Wilhelm Dilthey and the German Enlightenment

(De Leibniz a Goethe (From Leibniz to Goethe), Fondo de Cultura Económica, México, D.F., 1945, 402 pp.)

A note concerning this edition:

The original German edition of De Leibniz a Goethe was originally published in 1914. Subsequent editions appeared in 1924, 1927 and 1933. The Spanish translation was published in Mexico City in 1945. No translation is available, as far as I know, in English or French.

The history of the Spanish translation offers an interesting comment on the history of ideas in the XXth century. In the late XIXth century, there was a powerful rebirth of Hispanic thought and culture. The so-called "generation of 1898" made a searching analysis of the basic elements of Spanish civilization. It was a pitiless process of self-criticism, and the thesis was upheld that Spain needed new intellectual contacts with the outside world. Under the leadership of an eminent Spanish educator, Don Francisco Giner de los Ríos, a number of brilliant students were sent to France, England and Germany to become acquainted with the main trends of thought of the times. Some of these students, like José Ortega y Gasset, later distinguished themselves as the leaders of XXth century Spain.

Ortega received most of his philosophic and historical training in Germany. Upon his return to Spain, he founded the Revista de Occidente - a publication truly European in its outlook and wide range of subject matter. In the Revista, the leading English, French and German writers of the day were introduced to the Spanish-speaking world. Ortega himself was one of the first outside Germany to call attention to the historical significance of Dilthey's works in an
essay entitled "Wilhelm Dilthey y la Idea de la Vida" which appeared in the Revista in 1933 and has since been published in an English translation in Ortega's, Concord and Liberty, New York, 1946.

The Revista stopped as a publishing venture in 1936. The Spanish Civil War and the triumph of Spanish fascism brought about the dispersal of the liberal intellectuals who had made the Revista possible. Many of them went to Mexico City and were brought together in another significant publishing venture: the Fondo de Cultura Económica. The Fondo added to the German and English writers already known in Spain the names of leading American scholars. This interaction of intellectual currents has led to the translation of the collected works of Wilhelm Dilthey in eight volumes. De Leibniz a Goethe is the third volume of the series and is followed by another volume containing essays on Lessing, Goethe, Novalis and Hoelderlin.

Dilthey and Cultural History

In order to understand the Diltheyan interpretation of the German Enlightenment, it is necessary to have a general idea of the author's approach to the aims and methods of cultural history. A possible key may be found in the first volume of the series, Introducción a las Ciencias del Espíritu (Introduction to the Sciences of Man), in which the elements of Dilthey's theory of history are first clearly formulated.

Wilhelm Dilthey was among the first to react against the arbitrary subordination of history to the methodology and purposes of the natural sciences, as witnessed in Comte's positivism. He also desired to avoid the Hegelian viewpoint in which historical facts were made the instruments of his peculiar interpretation of history as the realization of the world-spirit.
Dilthey was essentially concerned with historical reality as the point of departure of all speculations as to the nature and meaning of life. From the German philosopher Kant, he derived the notion of the two worlds: the world of phenomena, described by natural science and the object of pure reason; and the world of the noumena, of the thing-in-itself, accessible only to the practical reason. As a student of Goethe, he was imbued with the idea that there are depths in the human soul to which pure reason can never penetrate. What was then the position of the sciences of man in this scheme? To apply to them the methods of the natural sciences was a mistake, for the nature of man was different from the nature of the physical world. Such, however, was the mistake of positivism. Faced with this dilemma, Dilthey drew a boundary line between the sciences of nature and the sciences of man. Knowledge of the physical world was dependent on the methods and observations of the natural sciences as developed from Galileo to the present. Knowledge of the human world was dependent fundamentally on historical knowledge. History became, therefore, the clue to the sciences of man. If according to Kant, pure reason was the medium through which man could know the physical world and practical reason was the organon through which he could reach the elusive world of the noumena, Dilthey thought that historical reason was the instrument through which man could know the human world: the world of culture.

In knowing this world of culture, man learns how to know himself. The study of history is, therefore, a process of self-knowledge, of autognosis. It touches upon the realm of psychology, but a psychology rooted in the thoughts and deeds of man throughout the ages. Rather than an abstract or "natural" psychology, it is based on the empirical data of historical events. The net result of Dilthey's position is that abstractions are ruled out in interpreting human nature. There is
not an abstract law, nor an abstract philosophy, nor, as a matter of fact, an unchanging human nature. As Ortega y Gasset has stated in a further development of this idea: "Man has no "nature"; he has history. His being is not one but many and manifold, different in each time and place. To have been aware of this and to have been engrossed in the kaleidoscopic spectacle of history, describing its untold patterns and observing its exclusive and stubborn peculiarities, is the achievement of the historical school." (J. Ortega y Gasset, *Concord and Freedom*, New York, 1946, p.148). What Dilthey did was to strengthen the principle of relativism in the study of history, a principle which has been further developed in our century, both in its theoretical and its practical aspects, by the Italian philosopher and historian, Benedetto Croce. Leopold Ranke, the German historian, had stated that each historical period has a value of its own. Dilthey carried this notion further and insisted that it has a meaning, an inner-connection, which is represented by its world-view its "weltanschaung". The study of the successive world-views is the study of the unfolding of western culture, in which according to Dilthey three leit-motifs are present and closely interwoven: the scientific and aesthetic thought of the Greeks, the Roman will to power, and oriental mysticism. Now let us turn to a typical Diltheyan application of these ideas in his analysis of the German Enlightenment.

