SPECIAL SECTION

History and Natural Science

Wilhelm Windelband

Translator’s Preface

When in 1937 Gordon Allport (1897–1967) borrowed from the German philosopher Wilhelm Windelband (1848–1915) the terms ‘nomothetic’ and ‘idiographic’ and injected those terms into the discourse of scientific personality psychology, he surely suspected that he would be igniting a controversy. It seems unlikely, however, that he or anyone else would have predicted such an enduring tempest. Yet on it lives. Contemporary publications continue to draw attention to the difference between knowledge about people in general, on the one hand, and knowledge about persons in particular, on the other, and those same works inform that while a very small minority of investigators continue to clamor for more and better knowledge of the latter, that is, ‘idiographic’, sort, the vast majority is oriented toward the quest for knowledge of the former, ‘nomothetic’ variety.

Yet during the 60 years over which the relative merits of nomothetic vs idiographic knowledge have been discussed and debated (sometimes very acrimoniously), virtually no attention has been given to the text of the speech, delivered in 1894, in which Windelband originally drew the distinction. To the best of my knowledge, an English translation of that text has until now never been published, and the relevant literature after Allport’s 1937 text (Personality: A Psychological Interpretation) gives precious little evidence that participants to the ensuing decades-long debate have been (or are currently) familiar with that text’s contents. As I have argued in my paper that accompanies this translation, the consequences of this oversight for scholarship in this important matter have been less than salutary.

The present contribution is made in hopes of redressing this problem. In making this translation, I have sought to achieve the twofold objective of conveying Windelband’s ideas as clearly as possible (some are less than fully transparent even to native German speakers reading the original text), while simultaneously adhering to a style of English that is as faithful as possible to the style of the German in which the speech was originally given. (The original German text is available on the Theory & Psychology Web page: http://www.psych.ucalgary.ca/thsyc/windelband.html) Through various drafts of this work, I have consulted with several philosophers and psychologists, some of whom are native German speakers, in hopes of ensuring that this published translation would be as true to Windelband’s original meanings and style as possible. In this connection, special thanks are due to Frank Radtke of the Hegel Institute of Berlin, Werner Deutsch of the Technical University of Braunschweig, and my Georgetown University colleague Rom Harré for their insights and for their helpful advice on philosophical, psychological, historical and linguistic matters pertaining to this translation. The work has also benefited from the comments of a native German speaker who reviewed the translation and who has remained anonymous to me. In acknowledging the help of these various individuals, however, I must nevertheless assume full responsibility for such errors or inaccuracies as the text may yet contain.

I also wish to thank and commend the Editor of Theory & Psychology, Henderikus J. Stam, for his faith in and help with this rather unusual undertaking.

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Rectoratsreden der Universität Strassburg
1894

GESCHICHTE
UND
NATURWISSENSCHAFT.

REDE
ZUM
ANTRITT DES RECTORATS
DER
KAISER-WILHELM-UNIVERSITÄT STRASSBURG
GEHALTEN AM 1. MAI 1894
VON
Dr. WILHELM WINDELBAND
ORD. PROFESSOR DER PHILOSOPHIE.

ZWEITE UNVERÄNDerte AUFLAGE.

STRUSSBURG
J. H. Ed. HEITZ (HEITZ & MÜNDL)
1900.
Address of the Rector of the University of Strasburg 1894

HISTORY
AND
NATURAL SCIENCE

ADDRESS
on the occasion of the
Assumption of the Rectorship
of
Kaiser-Wilhelm University of Strasburg
held on 1 May 1894
by
Dr Wilhelm Windelband
ord. Professor of Philosophy

Second unaltered edition

STRASBURG
J. H. Ed. Heitz (Heitz & Mündel)
1900
Respected colleagues and guests!

On the celebration of the founding of the University, it is a great privilege for the Rector to have the ear of its guests and members for a subject drawn from the province of the discipline he represents. But the duty corresponding to this right entangles the philosopher in quite special consternation. Obviously, it is relatively easy for him to find a theme which he can surely count on to be of general interest. But this advantage is clearly outweighed by the difficulties which attend the specificity of the manner of philosophical investigation. All scientific work is directed toward expanding the circle of its particular subject-matter and to deciding upon a given particular question within the framework of a more general orientation. To this extent, matters are no different in philosophy than in the other sciences. But while the latter may treat such principles as firm and given with reliability sufficient for focused inquiry, it is essential for philosophy that its true object of investigation be constituted of those very principles, and hence that it cannot derive its object of investigation from something more general but must in each case determine its object within the most general itself. Strictly speaking, there is for philosophy no special topic of investigation whatsoever. Each of its special problems extends its lines from itself into the highest and last questions. One who would speak on philosophical matters must have the courage to take a position on everything, and must also have the courage, more difficult to maintain, to lead one’s listeners out onto the high seas of the most general considerations, where firm ground threatens to disappear to the eye as well as beneath the foot.

