. Why did Misch *the philosopher* decide to write a purely historical work, putting aside his own and Descartes' philosophical profession? The question becomes even more pressing if we remember that the new philosophical hierarchy of the disciplines established precisely by Descartes, as one of his *philosophical* achievements in the autobiographical parts of the *Discours*, assigned no significant role to history. And to accept this hierarchy became almost obligatory for later philosophers of the mainstream.

To complete the first layer and provide a satisfactory answer to the question, we need only to remind ourselves that Misch's obligation toward Dilthey, originating in family relation and formal master-pupil relation, had its material aspect as well: Misch was a pupil of a philosopher who attributed a unique significance to autobiography *not only in historical but also in philosophical terms*. He wished to demonstrate his talents *as a historian* before setting about to write a theoretical work on the philosophical-methodological foundation of the historical sciences. In Dilthey's *œuvre*, the unfinished project of the biography of Schleiermacher prefigured Misch's (likewise unfinished) *History of Autobiography*.

So, we can now solve the problem: philosophers as they were, Dilthey and Misch could certainly not be wholly satisfied with a purely *historical* treatment of autobiographies in order to complete the discipline of history. There is a *philosophical* layer of their enterprise that rounds off our answer to the question

⁹ Cf. Misch 1930.

about Misch's reasons. In my view, the philosophical motivation for Misch to consider Descartes' text merely in a historical context was that he decidedly refused Descartes' idea of an ahistorical metaphysical foundation of the sciences, in reverse analogy to Descartes' exclusion of history from the tree of the serious sciences constituting philosophy, as put forward in the famous letter-preface to his *Principles of Philosophy*. In this sense, Misch must have regarded his *History of Autobiography* as a historical work *with a foundational philosophical significance*. But he could do so only if he rejected the philosophical argument against history outlined in the *Discourse on Method*. He must have endorsed and assumed the arguments behind Dilthey's life-long project to re-establish the historical and social sciences on a solid *philosophical* foundation he sought for in his theory of cognition. He thus opposed Descartes' famous or infamous project of providing the sciences with a solid *metaphysical* foundation, that is, those that seemed adoptable into his project of a *Mathesis universalis*. Therefore, what can be seen in the pages of the *History of Autobiography* is that the truest follower of Dilthey's method celebrates Descartes' *Discourse on Method as an Autobiography* while categorically rejecting the main lines of the *philosophy* of the same work; for even if there is no *specifically applicable* scientific method in the *Discours*, it does offer some general philosophical ideas on method, especially in the first two chapters and the last one.

To complete this preliminary philosophical answer, I first discuss the "autobiographical" story of the *Discourse*, establishing as it does the superiority of the ahistorical sciences over the historical ones. Second, this is followed by a short analysis of Dilthey's rejoinder after two centuries, which established and prefigured not only Misch's anti-Cartesian stance but also that of Heidegger and the whole tradition of philosophical hermeneutics.

In my view, the autobiographical aspects of Descartes' *Discours touchant la méthode* can be better clarified if we consider Adrien Baillet's *Vie de Monsieur Descartes*, especially the narration of Descartes' life until 1637, the year of the publication of the *Discours*. Baillet's work can be duly taken as a more complete version of the autobiographical parts of the *Discours* of almost the same authority as Descartes' own *histoire de mon esprit*. Baillet's *Vie* is all the more helpful in shedding light on the *Discours*, since he inserted long excerpts from the *Discours*, as well as passages from Descartes' correspondence into his account. Thus, I propose to interpret the relationship between Descartes' own autobiographic narra-

tive and Baillet's work on the basis of hints given by Dilthey at the beginning of his fragmentary *Plan for a Critique of Historical Reason*.

The lived experience (*das Erleben*) is a temporal sequence in which every state is in flux before it can become a distinct object. (Dilthey 2002, 216)

Biographies and autobiographies are always more or less sustained attempts at "arresting" this flux of life by way of "objectifying" some of its elements through informing, as it were, the formless flow, and cutting out moments or events of life seemingly separate or separable from others.

