

ARTICLE

THE CONCEPT OF  
INDIVIDUALITY IN  
*Friedrich Meinecke's*  
*Early Work*

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This article investigates the centrality of the concept of individuality in the young Friedrich Meinecke's theory of history, positing it as a fundamental element shaping Meinecke's historical conception. To elucidate this position, an analysis is conducted to discern the significance attributed to the *principium individuationis* at two critical junctures in Meinecke's early intellectual development: firstly, in his response to the positivist assault on the German historical school, and secondly, in his endeavor to reconceptualize the underpinnings of a revitalized history of ideas between the late 1800s and the initial decade of the twentieth century. By expounding upon these aspects and contextualizing the intellectual evolution in which these ideas emerged, it is argued that the concept of individuality functioned as a theoretical refuge against what Meinecke perceived as the doctrinaire nature of worldviews incompatible with notions of freedom and spontaneity — principles he considered intrinsic to the historical mode of thought.

*Friedrich Meinecke—individuality—history of ideas*

*This work was carried out with the financial support of Fundação de Amparo à Pesquisa e Inovação do Espírito Santo (FAPES). Grant Agreements 553/2023 and 988/2023. All translations provided are authored by the author of this article.*

ARTIGO

O CONCEITO DE  
INDIVIDUALIDADE NO  
*Trabalho do Jovem*  
*Friedrich Meinecke*

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Este artigo investiga a centralidade do conceito de individualidade na teoria da história do jovem Friedrich Meinecke, posicionando-o como um elemento fundamental que molda a concepção de história desse intelectual alemão. Para elucidar essa posição, o texto trata da importância atribuída ao *principium individuationis* em dois momentos críticos no desenvolvimento intelectual do jovem Meinecke: primeiro, em sua resposta ao ataque positivista à escola histórica alemã, e segundo, em seu esforço para repensar, entre o final do século XIX e a primeira década do século XX, os fundamentos de uma história das ideias teoricamente renovada. Ao expor esses elementos e contextualizar a evolução intelectual em que essas ideias surgiram, o artigo sustenta que o conceito de individualidade funcionou como um refúgio teórico contra o que Meinecke percebia como a natureza doutrinária de perspectivas incompatíveis com as noções de liberdade e espontaneidade, princípios que ele considerava intrínsecos à forma moderna de pensamento histórico.

*Friedrich Meinecke—individualidade—história das ideias*

## INTRODUCTION

“A *Kampfbegriff* (a “Fighting concept”).” This was the term recently chosen by the Dutch historians Herman Paul and Adriaan van Veldhuizen to refer to historicism, a complex and polysemic term notable for its varying definitions and for travelling “across different disciplinary divides as well as through time and space” (Paul; Veldhuizen 2021, 1). Although seemingly exaggerated at first glance, Paul and Veldhuizen’s definition appears rather apt, especially when considering not only the diverse controversies surrounding the usage of the concept of historicism in the last century but also the varied debates its application continues to provoke in contemporary historiography.<sup>1</sup>

However, despite being broad and multifaceted, it is possible to identify some commonalities in these controversies involving the concept of historicism. One of them, undoubtedly, is the position that German historian Friedrich Meinecke (1862-1954) has occupied in such disputes. Meinecke’s work often serves as a kind of initial reference for debates surrounding the theme. Consequently, historians frequently invoke his name when seeking to grasp historicism as an intellectual phenomenon of the 19th and 20th centuries and to explore the possibilities of the concept in addressing contemporary challenges within historical thought.

Even though occupying a fixed seat in these debates, references to Meinecke’s work have often been accompanied by a wide array of misunderstandings and simplifications. Whether due to the numerous controversies surrounding the interpretation of his work in the post-Second World War years<sup>2</sup> or the recurrence of fragmented and less meticulous approaches regarding the complexity of his extensive academic trajectory,<sup>3</sup> Meinecke’s body of work has received a level of attention inversely proportional to the frequency with which his name is superficially cited as a reference regarding the topic of historicism.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Notable discussions regarding attempts to reexamine the controversial potentialities of historicism include the debates involving Georg Iggers (1995) and Frank Ankersmit (1995). Moreover, Otto Gerhard Oexle’s contributions (2007) hold significant relevance in the German-speaking academic sphere. In addition, a recent collaboration between Thiago Nicodemo and me resulted in the publication of an article offering a short overview of historicism debates in Latin America, titled “Sentido e historicidade nos trópicos: Sérgio Buarque de Holanda e as aporias do historicismo” (2023).

<sup>2</sup> In the years following Meinecke’s death in West Germany, his work, previously regarded as canonical, began to face severe criticism from those advocating the revision of the more traditional tenets of German historiography. Meinecke’s name became synonymous with what was seen as historicism’s theoretical archaism, and historians like Imanuel Geiss advocated for a necessary “dismantling of the Meinecke monument” as a prerequisite for the intellectual maturation of German historical science (Geiss 1972, 91). Representatives of Historical Social Science also echoed this sentiment, so when Wolfgang Mommsen spoke of a necessary historiography “beyond historicism,” he envisioned moving beyond Meinecke’s conception of historicism (Mommsen 1971, 6).

<sup>3</sup> Works such as those by Frederick Kreiling (1959), Georg Iggers [1968] (2014), and Robert Pois (1972) are examples of books that, from a somewhat hasty perspective, criticized Meinecke’s positions based on what they claimed to be the cult of “irrationalism” in the historicist worldview of this historian.

<sup>4</sup> In the 1990s, Stefan Meineke (1995) contributed significantly to deconstructing the myth of Meinecke’s “irrationalism” by investigating his early political thought. However, only in the last few decades did other relevant attempts at approaching Meinecke’s oeuvre in a complex manner emerge again. In this regard, the books by Gisela Bock and Daniel Schönplüg (2006), Gerhard A. Ritter (2010), and Wolfgang Kämmerer (2014) are worth mentioning. Finally,

Often mentioned in passing in most of these readings, Meinecke's well-known definition of historicism exemplifies this evident need for more careful engagement with his work as a historian. An intellectual output of his later years and the result of theoretical meditations gestating for more than five decades, Meinecke's definition of historicism—as “one of the greatest intellectual revolutions ever experienced by Western thought” (Meinecke 1972, LIV)—presented in his work *Die Entstehung des Historismus* (The Genesis of Historicism) (1936), has often been read in isolation from the early years of his career and, above all, disregarding one of the most important elements in this historian's theory of history: the concept of individuality.

A central characteristic of the German tradition of historical thought since at least the mid-18th century, the concept of individuality should be regarded as one of the defining elements of Meinecke's conception of history and a fundamental aspect for a more detailed understanding of his theory of history and his latter conceptualization of historicism. Likewise, the historian developed this aspect of his work in the early years of his career, thus it cannot be simply identified as a late product of his academic trajectory.