In the light of such considerations the representative of philosophy might well find himself trying either simply to sketch a historical picture of his discipline or to take refuge in that special empirical science which, according to still existing academic arrangements and customs, he is likewise compelled to attend to, namely psychology. It, too, offers an abundance of subject-matters of concern to everyone, and its treatment promises ever surer yield, the more multifaceted the methodological and factual perspectives there are to which the lively movement of this discipline has given rise in the last decades. I eschew both ways out: I would like to advance neither the opinion that there is no more philosophy but only its history, nor the view that philosophy, as Kant has newly founded it, could ever again shrink into the narrow frame of those special sciences whose contribution to knowledge he himself appraised as most limited among the theoretical disciplines. On the contrary, I see it as my duty, on an occasion such as today, to bear witness to the fact that philosophy, even in its contemporary form where it has set aside all metaphysical covetousness, is equal to the great questions to which it is beholden not only for the significant content of its history but also for its value in literature and its place in the academic curriculum. And so I am prompted to the task by this risk, by that drive of philosophical investigation through which every special problem extends to the last
puzzles of the human world- and life-view; to illustrate to you with an example how, necessarily, any attempt to bring the apparently clear and commonly known to full understanding quickly and unavoidably pushes our cognitive capacity to understand to the furthest frontiers, surrounded by dark mysteries.

If to this end I choose a theme from logic, and more specifically from methodology, from the theory of science, I do so in the opinion that an especially clear, understandable way must emerge to the inner connection which exists between the work of philosophy and that of the other sciences. Philosophy has not existed and does not exist in its own conceptual world, oblivious to knowledge, but in a rich interchange with all working knowledge of reality and with all of the valuable content of the true spiritual life [Geistesleben]: if its history has been that of human error, the underlying fact was that, in good faith, it appropriated as final and secure from the theories of the special sciences that which, even in the latter, could be regarded as, at best, an approximation of the truth. This vital connection between philosophy and the other disciplines is shown most clearly in the development of logic itself, which was never anything but the critical reflection of the forms of true knowledge presented to it. Never has a fruitful method grown out of abstract construction or the purely formal considerations of logic: to the latter is given only the task of expressing in its general form that which has been successfully carried out in particular, and thus specify its significance, its value as knowledge, and the limits of its application. To take the most prominent example: Whence has modern logic, as compared with its Grecian Mother, the mature conception of the essence of induction? Not from the programmatic emphasis with which Bacon recommended and scholastically described it, but instead from reflection on the effective application which this form of thought proved to have in isolated works of the investigation of nature, being refined and spiraling upward from one special problem to another special problem since the days of Kepler and Galileo.

But, obviously, these same interrelationships are the basis of those more recent attempts, characteristic of the newer logic, to draw conceptually determined borders between particular provinces within the domain of human knowledge, which is growing ever more variegated in its multifacetedness. The various degrees to which philology, mathematics, natural science, psychology and history have prevailed on scientific interests in recent times is reflected in the various drafts of the 'system of the sciences', as one said formerly, or of the 'classification of the sciences', as one says today. Errors resulted from the tendency toward universality which, through misjudgment of the autonomy of the isolated scientific disciplines, sought to submit all subjects to the force of one and the same method, so that for purposes of partitioning the sciences only objective—which is to say metaphysical—facets remained. Thus have the mechanistic, geometric,
psychological, dialectical and in most recent times the developmental- historical methods claimed the right to extend their predominance from the narrower fields of their earlier fruitful application over the entire spectrum of human knowledge. The greater the conflict between these various efforts appears, the more is logic called upon to consider the visionary task of achieving a just weighing of those demands, and a balancing separation of their realms of validity through the general determinations of epistemology. The prospects for this are not unfavorable. Through Kant, the methodological confrontation of philosophy with mathematics, and in principle also with psychology, has been effected. Since then, the 19th century has experienced, along with a certain paralysis of the initially over-stimulated philosophical drive, a more diverse multiplicity of efforts and movements in the special sciences. In coping with newer and newer kinds of problems, the methodological apparatus has been changed on all sides, and at the same time expanded and refined to unprecedented degrees. In the process, the ramifications of the various ways of proceeding have extended many times over into one another, and if, at that, each demands for itself a pre-eminent position in the general world- and life-views of our days, it is just this out of which new questions grow in theoretical philosophy, and those are the ones for which I would wish to command your attention, without intending to somehow exhaust them.