But observation destroys lived experience. [...] the law of life [is that] every moment of life that is observed [...] is a remembered moment and no longer a flow; *it is arrested by attention, which fixes what essentially is fluid*. (Dilthey 2002, 216; emphasis in the original)

To use Dilthey's hint, Baillet's and Descartes' descriptions differ as a more and a less detailed description of the same flux of life. This is not to say, however, that I endorse the objectivist self-image characteristic of 19th century conceptions of history: no historian will ever give a *wie es eigentlich gewesen* picture of Descartes' life or the life of any other individual, unfathomable as it is in Dilthey's view.

I am also aware that beyond the unfathomable character of Descartes' individual life, Baillet's biography is informed by hagiographic and other assumptions and narrative patterns that can have negatively influenced its truthfulness. Nevertheless, to a certain degree we can share Dilthey's conviction that such a combination of biography and autobiography can offer a unique access to historical truth, despite all eventual factual mistakes in either. To quote a passage already quoted with another pattern of omission:

In autobiography we encounter the highest and most instructive form of the understanding of life. [...] The person who understands it is the same as the one who created it. [...] The person's memory has highlighted and accentuated those life-moments that were experienced as significant; others have been allowed to sink into forgetfulness. Momentary mistakes about the meaning of his life are corrected by the future. (Dilthey 2002, 221)

Let us now apply this theoretical framework to the *Discours*. Its “intellectual autobiography” provides us with a perfect example for the presentation of moments of life-nexus “that were experienced as significant” by Descartes, from the viewpoint of what he took to be the overall aim of his philosophical life. As Misch formulated in our second quote from him: “What appeared here was the self-realisation of a great thinker, which was elevated to consciousness from the context of knowledge itself in the manner in which he grasped it.” What was experienced as most significant by Descartes was his discovering a radically new manner of conceiving of the process of knowledge acquisition and systematization—precisely the manner to be rejected by Dilthey and Misch. Baillet certainly provides more details about Descartes’ life-moments than Descartes himself, but he is also far from an annalist without preconceived frames, even if these are different from those of Descartes.

There seems to be a most conspicuous difference of emphasis between Descartes’ account of his youth and what we find in *The Life of Monsieur Des Cartes, Containing the History of his Philosophy and Works: as also the most Remarkable Things that Befell him During the Whole Course of his Life* – as the title of the 1693 translation of Baillet’s work goes. I said “difference of emphasis” because, to be sure, there is a huge difference in terms of the quantity of details provided by the author of two short chapters of a fundamentally philosophical work, and that given by the author of two volumes of a biography dedicated to the life of the same author. This fundamental difference is not our main concern here. From our point of view, the most interesting difference of emphasis consists in the two authors’ accounts of the unbalanced natural gifts of Descartes: the feebleness of his body and the strength of his “genious”. I quote just one characteristic passage from Baillet:

The weakness of his disposition, and the unconstancy of his health obliged the Father to leave him along time under the tuition of Women. Yet at the time they were but busie about his body, and endeavour to procure him a good strong constitution, he afforded almost every day instances of the beautifulnes of his genius. He shewed, in the midst of these his infirmities such promising dispositions for study; that his Father could not chuse but procure him the first exercises suitable to the design he had of cultivating his stock of parts, maugre [in spite of] the resolution he had taken to make sure of the corporeal health of his Son, before he attended any thing upon his mind. (Baillet 1693, 5)

There are several interesting points in this passage. One of them is the well-known traditional interpretation of the gender roles, where women are responsible for the body and infirmity, whereas men for the firm character of the mind. What is, however, more important for us now is the emphasis put on the inequality of body and soul. Of course, Baillet was aware of the basic novelty of Descartes's philosophy, notably, of the philosophically exploited inequality of body and mind. Thus, it could be argued that this is but a preconceived opinion, focusing on the prefiguration of the famous theory in Descartes' own original conception. However, I am not convinced that such an exaggerated critical stance toward Baillet is appropriate. What I suggest instead is that Descartes deliberately omitted such details from his *histoire de [s]on esprit*, partly because he was already convinced of the superiority of the mind over the body. Thus, he was not bothered by what had happened to his own body all along those years from his birth until 1637. This can even be evaluated as the sign of something like "the inner truth" of an autobiography Misch underlined in the RIAS-talks as late as the 1950's, exemplified by Augustine's *Confessions*.¹⁰ However, if we consider other well-known cases of omission by Descartes, such as his friendship with Beeckman, which ended rather abruptly and distastefully, it occurs that we need an explanation different from Misch's (and Dilthey's) theory of "the inner truth" of autobiographies.