Since these issues have been relatively underexplored in English-language historiography, this article aims to shed new light on these elements. Thus, it seeks to illuminate the role played by the *principium individuationis* in two crucial moments of Meinecke's early intellectual trajectory: first, in his response to the incursions of positivist thought on the German historical school (with a special focus on his involvement in the so-called *Lamprechtstreit*), and second, in his endeavor to reformulate the theoretical foundations of a renewed history of ideas between the late 1800s and the first decade of the 20th century.

By elucidating these aspects and the contextual backdrop in which such intellectual developments emerged, the article argues the hypothesis that the principle of individuality served as a theoretical refuge against what Meinecke perceived, from the early phase of his career, as the dogmatism of worldviews devoid of the freedom and spontaneity inherent in historical thinking. However, a thorough understanding of this hypothesis can only arise from a prior comprehension of the significance of this core concept within the German tradition of historical thought. Hence, my first topic aims to elucidate the meaning of the concept of individuality within the history of modern historiography in Germany.

## THE PRINCIPLE OF INDIVIDUALITY IN THE GERMAN TRADITION OF HISTORICAL THOUGHT

As long acknowledged by authors like Ernst Schulin, a fundamental guide in Meinecke's thought is primarily based on the concept of individuality and its ontological and epistemological implications (Schulin 1963, 106). In it, the historian found the beginning and the end of the answers that would lead him beyond the dilemmas experienced by his thinking since the late 19th century. However, what is the elementary meaning of this concept, and what are the outlines it possessed before unfolding in the thought of the author of *Die Entstehung des Historismus*?

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Reinbert Krol has recently offered one of the most complete analyses of the antithetical nature of Meinecke's thinking in *Germany's Conscience* (2021).

Initially, it is possible to infer that the principle of individuality held multiple meanings in the German tradition of historical thought, varying according to the moment and the intellectual context of its expression. Its general significance, however, lies in the notion that the primary concern of history, and the goal of its inquiry, is the individual—that is, a particular person, action, culture, or period existing in a specific time or place. This principle traces back to Plato and Aristotle; however, modern German historians and intellectuals have ascribed a new meaning and new possibilities of application to it. In contrast to their classical predecessors, figures like Herder, Humboldt, and Ranke insisted that the individuality of things — what sets them apart from others — constitutes the primary object of scientific inquiry. Nevertheless, this did not deter them from associating this principle with universal precepts, generalizations, or laws that would flow independently of individual differences among the objects addressed by the historian (Hinchman 1990; Beiser 2011, 4; Morgner *et al.* 2023).

What gave meaning to this relationship between the individual and the universal was primarily a holistic worldview capable of providing coherence between the parts and the whole within the realm of historical reality. From Herder to Meinecke, the German tradition of historical thought insisted that the individual human being was not self-sufficient, representing an independent unit of life, but rather a dependent entity in terms of identity and existence based on their place in a broader social, historical, and cultural world. As affirmed by Meinecke, although tracing its roots to Antiquity, this principle of individuality gained significant momentum, particularly in the Neoplatonic thought of Leibniz and his monadological doctrine developed between the 17th and 18th centuries (Meinecke 1972, 18).

According to Leibniz, for each individual thing, a notion or idea — their *principium individuationis* — would render this individuality precise and distinct. This notion or idea was inherent to the thing itself, although initially only potential or rudimentary. The purpose of the individual thing was to actualize this notion or idea, meaning to make the potential real, the implicit explicit, and the rudimentary clear. This premise was made possible through Leibniz’s notion of plenitude, in which “all things would exist if it were possible for them” (Leibniz 1923, 474). Furthermore, the moral and political implications of the idea of perfection — the most excellent possible variety, in which the best is the existence of the most significant number of individuals — advocated by Leibniz pointed to the necessity of preserving individual things for their own sake. This understanding helps us grasp the ethical significance that the notion of individuality would have for subsequent German historical thought.

Later in the 18th century, influenced by anthropology and the newly established discipline of aesthetics, Herder conceptualized the notion of individuality in an even more direct manner. Striving to comprehend the cultural significance of language and poetry, the philosopher concluded that the most suitable way to access the meaning of human affairs was by examining what they possess as singular, i.e., their individuality.

In opposition to Kant’s pure reason and the universal claim of the Enlightenment perspective, Herder argued that an internal understanding of artistic and linguistic expressions of individuals was the most profound way to grasp their contours and preserve the diversity existing in the cultural world (Herder 2002, 106). In the latter half of his life, Herder expanded this aesthetic-anthropological conception of individuality to comprehend cultures and nations

in a broader sense. Nations, their languages, and cultural products evolved from what was unique, inimitable, and individual about them (Herder 1995, 43). Similarly, the most suitable path to understanding these historical individualities involved a sensitive form of individualization of human achievements within the history of humanity:

The more life and reality, that is, the more understanding, energy, and perfection a being on its way to completeness possesses, feeling like part of something, being intimately and completely related in this logic, the more it becomes itself, an individual (Herder, 1828, 274).

The markedly religious character inherent in this principle in Herder would manifest even more explicitly in the thought of some direct heirs of his legacy as a philosopher of history. In Wilhelm von Humboldt, for example, historical individualities were directly linked to ideas representing the elementary principle from which historians could comprehend their objects in the past, for: “the individual is an idea represented in reality, a physical vitality renewed in the effort of every moment, the idea of the organism, the moral effort of the peculiar spiritual character to obtain validity in reality” (Humboldt 1904, 198).

While manifesting in reality and functioning as an epistemological premise capable of connecting the cognizant subject to past events, these ideas also pointed to the limits of human knowledge. They had a divine origin that could not be fully known or accessed by historians: “As the mystery of all existence lies in individuality, all progress in the world history of humanity is based on the degree of freedom and singularity of their reciprocal effects” (Humboldt 2010, 96). Therefore, the individual in Humboldt, in its relationship with the theory of ideas, represented both a rich gateway and an elemental marker existing in historical reality and the historians’ potential access to the historical world.

This kind of relationship between ideas, the divine, and the notion of individuality was also present in the historical thought of Leopold von Ranke. According to the father of modern German historical science, ideas represented individualities that had their origin in God, and the primary task of the historian was to apprehend their manifestation at different moments in the past (Ranke 2011, 4). In contrast to Hegelian philosophy, Ranke emphasized the importance of preserving the mysterious and enigmatic character of universal history, comprehensible in its complete form only to divine omniscience: “Only God knows the whole of universal history” (Ranke 2010, 212).

