PART I

HERMENEUTIC DEAD ENDS
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The Claim to Autonomy of the Human Sciences

* A Critique of Wilhelm Dilthey’s Hermeneutic Conception *

1.1 Wilhelm Dilthey’s Hermeneutic Conception

Contemporary discussions about philosophical hermeneutics are largely inspired by the conception of Wilhelm Dilthey, who is viewed as the founder of philosophical hermeneutics. Although more recent research has convincingly shown that general hermeneutics was systematically developed much earlier, as *hermeneutica universalis*—above all in the work of Georg Friedrich Meier (1718–7)³—Dilthey’s work remains the source of information and, in part, of legitimation for contemporary hermeneutic reflections.⁴

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¹ *Note: When possible, I have used standard translations of the texts of Dilthey, Heidegger, and Gadamer. Other translations from German into English are by Darrell Arnold (D. A.) unless otherwise noted. For direct quotations, when possible I have given the page references to both the German and English editions. The German page number is given first, followed by the English one. The normal textual references throughout this work are to the German editions of the texts.*

² See especially the articles in Bühler (1994).

³ Compare Meier (1757/1996), who developed a general theory of signs and a general art of interpretation. Meier spoke of the principle of hermeneutic equity as the most general principle of all interpretive rules. Compare, for example, Meier (1757/1996, §39): “The hermeneutic equity (aequitas hermeneutica) is the tendency of the interpreter to hold that meaning for hermeneutically true that best comports with the flawlessness of the originator of the sign, until the opposite is shown” (trans. D. A.).

⁴ And indeed, to a greater extent than the work of Schleiermacher, above all, because Dilthey’s hermeneutics was connected with the claim to the foundation of the human sciences and was embedded in a general philosophical conception, namely, in his
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Dilthey’s goal was to work out the philosophical foundations of the human sciences, and to do so historically and systematically. His plan was to write six books, which would be divided into two volumes. This remained a torso, because Dilthey published only the first volume, entitled Introduction to the Human Sciences (1883). This volume contains above all a historical account, which was to set the stage for the epistemological foundation planned for the other volume. Nevertheless, the first two books of the introduction also contain systematic thoughts; besides, already in Dilthey’s lifetime, his systematic work, The Formation of the Historical World in the Human Sciences (1910), was published, which according to the publisher, Groethuysen, was to be integrated into the second volume of the planned introduction to the human sciences (GS VII, IX). These two books, which were published by Dilthey himself, as well as his famous article “The Rise of Hermeneutics” (1900) and a few other smaller works, will serve as the foundation for my discussion of his hermeneutic conception.

Dilthey attempted to show that the human sciences comprise an independent whole alongside the natural sciences. Human sciences are understood as “all the disciplines that have socio-historical reality as their subject matter” (GS I, 4/SW I, 56). Dilthey diagnosed a dualism between the ‘realm of nature’ and the ‘realm of history’ and postulated the incommensurability of the mental order with the order of nature on the basis of the facts of the unity of consciousness philosophy of life. For more on the historical influence of his work, see Anz’s fitting characterization (1982, 59): “Without Dilthey’s presentation of the history of hermeneutics and without his reinterpreting elaboration, Schleiermacher’s hermeneutics would have hardly achieved the character of a paradigm; without his unending epistemological efforts to make ‘understanding’ the basis of all ‘sciences of the acting man’ and of the ‘socio-historical reality’, Heidegger’s project of ‘existential hermeneutics’ would hardly have been possible; without his foundation of the human sciences, critical of metaphysics and speculative idealism as it was, Gadamer certainly would not have attempted to develop philosophical hermeneutics as the ‘prima philosophia’” (trans. D. A.).

5 As Bernhard Groethuysen, his colleague and the editor of many of his works, notes in the preface to the first volume of the collective works of Dilthey: “That was a source of anguish for him his entire life, and all his work was, in the final analysis, aimed at making it possible for a second volume to follow the first volume of the Introduction” (GS I, V/trans. D. A.).

6 This follows Dilthey’s own remarks in the preface to the first volume of the Introduction (GS I, XV/SW I, 47).

and the spontaneity of will, which can only be found in the mental order. Correspondingly, it is impossible to extract mental facts from the mechanical order of nature. For Dilthey, the ‘content’ of the human sciences is “the socio-historical reality insofar as that reality has been preserved in human consciousness as historical information and has been made accessible to scientific study as information about society extending beyond its current state” (GS I, 24/SW I, 76).