The German Enlightenment:

The series of studies included in *De Leibniz a Goethe* represent an effort to trace the development of German culture from the end of the seventeenth to the end of the eighteenth centuries. They are an integral part of a very ambitious scheme: the analysis of the evolution of German ideals since the Reformation to Dilthey's own times. They may
be called a study of the German Paideia—a term now made familiar among cultural historians by the excellent book of Warner Jaeger on the Greeks.

Leibniz and his times are the starting point of Dilthey's analysis. Leibniz—one must remember—came after the Thirty Years' War which left Central Europe divided and desolate. It was through him that the spirit of rationalism finally flourished in Germany. As Dilthey points out, he was the most universally-minded German before Goethe. His problem was how to reconcile the new mechanistic interpretation of nature with traditional religion. He worked for a united front of all Christians and attempted almost single-handed to undo the disruptive work of the Reformation. And yet, he was also a firm believer in science and laid the groundwork for the theory of progress. His formative influences were mainly French; he was against German particularism and believed in the need for a truly cosmopolitan culture which should spread around the world, based on the enlightened concepts of modern science. He brought the new ideas to Germany and was instrumental in guiding German thought through the early years of the Enlightenment.

If Leibniz succeeded as the organizer of the German Aufklärung, it was because of certain social and political conditions in the Germanies. In his essay on the new secular culture, Dilthey draws a picture of the Germanies after the Thirty Years' War. He brings forth as an outstanding trait the decay of the political influence of the emperor and the cities at the expense of the princes. The treaties of Westphalia marked the triumph of German particularism and princely power. Each prince became then an imitator of the powerful kings of
Western Europe and surrounded himself with a small court. One of these states became the embodiment of the political doctrines of the German Enlightenment: Prussia under Frederick the Great.

Frederick is, indeed, the key to the Diltheyan interpretation of Germany in the eighteenth century. He sees in the Prussian king the architect of the new Germany—a proteic personality, dominated by a stern conception of public duty and the consciousness of his high mission as a king. The collection of essays on Frederick the Great and the German Enlightenment is the most solid contribution of this book to German cultural history. Here we find at its best the technique of determining the world-view of a period and its relationship with the thoughts and deeds of a great historical figure. The analysis of the political thinking of Frederick the Great is preceded by a study of the development of the French Enlightenment, which so deeply influenced Frederick's policies and ideas. Dilthey stresses the fact that while the seventeenth century gave freedom to the spirit of scientific inquiry, the eighteenth made reason the judge of all existing social institutions. In literature and in the arts, the new idea of man was readily expressed, and the writer became a most important force in the shaping of the new society.

As a child of the Enlightenment, Frederick cultivated the arts and letters of the period and had an unbounded admiration for all things French. Racine was his favorite author and the story goes that he used to recite the poems of this poet of the classical age while leading his troops into battle. Dilthey is quick to observe that the king felt much more at home with the cohort of French writers whom he invited to Sans Souci than with the German writers of his day. He could not understand the new trends in German literature and was highly critical of them in his late years. "He had
become", Dilthey states—"as old as his Voltaire and was amazed to see that the new generation turned to new masters. But it also expressed the clash between the French and the German spirit." (page 121).

The alliance between Frederick and the new Germany came after the Seven Years' War when the king sought refuge in a moral idealism, tempered with a deep religious feeling. It was then that he saw most clearly his kingly duties as the embodiment of the national will. His theory of the state became purely machiavellian. The interests of the state must be supreme, even if at the expense of the king's word. To him Prussia was the historical nerve of German life, the state that led the way and set the example. Dilthey, writing at the end of the last century when German power was at its zenith, could hardly foresee the pitfalls that lay ahead for his country. He thought that Frederick's heritage should always nurture "the historic and political intelligence of Germany". But even his acute mind could not rid itself of certain nationalistic prejudices and he praised equally the cosmopolitan outlook of the enlightened Frederick and the narrow patriotism of the warrior. The first tradition led to Goethe and the hey-day of German culture; the second to Treitschke, Bismarck and the dark Germany of Adolphe Hitler.