Therefore, in advocating for an individualizing perspective in dealing with the past, Ranke stressed the need to preserve the freedom of individual actors and the historians’ capacity to represent the objects of history. Moreover, for the German historian, the most perfectly developed individualities were represented by the States, true “thoughts of God,” whose struggle for hegemony and political legitimacy constituted the elemental core of universal history: “One can observe how these forces appear in their distinctive identity, confront, and struggle with each other; the events and destinies that dominate the world take place in this opposition” (Ranke 1875, VII-VIII).

To inductively grasp the course of these individualities was the primary task of historical writing, a feat that, for both Ranke and Humboldt, was always carried out by historians in a fragmented and incomplete manner. As extensively emphasized by specialized historiography, this emphasis on the individual character of the State, culture, and nationality was a cornerstone upon which

subsequent generations of historians would build the German national myth and a significant portion of the moral values upheld by the bourgeois class of the 19th century and the early part of the 20th century within that historical culture.<sup>5</sup>

In addition to being a source of identity formation and the construction of ethical-political precepts, the concept of individuality equally represented a defense of the inherently fragmented, imperfect, and inconclusive nature of human knowledge. While acknowledging the mystery inherent in history and recognizing the epistemological limits of scientific knowledge, the historicist emphasis on individuality ensured that the world remained in a constant process of transformation, stimulated by inventiveness and the creativity of thought that universalist and rationalist perceptions of reality could not provide.

Aware of the importance of these principles, Meinecke's intellectual career constituted a constant struggle to preserve the foundations of an individual historical consciousness capable of placing him beyond the atmosphere of crisis that would gradually haunt the thinking and practical lives of a portion of his contemporaries. The meaning and the distinct phases experienced by this intellectual effort in the initial decades of the historian's work will be the focus of this article in the following pages.

## MEINECKE AND THE DEFENSE OF FREE WILL IN HISTORY

Contrary to the simplistic view of Meinecke's work as representing a naive and theoretically unreflected conception of history, many experts have pointed to the complexity of the historical perspective of one of the most significant German historians of the first half of the 20th century. Numerous works attest that from early in his career, Meinecke was concerned with the issues of German historical science and the need to answer the philosophical aporias imposed upon it in the late 19th century.

Since his student days, when he attended lectures by Johann Gustav Droysen at the University of Berlin, Meinecke began to pay attention to the debates advocated by his professor in defense of the autonomy and epistemological specificity of the historical knowledge. Droysen's classes and theoretical work significantly influenced the positions Meinecke later espoused.

One of the main battlegrounds faced by Droysen during his years in Berlin was the increasingly frequent attempt to safeguard the methodology of historical science concerning that of the natural sciences. The well-known problem identified in Wilhelm Dilthey's *Introduction to the Human Sciences* (1883)<sup>6</sup> — that is, the differentiation between the methods of the humanities and natural sciences — had already been debated by Droysen more than two decades before

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<sup>5</sup> Georg Iggers' [1968] (2014) contributions to this topic are undoubtedly the most well-known. However, several other essential books emerged in the last few decades dealing with the relationship between historical writing and the building of the national identity of Germany's bourgeoisie. For example, the books by Friedrich Jaeger (1994) and Stefan Berger (1997) are worth mentioning.

<sup>6</sup> The hermeneutic position of Dilthey presented in this work is undoubtedly the most critical defense of the autonomy of the human sciences in the face of the natural sciences in Germany at the end of the 19th century. In the early 20th century, Dilthey further developed his position on the autonomy of the human sciences in an even more complex manner (based on the relationship between lived experience and understanding) in *The Formation of the Historical World in the Human Sciences* (1910). For an introduction to Dilthey's work, see Eric S. Nelson (2019).

in his critique of the book *History of Civilization in England* (1858) by the English historian Henry Thomas Buckle.

In his review of the work, published in 1863, Droysen opposed Buckle's attempt to understand history as derived from general laws that the historian could apprehend precisely (Stern 1970, 121). Droysen's main argument against Buckle's positivist approach to history was based on what he saw as the English author's misunderstanding of the limits of his proposal in the face of the constantly "mutable and inconstant nature of historical life" (Droysen 1863, 17). By proposing general laws to fully grasp the meaning of human actions in the past, Buckle overlooked that history primarily consisted of individual historical phenomena, with all the unpredictability and freedom inherent in the will of historical actors.

Defending the hermeneutic method as opposed to Buckle's quantitative explanation, Droysen believed he could safeguard the foundations for an independent historical epistemology while preserving the autonomy, freedom, and individuality of both the agents of the past and the historian.

Meinecke recounts in his memoirs that this aspect of Droysen's thought caught his attention the most during the lectures given by the historian in the winter of 1882 at the University of Berlin. Against the totalizing view of positivist science, in his lectures on methodology, Droysen clarified the mysterious and never-exhaustible nature of individual historical phenomena:

Once, while discussing the core of the personality inherent in Raphael's *Sistine Madonna*, he showed how this phenomenon was immune to critical manipulations and inexplicable through tradition or any empirical borrowings. He aimed to clarify how the mystery of personality lies at the foundation of all historical acts and impulses (Meinecke 1941, 87).

Furthermore, Droysen's methodological caveats regarding the fragmentary essence of historical research led him to emphasize the importance of interpretation and the responsibility of historians themselves in the process of reconstructing aspects of the past:

There is a gap as vast as the heavens between history itself and our knowledge of it; we possess only a fragmented view of what happened. Yet, we can console ourselves with grasping the development of human thought even in the incompleteness of this material (Meinecke 1941, 87-88).

Droysen's drive to safeguard the tradition of German historical thinking against the attacks of positivism substantially impacted Meinecke during his student years. This influence increased as he sought his path amid the growing discussions about the meaning and configurations of historical knowledge. However, if "the idea of an individualized creative spirit among the great manifestations of history and human life" was still marginal among his various intellectual influences at that time (Meinecke 1941, 119), the encounter with Dilthey's work would be the necessary complement for the young historian to embark on his own struggle against the problems faced by historical thought by that period.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Although Dilthey was in Berlin at the time and had even been one of the evaluators of Meinecke's doctoral dissertation, the young historian would not attend the philosopher's lectures. Years later, Meinecke would characterize this choice as "one of the biggest mistakes" of his student years (Meinecke 1941, 119).



The combination of insights from Droysen and Dilthey regarding the meaning of historical knowledge was the necessary ingredient for the definitive overcoming of the crisis caused by abandoning the religious dogmatism of his family during his adolescence.<sup>8</sup> Meinecke knew, in reality, that returning to the “easy answers” of the Christian dogma of the past did not suffice to maintain the relevance of studying the past, nor could it safeguard a post-dogmatic meaning for his own life and career as a historian.