It scarcely bears mentioning that compartmentalizations of the sort I have in view here cannot coincide fully with the partitioning which the sciences find in the separation of university faculties. The latter have emerged from the practical tasks of the university and its historical development. In the course of this the practical goal has regularly unified what from a purely theoretical view would be separated, and separated what would otherwise be bound closely together, and the same motive has repeatedly molded together the truly scientific with practical and technical disciplines. Yet one should not think that all of this has been to the detriment of scientific activity: on the contrary the practical relationships have succeeded even here in calling forth a richer and more active interchange between the various regions of work than perhaps would have been the case under a more abstract partitioning of kinds, as occurs in the academies. Likewise, the realignments which the faculties of the German universities have experienced in the last decades—especially in view of the former facultas artium—concede a great significance to the methodological motives of the separation.

If one pursues these motives with only theoretical interest, it may first of all be taken as valid that we can juxtapose philosophy, and indeed also mathematics, with the empirical sciences. The first two might be grouped together under the old name of the ‘rational’ sciences, even if in very different senses of the word not to be discussed further here. It suffices here to express their commonality in the negative form, in the sense that they themselves are not directly oriented toward knowledge of that given in
experience, even if the insights won from them can be and should be applied in other sciences. This objective moment on the formal side coincides with the thinking of the scholarly community of philosophers and mathematicians in that neither philosophy nor mathematics bases its claims on particular perceptions or on bundles of perceptions, however much the factual, psycho-genetic occasion for their investigations and discoveries might lie in empirical motives. Among the empirical sciences, on the other hand, we include those whose task it is to make known some or other reality that is given and accessible to perception. Its formal characteristic thus consists in the fact that it requires for the grounding of its results, alongside the general axiomatic requirements and the justifications required equally of all normal thought, a determination of facts through perception.

For the classification of the disciplines directed to knowledge of reality, it is at present customary to distinguish between natural sciences [Naturwissenschaften] and humanities [Geisteswissenschaften]: in this form, I regard this distinction as unfortunate. The opposition of material nature and mind [Natur und Geist] is an objective one, which in the conclusions of ancient thought and in the beginnings of thought in the middle ages came to assume a dominant position and has been very strictly maintained in the more recent metaphysics from Descartes and Spinoza to Schelling and Hegel. To the extent that I correctly judge the views of the newest philosophy and the effects of epistemological critique, this distinction, remaining bound as it is to the general ways of thinking and speaking, is no longer regarded as so secure and obvious that it can be made, uncritically, the basis of classification. Moreover, this opposition of objects is not covered by one such way of knowing. Because, if Locke gave Cartesian dualism a subjective form, to juxtapose outer and inner perception—sensation and reflection—as the two separate organs for knowledge of, on the one side, the outer world, the world of nature, and, on the other side, of the inner mental world, so the most recent epistemological critique has, in turn, shaken this conception more than ever, and rendered doubtful at best the assumption of an ‘inner perception’ as a special kind of knowledge. Moreover, it is not at all conceded that the facts of the so-called humanities could be founded simply on inner perception. But above all, the incongruence of the objective and the formal principles of classification is shown in the fact that an empirical discipline of such significance as psychology is not to be accommodated by the categories of the natural sciences and the humanities: to judge by its subject, it can only be characterized as a humanity, and in a certain sense as the foundation of all of the others; but its entire procedure, its methodological arsenal, is from beginning to end that of the natural sciences. For this reason, psychology has had to allow itself to be characterized at times as the ‘natural science of inner sense’ or even as ‘the natural science of the mental’ [geistige Naturwissenschaft].
A division which gives rise to such difficulties is unlikely to prove resilient. But, at that, perhaps only a small adjustment is necessary here. In what, then, does the methodological relationship of psychology to the natural sciences exist? Obviously, in the fact that the former, like the latter, identifies, gathers and analyzes its facts only from the standpoint, and toward the end, of thereby understanding the general lawfulness [die allgemeine Gesetzmäßigkeit] to which these facts submit. To be sure, the variety of subjects entails that the methods for identifying the facts, as well as the kinds and ways of their inductive application and the formulas to which the discovered laws can be brought, are quite varied. And yet in this respect, the distance of psychology from, for example, chemistry is hardly greater than, for example, that of mechanics from biology. But—and this is the point—all these factual differences pale in the light of the logical equivalence which all these disciplines possess with respect to the formal character of their knowledge goal: it is always laws of occurrences which they seek, whether the occurrence concerns a movement of bodies, a transformation of matter, an unfolding of organic life or a process of ideation, feeling and willing.

