Title
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Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/24g4s98c

Journal
Journal of the Philosophy of History, 1

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Publication Date
2007

Peer reviewed

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Historical Understanding and the Human Sciences

Historical understanding (<u>verstehen</u>) has to do with grasping the intentional content attached to human actions.[1] It is a distinctive approach to the human sciences, typically based on the idea that the meaningful nature of human action requires a distinct epistemology in the form of historical understanding. Philosophers who study historical understanding have generally focused on three interwoven but analytically distinctive concerns. The first concern is to articulate the ontological conditions for the possibility and grounds of historical understanding. The second is to clarify the epistemological nature of historical understanding itself: What does it mean to understand actions that took place in the past? The final concern is to specify the role of understanding in historical explanation: Does understanding have to be accompanied by additional explanatory operations in order to secure its empirical validity?

The papers in this special issue concentrate primarily on the third issue, and they do so against the background of post-positivism. How does post-positivism alter the ways in which we should think about the place of culture and meaning, and the role of understanding and interpretation, within explanations in the human sciences? The purpose of this introductory essay is mainly to describe the tradition of historical understanding, but also briefly to locate the ensuing essays within that tradition. I challenge two myths about <u>verstehen</u>. The first myth is that <u>verstehen</u> is just a method for the production of historical facts. The second is that <u>verstehen</u> is an intuitive, quasi-mystical operation that resembles the work of an artist more than that of a scientist. In place of these myths, I emphasize the philosophical content of <u>verstehen</u> conceived as an

analysis of what it means to base the human sciences on recognition of the meaningful character of human action.

Hermeneutics and History

In the last decades of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth, German philosophers drew on the rich, multifaceted traditions of German idealism and hermeneutics to discuss the philosophical foundations of the human sciences and their relationship to the natural sciences. These discussions produced some of the classical statements on historical understanding. Wilhelm Dilthey's work had a profound impact on approaches to the human sciences within the hermeneutic tradition. Max Weber's work became a starting point for many subsequent debates on the matter within the social sciences. What is more, the German discussions helped to inspire similar ones throughout Europe, including, by way of the Italian Benedetto Croce, the work of the British philosopher, R. G. Collingwood.

Wilhelm Dilthey

Given that historical understanding concerns the intentionality of human action, it is not surprising that discussions of its philosophical principles arose against the background of idealism and hermeneutics. The idealists stressed (albeit in different ways) the primacy of mind over matter in human existence and so attempts to understand that existence. Hermeneutics was preoccupied with questions of understanding externally given linguistic formations (mainly written texts but also spoken communication and

even entire grammatical structures and literary genres) by grasping the mental content expressed within them.

Wilhelm Dilthey was the first major thinker in both the idealist and hermeneutic traditions to attempt a systematization of the theory of historical understanding. Dilthey anchors both the possibility and the necessity of historical understanding in ontological arguments. According to his ontology, human life differs from the rest of the natural world in that it consists of an inner world that gets expressed in outer manifestations such as gestures, words, music, poetry, churches, and universities. Understanding, he adds, is the process of grasping the inner content to which outer expressions refer back. It is only by such understanding, moreover, that humans are able to live, act, and communicate in a society. Understanding is a fundamental presupposition of individual and social life. This ontology leads Dilthey to define the human sciences in terms of historical understanding. He concludes that the human sciences, like human life as such, are about understanding expressions; they are about grasping the inner content of outer manifestations.

How does Dilthey conceive of the process of historical understanding? At times Dilthey identifies understanding with an intuitive and imaginative re-creation of inner contents in one's psyche, based upon analogy with one's own lived experiences and enhanced by "a sympathy with everything human."[2] Scholars should "transfer" themselves "into a given complex of manifestations of life" in a way that enables them actually to experience the temporal flow of historical events within their own psyche.[3] In his later writings, however, Dilthey downplayed the importance of individual psychic processes. Instead he placed "objective spirit" at the center of historical understanding. Objective spirit refers to the ensemble of objectifications (outer manifestations) that

comprise a society at a certain epoch. For Dilthey, all these objectifications share "a common stock of ideas, attitudes, and ideals," which "even the work of a genius will reflect."[4] Just as our everyday understanding of the objectifications that surround us is always attained by reference to these common conventions, so historical understanding can only be attained by reference to these social commonalities, that is, by "locating the individual manifestation of life within a common context."[5]