Therefore, he dedicated himself to reading the primary debates surrounding the intellectual paradoxes of the period, aiming to produce his own reflections on the problems and virtues of modern historical knowledge. From these meditations emerged the article *Willensfreiheit und Geschichtswissenschaft* (“Free Will and Historical Science”) (1886), the product of his university philosophical examination, which would be published a year later in the newspaper *Sonntagsbeilage*. Besides being one of his earliest publications as a historian, the text sought to find a solution to the highly debated issue of distinguishing between the methods of the humanities and natural sciences and their implications for historical science (Kessel 1959, XIV).

Meinecke began his reflection by discussing the significance of Charles Darwin’s revelations in the field of natural sciences, particularly concerning the discovery of specific laws of development inherent in the natural world. The excitement surrounding the work of the British naturalist led to a wave of speculations about the validity of his theory and even about the extension of evolutionism to the realm of humanities. After all, could studying human societies reveal the existence of laws governing the past and the subsequent development of historical life?

To address this question, Meinecke embarked on a journey filled with references to the most recent debates on the subject, focusing mainly on the works of Droysen and Dilthey. The aim was to craft a genuine manifesto defending free will and aesthetic sensitivity — against the dominance of technique — in the historian’s craft. While not denying the importance of considering the broad causal connections (the “ideas of an era”) capable of influencing the course of individuals and historical periods, Meinecke asserted that these could not exhaust the mysterious and inexplicable element present in specific historical phenomena: “The difficulty begins with whether, beyond this sum of conditions that influence our actions, there exists a tiny and truly spontaneous “x” of personality capable of directing our actions” (Meinecke 1959, 8).

The reference to Droysen’s little “x” was accompanied by his criticism regarding the positivist claim for an absolute ideal of objectivity comparable to the statistical method of the exact sciences. As much as it was able to scrutinize and quantify elements of reality, statistics would never be able to grasp subjective elements related to the ethical and moral realm, always present and manifested in individual phenomena: “In this regard, the arsenal of statistics will always remain obtuse and imperfect” (Meinecke 1959, 10).

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<sup>8</sup> Meinecke remarked that the trauma of abandoning his family’s Christian orthodoxy had not ceased even at the end of his university studies. He continually questioned whether a return to the religious dogmatism of the past might be the most prudent option: “You shouldn’t, I asked myself during the nights, ‘change, study theology, and become a priest?’” (Meinecke 1941, 129).

The naive belief in shared objectivity held by proponents of materialism and positivism was only possible because they believed it was feasible to establish a complete causal connection that could set limits on time and space within the universal domain of history. However, Meinecke reiterated that such an absolute historical claim would only lead to unsolvable paradoxes from a logical standpoint. The quest to trace the origins of phenomena back to an ultimate source, based on a “last source for all things,” inevitably led to an impossible task of establishing an inexorable sense of both the roots and the destiny of historical progress: “I cannot conceive that a cause does not have a previous cause; there must be a cause for another cause to exist and so on *ad infinitum*” (Meinecke 1959, 12).

Without a total causal nexus and neither an absolute a priori meaning for history, what would remain as a reference for action and human understanding of reality? Meinecke's answer aligned with that of his professors, particularly concerning the confidence that many German historians nourished vis-à-vis the possibilities of the ‘ethical consciousness’ (*das sittliche Bewusstsein*) inherent to all historical subjects:

The opinion that we are responsible for our actions is not a conviction based on reason; it is not simply deduced and logically proven but is given and has power over us. After we conclude that we must preserve the soul's life from becoming a closed mechanism, we are capable of projecting with this inner feeling the fortitude that keeps us above disorder (Meinecke 1959, 13).

Despite being shared by all individuals, this tendency to act according to an individual ethic presupposes understanding and free will, the true foundations of human relationships, and the development of the “ethical forces” that constitute universal history. However, Meinecke was emphatic in stating that, even producing causal connections and directions for history, these subjective exchanges characteristic of human understanding would never be entirely discernible and would only partially impose themselves on the enigma of individual free will. Ultimately, this was an “unsolvable” mystery (Meinecke 1959, 17), impossible to resolve through general laws or by seeking psychological patterns in human behavior.

Far from scientific precision and the possibility of relating general causes to individual freedom, historical science found itself in a paradoxical situation. However, even acknowledging these difficulties, Meinecke did not show any signs of distress in his text since, like Droysen and Dilthey, he believed in a path that could provide a satisfactory solution to the dilemmas of historical life: understanding (*Verstehen*).

Even though constrained by the drawback of examining distant and fragmented objects, historical science had the advantage of dealing primarily with flesh-and-blood people who, ultimately, shared the same ethos as the historians themselves:

For the historian, however, his object is made of the flesh of his flesh, being homogeneous to him, enabling him to move into the personalities whose demands and sufferings are explored by him, capable of being felt and shared by him — capable of being understood by him (Meinecke 1959, 25).

Precisely because it is a fundamental constituent of human reality, historical understanding was much more apt than any general methods to grasp the subjective elements present in historical life: “It is impossible to break down this act in logical terms, precisely because the apparatus of the principle of reason is not sufficient to contemplate it” (Meinecke 1959, 26).

Therefore, Meinecke concluded that besides not being possible to establish laws capable of grasping and determining any historical course, this was a harmful intellectual attitude in the face of the free, spontaneous, and creative nature of objects and the development of human history itself. Focusing on the individual and striving to preserve the essence of free will was the most prudent attitude of historians concerned with safeguarding not only the independence of their discipline but also the possibility of taking an affirmative stance towards life.

This conclusion implied the need to recognize that historical knowledge has closer roots to “poetry and art” than sterile forms of understanding the past (Meinecke 1959, 28). Therefore, freedom and spontaneity of thought should prevail over the dogma characteristic of specific trends of modern thought. Thus, reaffirming this distinction and embracing the inventiveness inherent in the comprehensive method and the notion of individuality was the stance that Meinecke deemed most appropriate for facing the challenges posed to history in the last decades of the 19th century.

#### THE *LAMPRECHTSTREIT*: MEINECKE’S EARLY REFLECTIONS ON THE PROBLEMS OF GERMAN HISTORICAL SCIENCE

More than half a century after the publication of “Free Will and Historical Science,” Meinecke admitted that despite finding many weak points in the article, even at that time, he “remained faithful to its central foundations” (Meinecke 1941, 133). However, while the defense of freedom of thought inherent in the notion of individuality remained steadfast in his worldview over five decades, many other aspects of his historical conception would be shaken in the early stages of his biography.