In contrast to the foregoing, the many empirical disciplines which one otherwise properly labels as humanities are directed decidedly to the complete and exhaustive portrayal of a particular, more or less protracted occurrence of a unique, temporally circumscribed reality. On this side, too, the subjects, and the special concepts through which one secures their understanding, are of great variety. One deals there with an isolated event or an interconnected sequence of acts and fates, with the essence and life of a single man or an entire folk, with the peculiarity and development of a language, religion or legal system, of a product of literature, of art or of science. And each of these subjects demands a treatment corresponding to its special nature. But always, the goal of knowledge is that of reproducing and rendering intelligible a creation of human life in its factuality. Clearly, the entire province of the historical disciplines is implied here.

We have before us here a purely methodological classification of the empirical sciences based on secure logical concepts. The principle of classification is the formal character of the sought-after knowledge. Some [disciplines] seek general laws, the other special historical facts. Expressed in the formal language of logic, the goal of the one is the general, apodictic pronouncement, that of the other the singular, assertory sentence. Thus is this difference connected to every important and decisive relationship in human understanding that has been recognized from the time of Socrates as the fundamental relationship of all scientific thought: the relationship of the general to the particular. It was with this as a starting-point that ancient metaphysics partitioned itself, in that Plato sought the real in the unchanging notions of kind [Gattungsbegriffen], while Aristotle sought the same in the purposively developing individual being [Einzelwesen]. Modern science has
taught us to define the existing thing [das Seiende] in terms of the enduring necessity of things happening within it. It has placed the laws of nature in the position of the Platonic idea.

So we may say that the empirical sciences seek in the knowledge of reality either the general in the form of the natural law or the particular in the historically determined form [Gestalt]. They consider in one part the ever-enduring form, in the other part the unique content, determined within itself, of an actual happening. The one comprises sciences of law, the other sciences of events; the former teaches what always is, the latter what once was. If one may resort to neologisms, it can be said that scientific thought is in the one case nomothetic, in the other idiographic. If we hold to the customary expressions, we may speak further in this sense of the opposition of the natural science and historical disciplines, provided that we bear in mind that in this methodological sense psychology is by all means to be numbered among the natural sciences.

But above all it is to be recognized that this methodological opposition classifies only the method and not the content of the knowledge itself. It remains possible, and in fact is shown, that the same subjects can serve as the object of a nomothetic and at the same time also of an idiographic investigation. That has to do with the fact that the opposition of the ever-enduring and the unique is in a certain sense relative. That which within a considerable period of time undergoes no directly noticeable change, and thus in light of its unchanging forms may be treated as nomothetic, can nevertheless show itself, upon further inspection, to be something which, at that, holds for only a limited time period, which is to say, as a one-time occurrence. Thus, for example, a language in all of its specific uses is dominated by its formal laws, which remain the same through all expressive change, but, on the other hand, this same entirely special language, inclusive of all of its special formal lawfulness, is nevertheless a one-time, temporary appearance in human linguistic life itself. The same holds for the physiology of the body, for geology, in a certain sense even for astronomy, and in the process the historical principle is pushed over into the province of the natural sciences.

The science of organic nature provides the classical example for this. As a system, it is of a nomothetic character insofar as it considers as its lawful form the ever-enduring types of living beings revealed within the several thousand years of human observation up to now. But viewed as a history of development, where it portrays the entire sequence of earthly organisms as a process of evolution or adaptation, gradually configured but once in the course of time, for the repetition of which on some or other worldly body there is not only no guarantee but not even a probability, it is an idiographic, historical discipline. Anticipating the notion of the modern theory of the descent of man, Kant had already identified as the future ‘archeologists of nature’ those who would dare to embark on this ‘adventure of reason’.
If we ask how, among the various specific sciences, logical theory has performed thus far in the face of this decisive opposition, we encounter just that point at which the former remains today in need of modification. Its entire development shows the most exclusive preference for the nomothetic form of thought. To be sure, that is explainable. Since all scientific inquiry and proof proceeds in the form of concepts, questions of essence, justification and application of the general remain of first and foremost interest to logic.