The process of understanding is important for Dilthey's epistemology. It leads him to raise a question that remains prominent in many later discussions of historical understanding. The question is: how can empathetic historical understanding have a "universally valid" objectivity?[6] On what grounds can a mental process occurring within the subjective experience of the historian be recognized as a valid interpretation of a given historical phenomenon? Dilthey treats this question of objectivity as one not of methodology but of philosophy. He does not answer it by offering a procedure that if followed by historians would secure the validity of their interpretations. He answers it by an ontological argument that, in his view, guarantees the validity of the re-created past experiences of others in a historian's mind. Dilthey here posits the identity of the subject and object of knowledge. In this view, understanding is a universal mode of cognition that is actualized in the historical flow of lived experience, and in that respect both the subject and the object of historical interpretation are identical. As Dilthey puts it:

> The primary condition for the possibility of historical science is contained in the fact that I am myself a historical being and that the one who investigates history is the same as the one who makes history. … Lived experience contains the totality of our being. It is this that we re-create in understanding.[7]

While this response to the problem of the validity of historical understanding, as well as Dilthey's theory as a whole, might seem vague, underdeveloped, even quasi-mystical, his work did much to raise issues that still concern philosophers interested in historical understanding.

Max Weber

Dilthey's philosophy of history was part of a wider debate, raging in Germany at the turn of the twentieth century, about the nature of the human sciences, their difference from natural science, and the methodologies appropriate to them. This methodenstreit (debate over methods) spanned a range of disciplines across the human sciences. The camp siding with a more historical and interpretive view of the human sciences included, besides Dilthey, the neo-Kantian philosophers Wilhelm Windelband and Heinrich Rickert and the sociologists Georg Simmel and Max Weber. These thinkers shared the conviction that the human sciences differ fundamentally from the natural sciences in that they require historical understanding. Beyond this shared conviction, however, they each had their own view of the human sciences and of historical understanding. The most influential for the social sciences has proved to be that of Weber.

For Weber, a valid scientific explanation is a causal one, but in the human sciences, causality has to assume a peculiar form in that it requires an interpretive dimension. The importance of interpretation follows, for Weber, from the fact that "in the social sciences we are concerned with psychological and intellectual (geistig) phenomena," and, more specifically, from the fact that social action is inherently driven by the subjective motive of the actor.[8] Consequently, causal explanation in the social

sciences depends on demonstrating a concrete relation between a specific action and its subjective motivation, not on formulating general causal laws. Weber's argument here is part of his attempt to distance himself from the naturalist conflation of the natural and the social sciences on the basis of a nomothetic epistemology. Yet he establishes this distance, not by Dilthey's ontological arguments, but by a neo-Kantian, epistemological distinction between the natural and the social sciences of the kind made by Windelband and Rickert. The neo-Kantians argued that the natural sciences are nomothetic (they are concerned with formulating general laws and abstract concepts), while the social sciences are preoccupied with the individual and unique aspects of reality.

What is the role of understanding within this causal epistemology? For Weber, the meaningful nature of social action implies that <u>verstehen</u> constitutes an indispensable part of any historical explanation. Understanding is not merely one way among others of generating hypotheses. To the contrary, it is built into the logic of the human sciences. Nonetheless, Weber also argued that a merely "subjective", empathetic understanding of the motive of an action could not by itself constitute an empirically valid explanation: <u>verstehen</u> must be supplemented by causal analysis. So, in order to gain empirical validity, a proposed interpretation must satisfy a double criterion of "adequacy". First, an interpretation must be "subjectively adequate", that is, it must be amenable to empathetic "reproduction" in the sense of being intelligible within the framework of our basic modes of thinking.[9] Second, it must be "causally adequate", that is, there must be a reasonable, demonstrable probability that the hypothesized motive would "normally" yield the observed action.[10]

How, then, does the scholar go about satisfying this double requisite of "subjective" and "causal" adequacy? Weber advocates the deployment of ideal types. Ideal types are conceptual constructs that do not necessarily have any direct correlate in reality. Rather, when the actual course of action deviates from the ideal type, the social scientist can arrive at a causal explanation of the deviations by appealing to factors such as misinformation, strategic errors, logical fallacies, and personal temperament.[11]

Although Weber allows for the formation of non-rational ideal types, such as "an ideal type of mystical orientation," he clearly favors ideal types of rational action, that is, action characterized by a relationship of means and ends.[12] Weber's emphasis on rationality points to his methodological individualism. As we have seen, the late Dilthey espoused the view that the ultimate object of historical understanding is a supra-individual "objective spirit" reflected in all individual life expressions. For Weber, in contrast, social collectivities and organizations have no subjective life of their own – only individuals do. Hence historical understanding must focus on the beliefs and motivations of individuals.