The historian mentions that one of the main factors that motivated him to reevaluate some of his theoretical positions in this early phase of his career was primarily the beginning of his friendship with Otto Krauske and Otto Hintze in the late 1880s. Especially in dialogues with the latter, Meinecke reveals that they debated issues ranging from what he saw as the “subjectivist anarchy” present in Friedrich Nietzsche’s<sup>9</sup> work to the problem of the relationship between the individual and the collective in history and historical research:

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<sup>9</sup> Although Meinecke mentions in his biography that he became acquainted with Nietzsche’s work as early as the 1880s, it was only in 1918 that the historian directly commented on Nietzsche’s ideas about history. In addition to the criticisms expressed about the philosopher in 1918, Meinecke mentioned in 1941 that he had always remained “immune” to Nietzschean philosophy. Regarding Nietzsche’s increasing influence during his time, Meinecke commented in the 1940s: “During the war, I spoke once with Troeltsch about the growing influence of Nietzsche on the German spirit and how the generations of the time distinguished themselves between those who took him to heart and those who did not. Yes, he replied, smiling, he is like rat poison in the entrails” (Meinecke 1941, 174-175).

“There are no laws in history!” Krauske explained in our conversations, and I agreed with him since I could not see laws other than those of the natural sciences at that time. “There are laws in history!” Hintze replied vehemently. Krauske called him a developmentalist because Hintze quickly connected events to a more extensive causal development when in a tight spot. Individual life—with its mysterious origins—was indeed considered by him, but it did not stand out as a primary point in his research, as Krauske and I advocated (Meinecke 1941, 157).

These were dialogues that, in the words of the historian himself, immensely helped him define his position regarding the most significant challenge he faced in this early phase of his career: the *Lamprechtstreit*. The well-known battle over the (historical) method, initiated after the publication of Karl Lamprecht’s *Deutsche Geschichte* (German History) (1891-1909), took place in the *Historische Zeitschrift* (HZ) and unfolded through the pages of the journal throughout almost the entire 1890s.

When Meinecke took over the co-editorship of HZ in 1893,<sup>10</sup> the controversy was in its early stages but already showing signs of its bellicose potential with the publication of Georg von Below’s lengthy review of the initial three volumes of *German History*. Below accused Lamprecht’s work of being empirically inaccurate, “superficial and unsatisfactory in both form and content,” representing an overly ornamental type of “cultural history” (*Kulturgeschichte*) (Below 1893, 466-468).

Lamprecht prepared his defense in two lengthy essays aimed at countering these and other criticisms and outlining the methodological proposal of his cultural history. Criticizing what he saw as the “old” Rankean-influenced approach of historiography, with its “mystical-religious” emphasis on individuals, states, nations, and individual political entities, Lamprecht proposed a structural, truly scientific approach capable of grasping socioeconomic trends and offering an objective perspective on what he understood as the distinct “cultural eras” throughout human history (Lamprecht 1896, 4-5).

Among many replies, counter-replies, and exchanges of insults, this quarrel between Lamprecht’s cultural history and the representatives of Rankean political history extended at least until the year 1899, when the final articles from both parties appeared in the journal (Chickering 1993, 245). Academic boycott and loss of intellectual prestige indicate the price the author of *German History* paid for challenging the mainstream of German professional historiography at the end of the 19th century.

Although he sought to act discreetly, when he became the sole editor of HZ in 1896, Meinecke was compelled to comment on this methodological dispute in the journal.<sup>11</sup> His involvement in the debate began in an indirect form when, in his obituary for Heinrich von Sybel, written earlier that year, he warned

<sup>10</sup> Founded in 1859 by Heinrich von Sybel, the *Historische Zeitschrift* became one of Europe’s most influential scholarly journals of history and historiography. Sybel died in 1895, and after a short period co-editing the journal with Heinrich von Treitschke, the latter died in 1896, and Meinecke became HZ’s sole editor. He kept in this position until 1935, when the rise of the nazis made it impossible for him to keep editing the journal. For an overview of HZ’s history, see the work by Margaret Stieg (2005).

<sup>11</sup> Meinecke’s entry into the battle against the author of *German History* also had a solid academic-political element, as, after Sybel died in 1895, Lamprecht had contacted the publisher Rudolf Oldenbourg intending to take over the editing of the HZ. Upon learning of this, Meinecke alerted Oldenbourg about Lamprecht’s unorthodox “materialistic” positions, attempting to persuade the editor to accept the name of the conservative Heinrich von Treitschke for the leading editorship of the journal (Chickering 1993, 179).

his peers about the danger of strongly positivist tendencies that haunted the profession and tended to see history as a mere “aesthetic spectacle” distant from the cherished harmonious historical perspective of Sybel’s generation (Meinecke 1968, 180).

After a fierce response from Lamprecht to these comments, Meinecke finally entered the discussion decisively through three short articles published between 1896 and 1897 in *HZ*. In these texts, the historian aimed to clarify that Lamprecht based his attacks on traditional German historiography on a complete misunderstanding of Ranke’s theory of ideas and its mystical-transcendental aspects concerning the meaning and possibilities of historical understanding.

Meinecke clarified that Ranke’s concept of the divine was much further from historical reality than Lamprecht’s interpretation had implied. By identifying a divine origin of mundane things, Ranke’s transcendent stance aimed to recognize that behind “trends and general conditions,” there existed in history the presence of “moral energies” responsible for giving coherence to human actions in the past. Moreover, this “mystical irrational” element served to preserve the freedom element always present in history, which the naturalistic perspective embraced by Lamprecht’s “new approach” ignored.

Against the accusation that this ancient tradition of historical thought was unscientific and non-psychological, Meinecke reiterated that this classification would fit much more with Lamprecht’s approach to cultural history, which ignored the spontaneous nature present even in the masses and in distinct socioeconomic groups than with the idealistic historical perspective of his peers, always willing to recognize the “x” of freedom present in the personalities of historical subjects. This premise of the Rankean school recognized its epistemological limitations and distanced itself from a view that was too rigid regarding the meaning of historical forces:

So, we should be content with the uncertain results obtained from the rich experience of a psychological induction not governed by laws, not allowing ourselves to be tempted by false causal connections that the new method insists on promising us (Meinecke 1968, 325-326).