In addition, there are the effects of the historical processes to consider. Greek philosophy grew out of natural science beginnings, out of the question of φύσις (physis), that is, of the enduring being within the change of appearances, and, following a course which even during the Renaissance did not dispense with causal mediation in favor of historical tradition, modern philosophy likewise has flourished hand in hand with natural science. So it could not have been otherwise but that logical reflection turned first of all to nomothetic ways of thinking and made its general theories ever dependent upon them. This continues to be the case. Our entirely traditional teaching about concept, judgment and conclusion is still patterned after that Aristotelian principle according to which the general thesis stands at the center of logical analysis. One has only to open any logic text to convince oneself that not only is the great majority of the examples chosen from the mathematical and natural sciences disciplines, but also that even those logicians who show themselves to be fully aware of the peculiar nature of historical inquiry still seek to orient their theories finally on the side of nomothetic thought. It would be desirable—but there are still very few treatments of the matter at hand—if logical reflection would do justice to the great historical reality which lies before us in historical thought itself at a level commensurate with how it has made comprehensible the forms of natural inquiry down to the finest details.

Meanwhile let us examine a bit more closely the relationship between nomothetic and idiographic knowledge. As said, the character of empirical science is common to the study of nature and of history, that is, both take as their points of departure—put logically, as premises of their proofs—empirical knowledge [Erfahrungen], facts of perception; and they also agree that neither in the study of nature nor in historical inquiry can one be content with what the naïve person customarily believes him/herself to experience. Both require for their foundation knowledge that has been critically analyzed and conceptually examined in a disciplined way. Just as it is true that in order to look through a microscope with discernment one must carefully educate one's senses to detect the subtle differences in the configuration of the next most closely related kinds of being, or to ascertain with confidence the simultaneity of the strike of a pendulum and the orientation of a needle,—so also does it require effort to learn how one determines the peculiarity of handwriting, or to observe the style of an author, or to grasp
the spiritual scope and domain of interest of an historical source. By nature
one does these latter things no more adequately than the former. And if the
tradition of scientific work in both directions has produced an abundance of
ever more refined constructs which the newcomer to the science appropriates
practically, so also is it the case that while each such special method is based
on objective insights which have already been won or at least hypothesized,
it is based as well on logical relationships that are often of a very entangled
kind. It is in turn to be noted here that, up to now, the interest of logic has
tended far more toward the nomothetic than toward the idiographic. We
have at hand detailed logical investigations of the methodological sig-
nificance of precision instruments, of the theory of experiments, of the
determination of probability based on repeated observations of the same
object, and of similar questions. But the parallel problems of historical
methodology have not at all found the same attention on the part of
philosophy. This has to do with the fact, as it is found in nature and as
history confirms, that philosophical and natural science talent and achieve-
ment coincide much more regularly than philosophical and historical. And
yet it would be of the greatest interest for the general theory of knowledge to
unveil the logical forms according to which the complement to the critique
of perception is drawn in historical inquiry, to formulate the ‘interpolative
maxims’ of hypotheses, and so also to determine here what portion of the
mutually supportive structures of world knowledge, in all its moments, is
constituted of the facts, on the one side, and of the general preconditions
according to which we interpret the facts, on the other side.

Yet here, all empirical sciences come finally to the last principle of all,
which consists of the non-contradictory agreement of all elements of thought
concerning the same object: the difference between the study of nature and
history begins where the concern is with the knowledge-appropriate utiliza-
tion of the facts. Thus we see: the one seeks laws, the other forms. In the
one, thought pushes from the identification of the particular to the grasping
of general relationships, in the other one remains with the painstaking
characterization of the particular. For the student of nature, the single, given
object of his observation never has scientific merit in itself; it serves him
only insofar as he considers himself justified in regarding it as a type, as a
special case of a categorial concept and to further develop the latter from it.
In this he reflects only on those features which lend insight into a lawful
generalization. For the historian, the task consists of bringing to life in an
imagined present some or other artifact of the past in its entirely individual
character. With respect to that which once really existed, the historian has a
task to fulfill similar to that of the artist with respect to that which is in his
creative ideas. This is the root of the relationship between a historical and an
aesthetic work, and between the historical disciplines and belles lettres.