In any case, the body or the bodies do not seem to play a decisive role in the *Discours* except for Part 5, where the whole corporeal universe, particular bodies within it, parts of such bodies, and their co-operation appear as the *explanandum*. His own singular body, and in general the particular bodies of human beings insofar as they are united to, but also by the respective particular souls appear only at the end of part 5. Here we read the following well-known sentences:

I had also shown what changes must occur in the brain to cause states of waking, sleeping, and dreaming; how light, sounds, smells, tastes, heat, and all the other *qualities* of external objects can imprint various ideas on the brain through the intermediary of the senses; how hunger, thirst, and the other internal *passions* can also transmit ideas to the brain; what must be taken to be the *sensus communis** in which these are received, the *memory* which preserves them, and the *faculty of imagination*, which can change them in dif-

¹⁰ Cf. Misch 1954, 4–6.

ferent ways, form them into new ideas and, by the same means, distribute animal spirits to the muscles and make the members of this body move, with respect both to the objects which present themselves to the senses and to the internal *passions*, in as many different ways as the parts of our bodies can move without being directed by our will. (Descartes 2006, 45)

These sentences mirror the plan endorsed by Descartes in *De l'homme* in order to explain human psychological phenomena as broadly as possible by virtue of macro- or micro-anatomical descriptions. We can even argue that this is a surprisingly positive approach to the human body, which could be evaluated as an attempt to realise what Spinoza maintained was missing even some 30 years later when he formulated his famous rallying call in the *Ethics* part 3, prop. 2, Scholium:

They will say, of course, that it cannot happen that the causes of buildings, of paintings, and of things of this kind, which are made only by human skill, should be able to be deduced from the laws of nature alone, insofar as it is considered to be only corporeal; nor would the human Body be able to build a temple, if it were not determined and guided by the Mind. But I have already shown that they do not know what the Body can do, or what can be deduced from the consideration of its nature alone, and that they know from experience that a great many things happen from the laws of nature alone which they never would have believed could happen without the direction of the Mind [...]. (Spinoza 1985, 496)

Afterwards, Descartes introduces the problem of differentiation between automata, i.e. bodies that are moved solely by bodily forces, and the particular *human* bodies. He comes to the well-known conclusion that human beings “have two very certain means of recognizing that they were not, for all that, real human beings.” (Descartes 2006, 46) Both of these means depend on possessing reason as a universal instrument, i.e. an instrument that opens up an indefinitely broad range of reactions of any particular human being to any action of any of the surrounding bodies. These reactions would otherwise be limited to a very narrow range or even to one predetermined reaction, as in the case of automata. Certainly, this universal, i.e. soul-type function is missing in the severed head “which we can see moving and biting the earth shortly after having been cut off, although

they are no longer animate”.¹¹ Here we can see an example for a bodily movement in Descartes that includes even biting the earth without being united to a soul or reason as a universal – and universalising – instrument. The head in that state has no other option of action than the one it is performing.

One can certainly infer from such a positive concept of the body that it becomes the appropriate subject-matter of a pure natural science, i.e. physics, which acquires a foundation from a metaphysics of a reduced scope only to gain an external point of view for concluding that *there are* soul-like factors in the universe, and that they are principally independent of the body, although autonomously functioning bodies occupy an enormous sphere. This independence is announced in the text of Part 5 by the famous statement on the rational soul.

I had described the rational soul, and shown that, unlike the other things of which I had spoken, it could not possibly be derived from the potentiality of matter, but that it must have been created expressly. [...]