In a similar tone to what he argued in “Free Will and Historical Science,” Meinecke concluded that the a priori present in the spontaneous x of human personality was the central element the historical science must preserve and recognize. In this regard, he saw Lamprecht’s proposal as an apparent attempt to ignore this postulate in the name of materialistic tendencies that were alien to the very nature of historical knowledge (Meinecke 1968, 327). Therefore, Meinecke insisted that, even though it seemed to be a methodological issue, the controversy sustained by Lamprecht represented a difference between worldviews: between the idealistic perspective, inclined towards free will, of traditional historiography and the rigid materialism of the positivist proposal advocated by the author of *German History*.<sup>12</sup>

It is possible to regard these three texts published in reaction to the methodological proposal of cultural history primarily as Meinecke’s rejection and

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<sup>12</sup> Meinecke based part of this diagnosis on the fact that Lamprecht’s *German History* received a positive review from the Marxist historian Franz Mehring. In his review, published at the end of 1893, Mehring praised Lamprecht’s effort to consider the material and social preconditions in his approach, suggesting that Lamprecht’s work could be seen as practically belonging to the Marxist tradition of “historical materialism” (Chickering 1993, 175).

personal contribution to the discrediting of Lamprecht in the professional circle of German historians during the 1890s. However, when viewed in a nuanced way and within a broader context, Meinecke's reaction to the controversy with Lamprecht presents several elements that shed new light on the significance of this episode for the theoretical reflections of the historian in this early phase of his career.

The first of these elements is his retrospective assessment of the different positions held throughout the debate. For Meinecke, the most sober contribution to the *Lamprechtstreit* was not the position of traditional orthodox historians like Below or Max Lenz but rather the reflection of his colleague, Otto Hintze, whom he invited to provide an assessment on the topic in the 1897 edition of *HZ* (Meinecke 1941, 205). In his contribution, far from any dogmatism, Hintze advocated for a methodological approach capable of reconciling the collectivist and individualist approaches of the political and cultural historians involved in the dispute. Therefore, agreeing with Hintze, Meinecke indicated his willingness to accept, albeit in a limited way, some of the criticisms put forth by his intellectual opponent at that time.

Another element contributing to this interpretation is the change in Meinecke's opinion regarding Lamprecht in the years following the peak of the *Lamprechtstreit* in the mid-1890s. In the following decade, for example, Meinecke moved away from the tone of reproach from those early years, showing interest in Lamprecht's project to create an Institute of Cultural and Universal History in Leipzig (Meinecke 1968, 328-329). In the year of the historian's death in 1915, he published an obituary, emphasizing that even Lamprecht's opponents "were able to learn many things" from his controversial propositions (Meinecke 1968, 332).

Therefore, despite disagreeing with the paths proposed by that outsider, Meinecke gradually began to recognize the importance of the criticisms made by Lamprecht and to understand that these had arisen mainly due to the reluctance of his fellow historians to reflect on the problems of the historical discipline self-critically: "Economists, philosophers, and jurists think more about general historical problems than average historians. Lamprecht would not have gone so far if we had better preparation in this regard" (Meinecke 1962, 12).

Meinecke perceived this problem since his dialogues with Hintze in the late 1880s, and the *Lamprechtstreit* vividly highlighted it in the last years of the 19th century. For the young Meinecke, it had become clear that if his fellow historians did not reflect on the fundamental assumptions of the historical discipline, new trends that were starting to flood the thoughts of his contemporaries ran the risk of obliterating the importance assumed so far by the historical science (Kessel 1968, XV).

Indeed, it was precisely from this dilemma that Meinecke first sought to consider the possibility of overcoming what he saw as the theoretical limitations of German historical thought between the end of the 19th century and the early decades of the 20th century. The next topic discusses the consequences of this first turning point in the historian's thinking.

## OVERCOMING THE DISTANCE BETWEEN THE INDIVIDUAL AND THE COLLECTIVE IN HISTORY: THE MEANING OF THE HISTORY OF IDEAS ACCORDING TO MEINECKE

As emphasized by Stefan Meineke (1995, 60-89), it is impossible to dissociate Meinecke's emphasis on the historical principle of individuality in the early years of his career from the debates on ethics and politics that took hold of a portion of German historiography in the late 19th century. In this regard, Meinecke himself recounts in his autobiographical writings that an essential factor contributing to the beginning of his early reflections on the relationship between history and politics stemmed from his encounter, in 1890, with Wilhelm von Humboldt's work "The Limits of State Action" (1791). Humboldt's political work highlighted the importance of preserving individual freedoms and the potential of the idealistic notion of education. In line with such premises, the young Meinecke began to pay attention to the preeminence of the individual over the general demands of the state: "Would not attempting to intervene in the education and other spheres of individual life be a kind of violence? This passionate desire for freedom also began to develop within me" (Meinecke 1941, 173).

Understanding the individual as an end in itself and not merely as a means to acquire other ends, Meinecke found in Humboldt's work both a justification to oppose the idolatry of state power (common among his contemporary historians) and a way to justify a kind of social reformism, increasingly present in his conceptions of history and politics.<sup>13</sup>

This emphasis on the inalienable nature of individual freedom led him to approach a kind of positive anthropology in which human nature was seen from an essentially optimistic perspective. Believing in the inherent goodness of individuals and the divine origin of worldly objects,<sup>14</sup> Meinecke embraced an idealistic view of history that he believed could place his thought beyond a mere reiteration of contemporary political reality (Meineke 1995, 116).

This stance was highly critical vis-à-vis the political status quo of Wilhelmine Germany and the *Borussianist*<sup>15</sup> historiography advocated by most of his professors and young colleagues. Contrary to the tendency to subordinate historical progress to the political successes of Prussia or the German state, Meinecke proposed a perspective in which the conditions for developing individual freedom and the ideas responsible for flourishing human spontaneity

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<sup>13</sup> Meinecke identified with the political positions of the Association for Social Policy members, the so-called "academic socialists." By then, names such as Gustav von Schmoller, Adolf Wagner, and Lujo Brentano integrated this Association. Meinecke saw in these intellectuals and their advocacy for social issues a legacy from the Prussian reformism of the early 19th century (Meineke 1995, 102).

<sup>14</sup> Meinecke recounts in his autobiographical writings that, despite moving away from the religious orthodoxy of his family in his adolescence, he maintained a belief "in a divine origin for all things in life and in a world of ideals in which the divine opened up to us" (Meinecke 1941, 76). Opposing an absolute form of religiosity, in this phase of his life, he leaned towards a kind of idealistic "pantheism" that saw the world's objects not as immediate revelations of the divine but as imperfect derivations of its image. For a more complete understanding of Meinecke's pantheism, see Krol (2021).

<sup>15</sup> *Borussianism* was a political tendency embraced by those who believed in the prominence of the Prussian state during—and after—the process of German unification. Due to the significance of this type of position, it became a kind of historiographical current in 19th and early 20th century Germany (Hardtwig 1980, 273).

became the primary reference for approaching the past: “But my own nature led me to the not-so-easy path of ideas [...] constructed and developed by individual personalities, like the framework where we must consider the development of historical life” (Meinecke 1941, 176).