An Alternative to Positivism

Within Anglophone philosophy, hermeneutic themes and the idea of historical understanding became prominent in the middle of the twentieth century as an alternative to positivism. For a while, R. G. Collingwood seemed to be almost a lone voice in Oxford drawing on an elder idealism to address hermeneutic themes. By the 1960s, however, a distinctive Anglophone approach to historical understanding appears in Britain, Canada, and US. In the face of influential attempts to develop a positivist and naturalist analysis

of the social sciences, philosophers such as William Dray, Peter Winch, and others like

Charles Taylor began to draw on Collingwood, Wittgenstein, and a range of hermeneutic

and phenomenological thinkers to insist on the interpretive nature of the human sciences.

The neo-positivist challenge

A second wave of verstehen theory emerged in reaction to the neo-positivist

attempt to reunify the natural and human sciences on a naturalist basis. The neo-positivist

project, which had middle European roots, consisted of an attack, led by Carl Hempel and

also Theodore Abel, on the idea that verstehen could be a legitimate, scientific form of

explanation.[13] Hempel claimed that empathetic understanding is neither a necessary nor a

sufficient condition for scientific explanation in the human sciences; it could serve at

most as a pre-scientific source of hypotheses.[14] He also argued that historical

explanations always implicitly include nomological elements; even genetic explanations

based on the motivations of actors actually presuppose psychological generalizations of a

nomological character.

Theodore Abel's approach is more complex than Hempel's, but with a similar

naturalist outcome. On the one hand, he claims that verstehen is "necessary and

indispensable" for the "study of social behavior."[15] But, on the other, the role that he

ascribed to verstehen is limited to the generation of nomological-behavioralist causal

hypotheses, within which meanings are reduced to the status of intervening variables. He

writes, "verstehen . . . consists of the act of bringing to the foreground the inner-organic

sequence intervening between a stimulus and a response."[16] Abel thereby reduces

verstehen from a complex philosophical system to a mere "operation", that is, a method subsumed under a naturalist philosophy.

Anglophone hermeneutics

The neo-positivist challenge provoked a lively debate over historical understanding within Anglophone social sciences, and a number of scholars rose to defend its importance.[17] However, the most systematic rejoinders on behalf of historical understanding came not from social scientists, but from philosophers such as Dray and Winch.

William Dray, following Collingwood, insisted that historical explanation depends on making sense of the inner world of actors.[18] Dray departs from Collingwood's perspective, however, in his attempt to integrate causal explanation and historical understanding. In particular, Dray argues that the causal explanation of any action requires an understanding of the purposive reasoning, whether conscious or unconscious, articulated or latent, that caused the actor to perform that action.

Dray describes interpretive explanation as follows:

Rational explanation may be regarded as an attempt to reach a kind of logical equilibrium at which point an action is matched with a calculation [attributed to the actor]. A demand for explanation arises when the equilibrium is upset – when from the 'considerations' obvious to the investigator it is impossible to see the point of what was done. The function of the historian's explanatory story will in many cases be to sketch in the corrections to these 'obvious' considerations which

require to be made if the reader is to be able to say: 'now I understand what he was about'.[19]

The historian has an initial expectation as to what a "normal" course of events would look like in a given situation. A deviation from that expectation prompts the historian to piece together those elements of the actor's reasoning "which are different from those we might have assumed in absence of evidence to the contrary."[20] The investigation is completed once the accumulation of knowledge of the actor's reasoning is sufficient to account for the "deviant" course of action. The reconstruction of the inner reasoning of historical actors is thus not an arbitrary, intuitive product of pure empathy; rather, it is built up "from the evidence".[21]

Peter Winch argues that social life is fundamentally different from the rest of the natural world in that social relations are "internal relations".[22] Social relations exist through ideas held in people's minds rather than through the external, physical aspects of human interaction. Thus all "specifically human behavior" is meaningful.[23] Winch then adds, following Wittgenstein, that all meaningful behavior is a matter of applying intersubjective, socially established rules within specific social contexts. For Winch, this view of human society is "logically incompatible with the kinds of explanation offered in the natural sciences."[24] "Historical explanation," writes Winch, "is not the application of generalizations and theories to particular instances: it is the tracing of internal relations."[25] Explanation is a matter of understanding the social actors' own understanding of their reality.