I dwelt a little at this point on the subject of the soul, because it is of the greatest importance. For, after the error of those who deny the existence of God, which I believe I have adequately refuted above, there is none which causes weak minds to stray more readily from the narrow path of virtue than that of imagining that the souls of animals are of the same nature as our own, and that, as a consequence, we have nothing more to fear or to hope for after this present life, any more than flies and ants. But when we know how different flies and ants are, we can understand much better the arguments which prove that our soul is of a nature entirely independent of the body, and that, as a consequence, it is not subject to death as the body is. And given that we cannot see any other causes which may destroy the soul, we are naturally led to conclude that it is immortal. (Descartes 2006, 48–49)

I have intentionally left out the well-known insertion of the metaphor of the pilot and the ship, meant to let the reader understand that Descartes was aware of the fact that the rational soul needs to be closely joined and united with the body, in order to account for the phenomena of conscious dual activity. I have left out this insertion to demonstrate how easily readers might neglect this passage, without necessarily feeling that something essential is missing. So,

¹¹ [...] *les têtes, un peu après être coupées, se remuent encore, et mordent la terre, nonobstant qu'elles ne soient plus animées* (Descartes 2009, 118).

a late interpreter such as Dilthey could easily come to the conclusion that Descartes' real standpoint – or at least the standpoint that the *Discours* communicated to the followers of his natural philosophy – was the independence of the body and the mind, implying the fatal fissure in the human being that led to the independence and triumphal success of the sciences, with corporeal nature as their *only* proper subject-matter the laws and the methods of which serve as the unquestionable basis for all other disciplines with a claim to be scientific. He may even have realised when reading *Le monde* and *De l'homme* that in spite of the past tense of the first sentence of our quotation, Descartes did *not* really describe the rational soul there.

As far as Dilthey is concerned, he must have considered this move a fatal mistake, the self-deception of an inalienably *autonomous* human *mind*, the activity of which is restricted to the laws of another domain, rendering itself from *sui juris* to *alterius juris*.

This points leads us to a discussion of Dilthey's "Discourse on method", as it were. For, it is this text, where Dilthey established his anti-Cartesian philosophy of method, that I had in mind in referring to a *second* discourse on method in the title of this essay. The text is the preface and the "first introductory book" of Dilthey's *Introduction to the Human Sciences*.

Dilthey's statements and conviction about Descartes' fatal mistake do not, however, imply that he intended to go back to a pre-Cartesian, traditional idealist metaphysical standpoint, in terms of which the mind is identical with the essence of human being, and the body must be ignored, along with the sciences that investigate its laws. Dilthey's indubitable starting point I have referred to as *his* "Discourse on Method" above is that the human being is a real psychophysical unity. This means that the passage containing the metaphor of the pilot and the ship omitted above must be given a central role. Let us quote the passage from Descartes:

I had shown how it is not sufficient for it [the rational soul] to be lodged in the human body like a pilot in his ship, except perhaps to move its members, but that it needs to be more closely joined and united with the body in order to have, in addition, feelings and appetites like the ones we have, and in this way compose a true man. (Descartes 2006, 48)

In fact, Dilthey might have believed that the clue to the solution of the whole problem of the human sciences is that this metaphor must be taken more seriously and given more prominence than Descartes was willing to do. One can refer to Descartes' somewhat odd statement in his letter to Elisabeth on 21 May and 28 June in 1643 about a „certain primitive notion” of „the union of the soul and the body” (Descartes 1991, 218) that we possess, but

it is the *ordinary course of life* and conversation, and abstention from meditation and from the study of the things which exercise the imagination, that teaches us how to conceive the union of the soul and the body. (Descartes 1991, 227, my emphasis)