Inclining towards studying the history of ideas, Meinecke distanced himself politically from the Borussianists and the Neo-Rankeans<sup>16</sup> of his time while formulating a perspective more in line with the horizons of his liberal-reformist perception of politics. If, in their historical writing, Ranke and Treitschke had aimed for an organic balance between the ideal and the real capable of revealing the gains of state power in their study of “spiritual ideas in motion” (Meinecke 1941, 176), Meinecke believed he could go beyond and establish the stimulation of freedom and individual potentials as the true ethical duty of the State.

However, beyond the political meaning of this stance, Meinecke’s drive to analyze the development of ideas historically served as well as an epistemological response to the challenge posed by the cultural history proposed by Lamprecht. As perceived by Hintze, one of the main criticisms that the author of *Deutsche Geschichte* directed against his contemporary German historians revolved around what he saw as their exaggerated mystical-religious emphasis on the notion of individuality. This mysticism produced a singularized view of the past that ignored the collective aspect of distinct cultural eras and limited the historical perspective to the sphere of action of individual states and nations. Against this overly restrictive perspective, Lamprecht proposed the adoption of a collectivist historical methodology based on general laws, capable of capturing the broad cultural significance of historical achievements in the history of humanity (Hintze 1897, 60).

Despite considering some of these criticisms, Hintze — and Meinecke later — saw the solutions suggested by Lamprecht as misguided, proposing, instead, a methodological stance capable of reconciling the poles of collectivity and individuality in history to develop a historical approach more in tune with contemporary life. However, unlike Hintze, who advocated for adopting a comparative institutional history to overcome this dilemma,<sup>17</sup> Meinecke embarked on his own intellectual endeavor to reconcile the individual and collective elements in the way historians understand the past.

To achieve this endeavor, he did not intend to distance himself from the intellectual tradition that had shaped much of his thinking. During the early stages of this self-reflection in the 1890s, for example, he revealed that he read Humboldt’s classic “On the Task of the Historian” (1821), aiming to complement his discussions with Hintze and providing a foundation for the refinement of a more complex historical perspective (Meinecke 1941, 176-177).

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<sup>16</sup> In the last decades of the 19th century, imperialistic expansion and the quest for markets led a new generation of German historians to readjust their conception of history to the new international political scenario. Taking a very particular interpretation of Rankean political theory, the so-called neo-Rankean historians, like Erich Marcks and Max Lenz, were enthusiastic supporters of naval expansion and the pursuit of new colonies from the early reign of Wilhelm II until the outbreak of World War I in 1914 (Jaeger and Rösen 1992, 92-95).

<sup>17</sup> Steeped in the Rankean tradition of historical thought, unlike most historians of his time, Otto Hintze, much like Meinecke, favored the timid impulses for theoretical renewal that occurred in German academic history between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Thus, he focused on constitutional and administrative history, and his interest soon turned to a comparative analysis of different European governmental institutions and structures. For a broader insight into Hintze’s work, see Leonard S. Smith’s (2017) book.



Another strong ally in his struggle to renew history's epistemological repertoire was the optimism of Ranke's theory of ideas. Indeed, he had already used this theoretical stance against Lamprecht's defense of an empirical rigor capable of eliminating overly subjective speculations in historical knowledge.<sup>18</sup>

Hence, advocating for the historical idealism in Ranke's theory of ideas was Meinecke's first step to renewing the foundations of German historical science. In doing so, he aimed to provide a theoretical basis for what he believed to be the most effective way to reunite the poles of the particular and the universal in historical research, namely, the history of ideas. Although he had already outlined part of this new approach in the two volumes of his biography on general Hermann von Boyen,<sup>19</sup> Meinecke only revealed the whole picture of this philosophically renewed history of ideas in *Weltbürgertum und Nationalstaat* ("Cosmopolitanism and the Nation-State") (1908) (Meinecke 1949, 40).

During this time, he turned to the cultural history of Jacob Burckhardt and the biographies of Hegel and Schleiermacher, written decades earlier by Dilthey. If in Burckhardt's work, he found the critique of the excesses of a type of historiography focused on the political role of the State, in Dilthey's, he encountered a model of historical writing concerned with the development of ideas in the life context of specific historical personalities. However, beyond Burckhardt's aesthetic contemplation and Dilthey's limited understanding of ideas within biographical scopes, Meinecke believed it was necessary to conceive the history of ideas as capable of understanding the relationships between the real, the ideal, the particular, and the universal in the various phenomena constituents of human history (Kämmerer 2014, 124).

Therefore, if it wanted to represent reality more complexly, history should move beyond superficial political play and delve into the world of the ideas that shaped the intellectual atmosphere of an era. However, if intellectuals like Ranke, Humboldt, and Hegel had long emphasized the importance of identifying the development of ideas in history, Meinecke needed to be more content with the abstract aspect of the historical world. Thus, he advocated for an "empathic psychological" method that effectively grasped the link between metaphysics and reality.

One way to avoid the temptation of thinking merely in abstract terms was to understand that human beings are the primary medium through which ideas manifest in history. In part due to his positive anthropology mentioned above, Meinecke believed that the human mind — in its fundamental diversity and freedom — was the main stage for the emergence, evolution, and

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<sup>18</sup> In contrast to Lamprecht's empirical purism, Meinecke attested to the impossibility of eliminating the idealistic perspective present in the historian's work: "We see in this effort to sustain a pure empiricism, free from all metaphysical assumptions, only a lunatic attempt to jump over one's own shadow" (Meinecke 1968, 326). Closing one's eyes to this premise meant ignoring that all history is necessarily "a history of people," given that all historical subjects possess a minimal and inexhaustible individual element that cannot be reduced or abstracted from exclusively empirical or general perspectives. Therefore, where Lamprecht saw "mere conglomerates of worldviews," Rankean historical idealism saw a "stimulus to the essence of personality" (Meinecke 1968, 325-326). This stance towards history was the only one capable of distinguishing freedom from necessity, pointing to the divine spark from which the different and broader worldviews are constituted (Meinecke 1968, 327).

<sup>19</sup> *Das Leben des Generalfeldmarschalls Hermann von Boyen* ("The Life of Field Marshal Hermann von Boyen") (1896-1899) is Meinecke's first book. In this work, he mentioned that he did not want to write a factual history of the military achievements undertaken by the general but rather a history of the political ideas that guided the reform period experienced by Prussia during the late 18th and early 19th centuries.

propagation of historical ideas. Hence, in their clash and expansion, these ideas established the distinct courses taken by the historical reality:

Our response to this objection is, of course, that our study of this area of contact between national and universal developments will be broader than the encounters and external actions of nations and states themselves. It will also extend to the inner life of men because, after a particular cultural stage is reached, the memorable interaction process between national and universal impulses emerges here (Meinecke 1908, 16).