Winch, like Dray, restores the constitutive role of meaning in social life and in our knowledge of it. But, unlike Dray, he rejects any association of historical inquiry with

causal analysis. He particularly attacks Weber's view that, in order to attain scientific validity, historical understanding needs to be supplemented by a probabilistic or statistical kind of causal analysis. Statistical operations, according to Winch, can never get us closer to understanding social action: "[a] man who understands Chinese . . . is not a man who has a firm grasp of the statistical probabilities for the occurrence of the various words in the Chinese language."[26] Winch also rejects psychological forms of understanding directed at grasping internal mental processes. In his view, again following Wittgenstein, all understanding (of oneself, of one's reality, of the objects of historical inquiry) is mediated by socially established concepts. All understanding occurs within an intersubjective linguistic medium, rather than in private, unarticulated experience.

New Directions

The emergence of an Anglophone literature on historical understanding occurred alongside two other developments. The first was a more general philosophical movement, often inspired by Wittgenstein or W. V. O. Quine, away from the positivism. The second was the rise within the human sciences of a range of new cultural theories, often inspired by the poststructuralism of Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault. Indeed, Richard Rorty famously argued that Wittgenstein's ordinary language philosophy, Quine's brand of pragmatism, Foucault's genealogical histories, and Derrida's deconstruction of literary texts all coalesced within a new postmodern <u>weltanschauung</u>. As Paul Roth discusses some of these developments in his contribution to his volume, I will not do so here. For now, what matters is the fact that, at least for a while, post-positivist philosophies of

language, knowledge, and mind, and the new cultural theories in the human sciences, appeared to have little use for theories of historical understanding.

The essays in this special issue of Journal of Philosophy of History are part of a wider trend to bring theories of historical understanding into dialogue with post-positivist philosophy and with new cultural theories in the human sciences. The essays thus look in two directions. They look back to post-positivist philosophy, asking what implications it has for historical understanding: What is understanding? What is historical explanation? And they look forward to the human sciences, asking what implications post-positivist analyses of historical understanding have for them: What are the prospects for macro-level inquiries? Do we need to rethink normative practices such as the law? To conclude, I want briefly to mention some of the ways in which the following essays deploy post-positivism to respond to these questions.

What is understanding? Earlier we saw that Dilthey (and Collingwood) conceived of the process of understanding in terms of something akin to empathy or re-enactment. Yet, today philosophers might conceive of the process of understanding more in terms of the way our concepts lead us to make sense of action by attributing beliefs to people. In this view, the grammar of our concepts is such that we just do make sense of actions by attributing beliefs or intentions to people. Understanding consists, in other words, of our attributing intentionality to people rather than in our re-creation or re-enactment of their thoughts. Analyses of understanding as the attribution of beliefs have given rise to various debates. Some poststructuralists dismiss the viability of postulating subjects to whom we can attribute any intentionality. Some of the new cultural theories follow the poststructuralists in conceiving of meanings not as related to intentionality but as

products of the (possibly unstable) relations among signs or signifiers. Paul Roth argues in his essay that these attempts to relate meanings to quasi-structures actually reproduce several of the philosophical difficulties that undermined positivism.

What is historical explanation? We have seen how Weber and Dray conceived of historical understanding as a part of (or even a species of) causal explanation. Today philosophers might conceive the question of explanation less as one about whether or not historical understanding is causal, and more about the types of connections that our concepts posit between two states of affairs. In this view, the grammar of our concepts might be such that we posit one type of connection when talking about the purely physical world and another when talking about actions and events.[27] In my essay, I argue, in a way that echoes Roth's critique of some of the new cultural theories, that we cannot return to those more essentialist cultural theories that postulated principles that defined the history of a nation or group. Rather, aggregate concepts in the human sciences must be pragmatic ones rooted in intentional meanings.

What are the prospects for macro-level inquiries in the social sciences? The essays by Robert Adcock and Asaf Kedar consider what social science might look like were it based on something akin to pragmatic concepts rooted in intentional meanings. Adcock suggests that in so far as post-positivism challenges reified concepts in a way that leads to free-will indeterminism, it calls for a far more dramatic rethinking of historical sociology from that found in Weber's Anglophone followers. Macro-historical social scientists have begun to engage complexity, contingency, and choice in ways that moves them from some types of determinism, notably historical determinism and structuralism. But, for Adcock, the interests and inclinations of these scholars still remain wedded to an

avowedly determinist framework. Kedar consider the possibility of avoiding this residual determinism by rethinking ideal types as pragmatic concepts that refer back to intentional meanings thereby allowing for a kind of free-will indeterminism. He argues that we should conceive of ideal types as capturing family resemblances more than essences, and as serving heuristic purposes more than explanatory ones.