Obviously, Dilthey sought to base philosophy on this very “ordinary course of life”, and instead of postulating its existence and its role in philosophy he conceived of it as an autonomous domain that must be our starting point in order to render the problem of the existence of the external world inadequate, the very problem that urged Descartes to develop his foundational God-based metaphysics of a limited scope. We can illuminate Dilthey's standpoint by contrasting it with that of Husserl. Whereas Husserl claims Descartes' mistake lies in his returning to the external world as soon as possible, thus, in departing from the newly discovered sphere of pure thinking, Dilthey reproaches Descartes for departing from the standpoint of the I *as a psychophysical unity*, “[t]he psychophysical life-unit which is filled with the immediate feeling of its undivided existence” (Dilthey 1989, 68) in the first place. It is when the fictitious I believes that its cogitative existence is separate from the body that doubt about the reality of the external world might arise. For Dilthey, this doubt can only arise if we limit what Heidegger calls our “being-in-the-world” to a “mere representation”, instead of identifying it with the “psycho-physical life-unit”, i.e.

with the whole human being who wills, feels, and represents external reality [that] is given simultaneously and [have] as much certitude as his own self. [...] We know this external world not by virtue of an inference from effects to causes or some corresponding process. Rather these representations of causes and effects are themselves only abstractions from our volitional life. [...] [A]n external world and other life-units are given together with our own life-unit. (Dilthey 1989, 59)

For Dilthey, this “life-unit” is “the whole human being” – something similar, in fact, to Descartes’ “*vrai homme*” – with the manifold powers of willing, feeling, and thinking. And because in later formulations of the same project, Dilthey connects this concept of the “willing, feeling, and thinking” being with the stream of life as the object of all these powers, he could reformulate the metaphor of the pilot and the ship in a significant manner:

The ship of our life is carried forward on a constantly moving stream, as it were, and the present is always wherever we enter these waves with whatever we suffer, remember, and hope, that is, whenever we live in the wholeness of our reality. (Dilthey 2002, 215)

This interpretation of the stream of our life, the “wholeness of our reality”, the “ordinary course of our life” was meant to convey a fundamental message to Dilthey’s age, the second half of the 19th century. This is the age in which the triumph of the natural sciences initiated effectively, in part, by Descartes reached its phase of maturation. In 1843, J. S. Mill published his work, *A System of Logic*, in which he proposed a methodology for the human – historical and social – sciences modelled on that of the natural sciences. This was tantamount to a destruction of their autonomy. But neither Hegel’s absolutization of the spirit-in-history, nor the ambivalent stance to “the use and abuse of history for life” in Nietzsche (Dilthey’s contemporary fellow-philosopher of life) rendered easier Dilthey’s task to reverse this procedure and emancipate the historical sciences.

The *Introduction to Human Sciences* was published in 1883. In the Preface, Dilthey sets his task unanimously: “to attain as much certainty as possible about the philosophical foundations of the human sciences” (Dilthey 1989, 47).

After this strictly philosophical proclamation, comparable to the undertaking of Descartes of attaining as much certainty as possible for the foundation of the magnificent castle of the sciences and ethics built by the ancients, Dilthey feels obliged to present himself in a historical-political tableau. Here it becomes evident that he must have considered Descartes as one of the Enlightenment thinkers who prepared the French Revolution, the ideological system of which should be opposed in his book by way of preparing the methodological foundation for the research of the so-called “German historical school”.

The French system of social thought developed in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Its ideas of natural law and natural religion, and its abstract theories of the state and of political economy manifested its political consequences in the Revolution when the armies of that revolution occupied and destroyed the ramshackle, thousand-year-old edifice of the Holy Roman Empire. At the same time, the view developed in Germany that historical growth is the source of all spiritual facts – a view that proved the falsity of that whole [French] system of social thought. (Dilthey 1989, 47–48)