This strategy was a way to break with traditional political history and leave behind the tendency to think of ideas in a fragmented and isolated manner from actual historical developments. For Meinecke, ideas and actions were interdependent, and historians should present them within a comprehensive framework encompassing everything surrounding them.

It is possible to see an example of the application of this genetic method — tracking the intellectual development of an individual from one work to another — in the chapter “Fichte and the Idea of the National State,” which compounds the first section of *Cosmopolitanism and the National State*. In this part of his work, Meinecke aimed to demonstrate how the glorification of the German nation presented in Fichte’s speeches — traditionally interpreted as an expression of pure nationalism — had the pedagogical goal of presenting an ideal nation whose traits did not fully exist in his time but gradually became the real expression of the idea of the national state in Germany throughout the 19th century:

We want to know how close Fichte came to the idea of the modern nation-state, be it monarchical or republican. However, every step taken by Fichte towards the nation-state was also a step towards the real political world, far from pure rational constructs (Meinecke 1908, 111).

This approach also involved a new emphasis on the analysis of literary sources and non-official documents because the objective of elucidating an individual’s intellectual development could make subjective stances even more important than the formal content of these writings. Changes in a subject matter could occur due to external circumstances, whereas ruptures in central concepts could indicate the inner development of an individual’s personality. This new focus on ideas also allowed the consideration of the intellectual interactions between various individuals, their influence on historical subjects, and the political contexts responsible for the emergence of their reflections (Gilbert 1970, XI).

Furthermore, one of the most significant advances that Meinecke believed he was making with his history of ideas was overcoming the main criticism put forward years earlier by Lamprecht’s cultural history: the limits of a historical emphasis on the individual. By dealing with the “inner life of men,” that is, the emergence and development of ideas in the minds of individual personalities, Meinecke believed he had found the ideal point from which the historical approach could overcome the gap between the singular and the universal in history:

There is a universal impulse in the intellectual friction between the individual and the environment and in the individual’s quest from the nation to their own particular sphere, for individual values appear to be universal values for those individuals who seek them (Meinecke 1908, 16).

Even if they never became fully universal, these impulses toward universal ideals represented the highest points of human action and intervention in historical reality. Emphasizing these moments and highlighting the complexity of their formation was the main challenge for historians concerned with stimulating the lives of their contemporaries.

Meinecke believed that an excellent way to exemplify the complexity of this friction between the individual and the collective in history was to study the development of the modern idea of the nation-state in Germany. After all, as evident in *Cosmopolitanism and the National State*, this process was characterized by the union of elements of nationality and universalism. And despite being antithetical poles, they intertwined harmonically in the thinking of the leading representatives of the political debate in 19th-century Germany.

Therefore, Meinecke saw his initial work as a historian of ideas as a response to the political issues of his time, as well as a theoretical and methodological solution to the challenges posed since the 1890s to German historical science. In both cases, the foundation of his reflections stemmed from an optimistic belief regarding the significance of individuality —especially of the individual human mind — and the configurations of the modern idea of the nation-state.

Finally, it is worth noting that both this emphasis on historical individualities and the attempt to embrace the history of ideas are elements that remained present in Meinecke's later works, such as *Die Idee der Staatsräson* ("The Idea of Reason of State") (1924) and, as already mentioned, *The Rise of Historicism*. Hence, it is impossible to underestimate these aspects if one intends to understand not only Meinecke's work but also the history of German historiography in the final decades of the 19th century and the first half of the last century.

## CONCLUSION

This article aimed to provide an overview of the first phase of Friedrich Meinecke's work, emphasizing the importance of the early years of the historian's career in shaping several elements that endured throughout the years in how he conceived the means of historical knowledge. It became evident that at least since the 1880s, Meinecke had been striving to provide his answers to the main problems faced by German historiography at that time. Even under the strong influence of his former professors, in articles such as "Free Will and Historical Science" (1886), he criticized the naturalistic tendency of positivist worldviews, intending to preserve what he recognized as the essential foundation necessary for understanding reality in historical terms: the concept of individuality.

The Platonic premise that *individuum est ineffabile* (the individual is ineffable) became a guiding principle in Meinecke's thinking and his refuge against what he saw as the dogmatism of worldviews not aligned with the sparks of freedom and spontaneity inherent in historical thought. Droysen had already expressed some of these premises in his formulation about the "x of personality," namely, that element which is indecipherable in its constant changes, where individuality meant both a perspective and a reference to historical reality itself. Much earlier, however, the concept had already been

associated by Romantic and Idealist thinkers of the 18th century with the development of cultures, religions, and individual nation-states.

This philosophical premise, typical of 19th-century German historiography, had a holistic principle that allowed the relation of individualities to the entirety of universal history. As discussed above, the idealistic foundations of this assumption remained under constant attack during the second half of the 19th century. However, these premises only found a strong opponent among professional historians in the 1890s, when Lamprecht's cultural history first challenged the status quo of academic history in Imperial Germany.

The voices raised against Lamprecht in the pages of *HZ* exemplify the configurations and directions taken by the German historical discipline during that period. If initially, Meinecke joined those who viewed Lamprecht's cultural history as an attack from a worldview alien to the principles of German academic history, in a second moment, he later came to see the positions of the author of *German History* as symptomatic of a necessary revision of the epistemological assumptions held by the professional historiography of his time.

The result of this first self-reflection was the emphasis on a philosophically renewed approach concerned with grasping the development of specific ideas within the minds of individual personalities, a stance that Meinecke believed could transcend the limits of traditional German political history. Focusing on the emergence and development of ideas in the minds of politicians and intellectuals, Meinecke believed he had found the ideal point from which reflections on the past could overcome the distance between the individual and the collective in history.

Representing a phase within the intellectual trajectory of the historian in question, the emphasis on the holistic nature of the principle of individuality persisted in Meinecke's historical conception, as previously mentioned, at least until the publication of *The Rise of Historicism* in 1936. Acknowledging this foundational premise, this article elucidated the necessity of comprehending the role of this ontological and epistemological principle within the intellectual oeuvre of Meinecke and within the broader German tradition of historical thought. Consequently, understanding the significance of this concept is imperative for a nuanced understanding of Meinecke's early theory of history and his frequently misunderstood notion of historicism. Nevertheless, elucidating the connections between the early and later phases of Meinecke's intellectual evolution is a challenging endeavor. For the time being, we shall suffice with the outlined summary, deferring the exploration of subsequent phases in Meinecke's thought to other research endeavors.

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*Friedrich Meinecke's Early Work*

Artigo recebido em 19/07/22 • Aceito em 05/11/23

DOI | [doi.org/10.5216/rth.v26i2.73403](https://doi.org/10.5216/rth.v26i2.73403)

Revista de Teoria da História | issn 2175-5892



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