From this it follows that the tendency toward abstraction dominates in the
thinking of natural science, while that toward concreteness [Anschaulichkeit]
dominates in history. This claim will surprise only one accustomed to limiting, in a materialistic way, the notion of concreteness to the psychic registration of the sensed present, and who has forgotten that concreteness, that is, individual aliveness of an imagined present, exists just as well for the eye of the mind as for that of the body. To be sure, the material conception is nowadays widespread, and this is something which merits our serious reflection. The more one is accustomed, in all instances where mental images are supposed to have been stimulated, to attribute them as much as possible to touching and seeing, the more it is that, through the excess of passive concreteness, the capability for spontaneous concreteness is exposed to the risk of atrophy through disuse, and then one wonders later if, in the absence of visual and kinesthetic stimulation, the sensory fantasy is rendered inert and dysfunctional. This holds for pedagogy as well as for art, and especially for drama, in which one presently devotes all effort to occupying one’s eyes, to such an extent that nothing remains for the inner vivification of the scripted forms.

But the fact that the strength of the study of nature lies on the side of abstraction and that of history on the side of concreteness is illuminated still further when one compares their research findings. However skillfully woven might be the conceptual work required of historical analysis during the processing of the material that has been passed down, its final goal is still ever that of working out with painstaking clarity, from the mass of the raw material, the true shape of the past, and what it delivers are portraits of humans and of human life with all of the richness of their unique forms, preserved in their fully individual vividness. Thus do past languages and past peoples, their beliefs and their forms, their struggles for power and freedom, their poetry and their thought, speak to us through the mouth of history, arisen from the forgotten to new life. How different is the world constructed for us by the study of nature! However concrete its point of departure might be, its knowledge goal is constituted of theories, ultimately mathematical formulations of the laws of movement: it leaves behind in disembodied appearances—truly Platonic—the isolated sense-thing which is here and gone, and strives toward knowledge of the lawful necessities which dominate all happenings in timeless unalterability. Out of the colorful world of the senses it prepares a system of constructed notions, in which it would grasp the true essence of things lying behind the appearances, a world of atoms, colorless and noiseless, lacking all earthly smell of sensual qualities,—the triumph of thought over perception. Indifferent to the past, it anchors itself in that which remains forever the same; it seeks not the changing as such, but rather the unchanging form of change.

But if the opposition between these two kinds of empirical sciences goes so deep, it becomes clear why the struggle between them for determinate influence on the overall human perspective on the world and on life must flare up and has flared up. It is to be asked: What is more valuable for the
overall goal of our knowledge, the knowledge of laws or that of events? The understanding of the general, timeless essence or of the isolated temporal occurrence? And it is clear from the start that this issue can be resolved only through a consideration of the ultimate goals of scientific work.

I touch here only in passing on the superficial judgment according to utility. In the face thereof, two lines of thinking are to be justified equally. The knowledge of general laws has everywhere the practical value of making possible the anticipation of future circumstances and the goal-appropriate intercession of the human in the course of things. That holds as well for the movements of the inner world as for those of the outer, material world; in the latter, after all, the knowledge acquired through nomothetic thought permits the production of those tools through which the dominance of the human over nature is extended in ever-increasing amount. But no less is all purposeful activity in communal human life dependent upon the experiences of historical knowledge. The human is, to employ a variant of an antique word, the animal which has a history. The human’s cultural life is an ever more condensed historical progression from generation to generation; one who would enter into this cultural life in living collaboration must have an understanding of its development. One who unravels from the thread—and this much history itself has proven—must subsequently and with effort be sought out and re-entwined. Should someone manage to shake contemporary culture in some or other fundamental way, whether it concern the outer configuration of our planets or the inner configuration of the human world, we may be sure that those who come later will dig further in that path just as zealously as we have dug further along the paths of our predecessors. For this reason alone humanity must carry its hefty bookbag, and if it threatens in the course of time to become ever heavier, neither will there lack, in the future, the means of lightening it prudently and without damage.

But the issue here is not one of utility: here we are concerned with the inner value of knowledge. To be sure, neither are we asking about the personal satisfaction which the investigator takes in his knowledge for its own sake. Because this enjoyment of finding out, of discovering and ascertaining, is ultimately present in the same ways in all knowledge. Its amount is determined much less by the meaning of the subject than by the difficulty of the investigation.

Without doubt, there are objective and yet purely theoretical differences in the knowledge value of subjects: but the amount is nothing but the degree to which they contribute to overall knowledge. The particular remains an object of mere curiosity if it cannot be made into a building block within a more general structure. In a scientific sense, therefore, a ‘fact’ is itself a teleological concept. Not any arbitrary reality is a fact for science, but rather only that from which—to put it briefly—science can learn something. The same
holds more than ever for history. Much happens that does not constitute historical fact. That in 1780 Goethe commissioned the manufacture of a house clock and a door key, as well as, on 22 February, a ticket box, is documented by an entirely authentic bill of sale that has been handed down over the years. It is thus enormously true—it happened—and yet it is not an historical fact, either for the history of literature or for a biography. But this raises the question as to whether it is always possible to decide from the beginning whether or not the particular that is given to observation or handed down over the years warrants regard as a ‘fact’. So science must, as did Goethe late in life, hoard, store away whatever it can get ahold of, happy in the thought of not neglecting what might eventually be of use, and in confidence that the work of coming generations, to the extent that it is not impeded by the external coincidences of transmission, will, like a great sieve, preserve what is useful and allow what is useless to be filtered out.