Do we need to rethink normative practices such as law? Naomi Choi discusses the implications of historical understanding for the philosophy of law where interpretivism is a relatively recent challenge to natural law theories and legal positivism. Among the main exponents of interpretivism is Ronald Dworkin. Choi finds much to admire in Dworkin's work. Yet, she also suggests that he relies on a normative construction of law's purpose in a way that leads to problems similar to those Roth associates with new cultural theories and I associate with elder accounts of historical principles. Choi herself thus argues for a more hermeneutic and historical dimension to interpretive jurisprudence.

[1] Most of the papers in this special issue were presented at the American Philosophical Association (Pacific Division). I personally am especially grateful to Asaf Kedar for help with this introductory essay.

[2] W. Dilthey, "On Understanding and Hermeneutics: Student Lecture Notes (1867-68)", in Selected Works, eds. R. Makkreel and F. Rodi, Vol. 4: Hermeneutics and the Study of History (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), p. 229.

[3] W. Dilthey, "Plan for the Continuation of the Formation of the Historical World in the Human Sciences", in Selected Works, Vol. 3: The Formation of the Historical World in the Human Sciences (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), p.235.

[4] Ibid., p. 229.

[5] Ibid., p. 230

[6] W. Dilthey, "The Rise of Hermeneutics (1900)", in Selected Works, Vol. 4, p. 253.

[7] Dilthey, "Plan for the Continuation of the Formation of the Historical World in the Human Sciences", p. 298.

[8] M. Weber, "'Objectivity' in Social Science and Social Policy", in The Methodology of the Social Sciences, trans. E. Shils and H. Finch (New York: Free Press, 1949), p. 74.

[9] It is important to note that, in line with the neo-Kantian impact upon his thought, Weber rejected the epistemologically realist idea that empathetic understanding is a direct, real reproduction of the psychic processes of another person.

[10] M. Weber, Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology, eds. G. Roth and C. Wittich (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), pp. 11-12.

[11] Ibid., p. 21.

[12] Ibid, p. 21.

[13] There was also a second wave of German writing on <u>verstehen</u> in opposition to this neo-positivism. Indeed, to some extent, we might read Gadamer as reviving Dilthey's hermeneutic approach, and Habermas as reviving Weber's project of synthesising historical and causal analysis. See respectively H-G. Gadamer, <u>Truth and Method</u>, trans. J. Weinsheimer and D. Marshall, (New York: Continuum, 2002); and J. Habermas, <u>On the Logic of the Social Sciences</u>, trans. S. Nicholsen and J. Stark (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988).

[14] C. Hempel, <u>Aspects of Scientific Explanation, and Other Essays in the Philosophy of Science</u> (New York: Free Press, 1965); and C. Hempel, "Explanation in Science and in History" in W. Dray, ed., <u>Philosophical Analysis and History</u> (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), pp. 95-126.

[15] T. Abel, "A Reply to Professor Wax" in M. Truzzi, ed., *Verstehen*: <u>Subjective Understanding in the Social Sciences</u> (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1974), p. 85.

[16] T. Abel, "The Operation Called <u>Verstehen</u>", <u>American Journal of Sociology</u> 54 (1948), 214.

[17] See several of the essays in Truzzi, ed., *Verstehen*.

[18] For Dray's use of Collingwood see W. Dray, <u>History as Re-enactment: R. G. Collingwood's Idea of History</u> (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995). For Collingwood's own work, see especially R. Collingwood, <u>The Idea of History</u> (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1946).

[19] W. Dray, <u>Laws and Explanation in History</u> (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1957), p. 125.

[20] Ibid., p. 125.

[21] Ibid., p. 129.

[22] P. Winch, P. <u>The Idea of a Social Science and its Relation to Philosophy</u> (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1958), pp. 23 & 123.

[23] Ibid., p. 52.

[24] Ibid., p. 72.

[25] Ibid., p. 133.

[26] Ibid., p. 115.

[27] See, most famously, D. Davidson, <u>Essays on Actions and Events</u> (Oxford : Clarendon Press, 1980).