However odd it might seem at first glance, Dilthey must have regarded the new attempts at providing indiscriminately all the sciences with a uniform methodology as a consequence of the revolutionary mind, against which he urged for an independent methodological foundation for the historical sciences. But his age, as mentioned above, was reluctant to rely on a new metaphysics: neither the inductive logical methodology, nor Dilthey's counter-project was to be based on metaphysics. Dilthey may even have believed that the metaphysical residuum was the driving force behind the French revolutionary mind and army. Dilthey's plan must have been to transform both the philosophy of life and the philosophy of mind/spirit (Hegel) in order to gain an original standpoint in terms of which life is basically the life of the mind, not to be identified with either the absolute spirit or the metaphysically ascertained ego of the cogito. He believed to find a firm basis solely in inner experience, the facts of consciousness he connected to the theory of knowledge and psychology, rather than to a new idealist metaphysics. The theory of knowledge and psychology must therefore be conceived of as the disciplines to replace metaphysics and to warrant the independence of the human sciences:

The analysis of these [inner, psychic] facts is the central task of the human sciences. Thus, in accordance with the spirit of the Historical School, knowledge of the principles of the *human world* falls within that world itself, and the human sciences form an independent system. (Dilthey 1989, 50)

Obviously, an immense research space opens up here for investigations in several directions: the Dilthey research might profit from this analogy between the two “discourses on method”, and the same holds true for research into the quadrangle, Dilthey-Husserl-Misch-Heidegger, as well as for the methodological debates about Gadamer's hermeneutics, to mention but a few examples.

Obviously, we cannot proceed in these directions within the framework of our present undertaking. Thus, I return to Descartes, in order to round up my arguments. Ironically, what we find in Descartes' *Discours* and in the *Rules* does not seem to be as far from Dilthey's motives as it might seem at first glance. Although Descartes developed a metaphysics as a foundational discipline, he understood this as a decisive turn within the history of metaphysics, insofar as his metaphysics was the science of the principles of human understanding. So, he was closer to a theory of knowledge than Dilthey considered him to be, and this was the reason why the neo-Kantian contemporaries of Dilthey and Misch celebrated him as a precursor of Kant. Husserl's ambiguous but basically positive evaluation of Descartes also relies on this acknowledgement of his services for the development of transcendental philosophy. And if we consider the very detailed and carefully worked out metaphor of climbing high mountains slowly, on serpentine routes, instead of running straight up and hazarding a precipice (*Discours*, part 2), we can conclude that, at least personally, Descartes would not have been a genuine admirer of the anti-monarchic revolutionary deeds of his compatriots.

Bibliography

Baillet, Adrian 1693. *The Life of Monsieur Des Cartes, Containing the History of his Philosophy and Works: as also the most Remarkable Things that befell him during the whole Course of his Life*, Printed for R. Simpson, at the Harp in St. Paul's Church-yard.

Descartes, René 1991. *The philosophical writings of Descartes, Vol. III, The correspondence*, transl. by Anthony Kenny, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Descartes, René 2006. *A discourse on the method of correctly conducting one's reason and seeking truth in the sciences*, transl. by Ian Maclean, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Descartes, René 2009. *Œuvres complètes III. Discours de la Méthode et Essais*, Paris: Gallimard.

Dilthey, Wilhelm 1989. *Selected Works, Vol I: Introduction to the Human Sciences*, transl. by Michael Neville et al., Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Dilthey, Wilhelm 2002. *Selected Works, Vol III: The Formation of the Historical World in the Human Sciences*, transl. by Rudolf A. Makkreel and John Scanlon, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Misch, Georg 1930. *Lebensphilosophie und Phänomenologie. Eine Auseinandersetzung der Diltheyschen Richtung mit Heidegger und Husserl*, Bonn: Fr. Cohen, 1930.

Misch, Georg 1954. *Das Problem der Wahrheit in der [Auto]Biographie*, broadcasted on 5. 8. and 6. 8. 1954.

Misch, Georg 1969. *Geschichte der Autobiographie*, Vierter Band, zweite Hälfte, *Von der Renaissance bis zu den autobiographischen Hauptwerken des 18. und 19. Jahrhunderts*, Frankfurt/M: Verlag G. Schulte-Bulmke.

Moreau, Pierre-Francois 1996. „Une théorie de l'autobiographie: Georg Misch”, *Revue de synthèse* : 4^e S. N° 3–4, juil-dec. 1996, p. 377–389.

Spinoza 1985. *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, Vol. I, transl. by Edwin M. Curley, Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press.