But now this essential goal of all particular knowledge, to be adapted to a great entirety, is in no way limited to the inductive classification of the particular under the concept of type, or under a general pronouncement. It is fulfilled just as well where the specific characteristic is ordered as a significant component of a living overall perspective. Every rigid adherence to the notion of type-likeness reflects the one-sidedness of Greek thought, propagated from the Eleatics to Plato, who, just as in the case of true being, also found true knowledge only in the general, and from him up to our days, where Schopenhauer has become a spokesperson for this prejudice in denying that history has the value of true science because it ever grasps only the particular and never the general. Of course it is correct that there is much that, at any given time, the human understanding is able to contemplate only by grasping the overall content of the scattered particulars: but the more one then strives for concept and law, the more one must one leave behind, forget and surrender the particulars as such. We see this where one tries in specifically modern ways ‘to make of history a natural science’, as the positivistic philosophy of history has suggested. In the face of such induction from laws, what finally remains of a nation’s folk life? There are a few trivial generalities, and even these are of dubious worth in the light of careful inquiry into their numerous exceptions.

In the face of this it must be firmly grasped that all interests and opinions, all value determinations of the human being, are based on the particular and the unique. Consider only how quickly our feeling is blunted as soon as an object is reproduced or is shown to be one case among thousands like it.

‘That is not the first’—it says in one of the harshest passages of Faust. All of our feelings of value are rooted in the uniqueness, the incomparability of the object. Spinoza’s thesis concerning the overcoming of emotions through knowledge is based on this, because, for him, knowledge is the submergence of the particular into the general, the one-time thing into the eternal.
But how all living appraisals humans make of the world hinge on the uniqueness of the object is proven more than anything else by our relationship to personalities. Is it not an unbearable thought, that a loved one, a revered being, would exist again in exactly the same way? Is it not unnerving, inconceivable, that a second instance of ourselves, with our individual uniqueness, should exist in reality? The imagination of a replica of ourselves—even separated by some great interval of time—that is dreadful, nightmarish. It has always been distressing to me that such a tasteful and sensitive people as the Greeks tolerated the notion, running throughout their entire philosophy, that all things periodically return, including the personality with all of its doings and sufferings. How terribly devalued is life if in just that way it should already have existed who knows how often, who knows how often it should be repeated again—how horrifying the thought that I as identity have already lived and suffered, strived and struggled, loved and hated, thought and intended, and that, when that Great Year of the World has run out and the time comes again, I should have to play the same role in the same theater over and over again. And what thus holds for the individual human life holds especially for the entirety of the historical process: it has value only if it is unique. This is the principle which the Christian philosophy proclaimed triumphantly in the patristic writings against Hellenism. From the very outset, the fall and the redemption of the human race as unique facts stood at the center of their world-view. That was the first great and strong sensing of the inalienable metaphysical right of historians to record for the memory of humanity the past in its unique, unrepeatable reality.

On the other hand, the idiographic sciences [Wissenschaften] require, at every step, general theses, which they can borrow in their fully correctly established form only from the nomothetic disciplines. Every causal explanation of some or other historical process requires general notions about how things take their course at all; and if one endeavors to formulate historical proof in its purely logical form, it always entails as its major premises natural laws of the event, and in particular of the mental processes [des seelischen Geschehens]. One who had no idea about how human beings think, feel and intend would scarcely come to knowledge of the facts by considering a collection of isolated happenings, for he would fail in the first instance to grasp critically those very facts. To be sure, it is quite remarkable in this connection how lenient the historical sciences are, strictly speaking, in their demands upon psychology. The notoriously extremely incomplete degree to which, up until now, the laws of psychological life have yielded to formulation has never stood in the way of historians: through common sense, discretion and ingenious intuition, they have known just enough to understand their heroes and their activities. That sets one to thinking, and makes it appear very doubtful that the recently envisioned mathematical,
natural-law conception of elementary psychological processes will deliver any noteworthy contribution to our understanding of real human life.

Despite such inadequacies of execution in isolated instances, it is clear from this that within the overall store of knowledge in which all scientific work finally should be united, these two moments remain alongside one another in their special methodological position: each general law-likeness of things contributes to the secure framework of our world picture, which, elevated above all change, expresses the eternally same essence of reality; and within this framework, we see unfolding the vital connectedness of all of the particular forms of the species’ notions of itself that have proven valuable to humanity.

These two moments of human knowledge cannot be traced back to a common source. Indeed, with its reduction to general laws, causal explanation of the particular happening leads to the notion that, in the last instance, it would have to be possible to understand, out of the general lawfulness of things, even the special configuration of actual occurrences. Thus was Leibniz of the view that, ultimately, all vérités de fait have their sufficient causes in the vérités éternelles. But he was able to postulate this only for the thinking of a Supreme Being, not as something to be achieved by human thought.

One can see this clearly through a simple logical scheme. Viewed causally, each case takes the form of a syllogism whose major premise is a natural law or, as the case may be, a number of lawful necessities, whose minor premise is a temporally given condition or set of such conditions, and whose conclusion is then the actual particular event. But just as, logically, the conclusion requires those two premises, so also does the event require two kinds of causes: on the one side the timeless necessity, in which the eternal essence of things is expressed; on the other side the particular conditions which surface at a particular moment in time. The cause of an explosion is, according to the one meaning—the nomothetic—in the nature of the explosive material, which we express as chemico-physical laws; according to the other meaning—the idiographic—it is a spark, a disturbance, or something of the sort. Only the two together cause and explain the event, but neither of the two is the consequence of the other; they are not in and of themselves bound to one another. Just as, in syllogistic subsumption, the inserted minor premise is not a consequence of the major premise, so is it the case that, in a given happening, the circumstance occurring in addition to the general essence of things is not to be derived from the latter itself. On the contrary, this condition, as something which is itself temporal, is in turn to be attributed to another temporally fixed condition from which the former follows according to causal necessity, and so on ad infinitum. The first verse of this endless sequence is not to be grasped conceptually; and even when one tries to imagine it, one discovers that any such initial condition is yet always something new, something which adds to the general
nature of things without following from it. Spinoza has expressed this through the differentiation of two causalities, the eternal and the finite, and with brilliant simplicity has thereby made unnecessary many considerations with which newer logicians have troubled themselves in connection with the ‘problem of the multiplicity of causes’. In the language of contemporary science it is said: out of the general laws of nature, the present state of the world follows only under the precondition of what has immediately preceded it, this in turn out of what has immediately preceded it, and so forth; but a certain determined state of atoms never follows from the general laws of movement themselves. There is no ‘world formula’ out of which the particularity of an isolated point in time can be developed: such a law would also have to cover the condition immediately preceding that isolated point in time.

Since there is, therefore, no established end in the general laws to which the causal chain of conditions can be traced back, all subsumption under those laws does not help us to analyze up to its ultimate grounding the single event given in time. There yet remains for us in all historical and individual experiences something left over that is ungraspable, inexpressible, indefinable. So, too, does the ultimate and innermost nature of personality withstand analytic decomposition by means of general categories, and this, uncertain, appears to our consciousness as the feeling of the causelessness of our nature, that is, individual freedom.

Many metaphysical concepts and problems surface at this point. However unfortunate the former and abortive the latter might be, the motive stands. The entirety of that which is given in time appears in non-deducible independence alongside the general lawfulness according to which the former is nevertheless carried through. The content of world happening is not to be understood in terms of its form. All attempts have failed to derive conceptually the ‘many’ out of the ‘one’, the ‘finite’ out of the ‘infinite’, ‘existence’ out of ‘essence’. This is a breach which the great systems of philosophical world explanation have only been able to cover over but not to fill in.

Leibniz saw this as he attributed the origin of the vérités éternelles to godly understanding and the vérités de fait to their godly willing. Kant saw this as he found, in the auspicious but unfathomable fact that everything given in perception is subsumed under the forms of the intellect and thereby ordered and understood, a hint of interconnected, godly purposes extending far above our theoretical knowledge.

In fact, thought cannot further unlock these questions. Philosophy is able to designate the point to which the power of knowledge of the single disciplines reaches; but beyond this, philosophy itself can achieve no further objective insight. The law and the event remain to exist alongside one another as the final, incommensurable forms of our notions about the world.
Here is a frontier point at which scientific thought can do nothing more than identify the tasks and formulate the questions, in full awareness that it will never be in the position to solve them.

Translated from the German by James T. Lamiehl