If the irreducible ‘mental facts’ of the socio-historical reality are defined as the epistemological object of the human sciences, then the question of the possibility of analyzing them arises. What does access to mental facts look like? Dilthey suggests proceeding in two steps. In the first step, psychology should deliver an analysis of life units, that is, the psychophysical individuals, which are the elements of which society and history are made. On the basis of this analysis, the ‘enduring formations,’ which are the objects of social research, are then to be examined. Dilthey views both the ‘cultural systems’ and the different types of the ‘external organization of society’ as among the enduring formations. “The facts which constitute the cultural systems can be studied only by means of the facts recognized by psychological analysis. The concepts and propositions which form the basis of our knowledge of these systems are dependent on the concepts and propositions developed by psychology” (GS I, 46/SW I, 96). Something similar applies to second-order facts, which constitute the external organization of society, such as the family, the state, the church, associations, and so forth.

It should be emphasized that in his discussion of this two-step procedure for analyzing the ‘lasting forms’ of socio-historical reality, Dilthey appears to approach very closely a consistent methodological individualism. Methodological individualism is well known as the meta-theoretical postulate8 according to which all social phenomena must

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8 The first, so far as I know, to give this idea the name ‘methodological individualism’ was Joseph Schumpeter in his Habilitation thesis Das Wesen und der Hauptinhalt der theoretischen Nationalökonomie (1908), and he used this as a clear contrast to political individualism: “We must clearly distinguish between political and methodological individualism. They haven’t the least in common. The former begins with general principles, such as the view that freedom contributes more to the development of people and to the general good than anything else, and builds a series of practical propositions on the basis of this; the latter does nothing of the sort, it makes no claims and has no special presuppositions. It only means that in describing certain processes, one starts with the action of individuals” (1908, 90 f./trans. D. A.).
be explained through the situations, dispositions, and presuppositions of individuals⁹ – or, expressed differently, that the social reality is to be explained by the interplay between individual actions under different conditions.¹⁰ As we shall see later, Dilthey challenges, in principle, the possibility of explaining social phenomena and proposes another way of dealing with social formations, the soundness of which is still to be examined. Nevertheless, Dilthey repeatedly argues that in an analysis of the social formations or of the external organization of society, one should never lose track of the individual. He notes, for example: “The family is the womb of all human order, of all group-life. […])

Nevertheless, this unity – the world’s most concentrated form of volitional unity binding individuals – is only relative. The individuals that are joined together in it are not completely absorbed in it; the individual is ultimately for and by himself” (GS I, 74/SW I, 123). This methodological individualism, however, is not to be confused with an ontological individualism – that is, with the thesis that in social reality only individuals exist – and Dilthey does not appear to hold this view. Thus he maintains: “[T]he sciences of the cultural systems and of the external organization of society are related to anthropology primarily through physical and psychophysical phenomena which I have designated as second-order facts. The analysis of these phenomena, which are produced by the interactions of individuals in society and are in no way fully reducible to anthropological facts, determines to a significant extent the theoretical rigor of the particular human sciences which they underlie” (GS I, 11/SW I, 163; emphasis added).

⁹ For example, Watkins (1953, 729): “[The principle of methodological individualism] states that social processes and events should be explained by being deduced from (a) principles governing the behaviour of participating individuals and (b) descriptions of their situations.”

The psychological foundation of the human sciences, joined with methodological individualism, could lead the reader to expect Dilthey’s conception to be a program that operates with nomological hypotheses. However, Dilthey intends to do something else. On the one hand, he does indeed mark himself off from the philosophy of history by emphasizing that the particular human sciences are capable of producing “real theories” because they are based on the analytic method and they are related to reality, that is, they have an empirical orientation. On the other hand, he doubts that laws are possible in the human sciences. To defend this, he introduces a distinction between explanatory and descriptive psychology. If a social scientific program that wants to operate with nomological hypotheses is based on an explanatory, natural scientific psychology, then the alternative proposed by Dilthey – of descriptive psychology as the fundamental science – can never lead to nomological knowledge in the human sciences. But even if the goal is not to produce nomological hypotheses, the descriptive psychology will inextricably lead to a dead end.

This special type of psychology is not concerned with regularities in the order of psychic processes, but with regularities in the sense of a psychic structure. It is concerned with the pattern according to which psychic facts are regularly connected with one another by an inner, experienceable relation, and the regularity consists in the relation of parts to a whole (GS VII, 15/SW III, 35f.). Dilthey’s descriptive psychology is concerned with inner experience (Anz 1982, 67), which attempts to grasp psychic facts together with their structure. This apprehension of mental states “arises from the lived experience (Erlebnis) and remains linked to it. In the lived experience (Erlebnis), the processes of the entire mind work together. It is endowed with a nexus, while the senses only present a manifold of particular data. The individual operation is brought to lived experience (Erlebnis) by the totality of inner

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11 In his words: “Psychology can be a foundational human science only if it stays within the limits of a descriptive discipline that establishes facts and uniformities among facts. It must clearly distinguish itself from explanatory psychology, which strives to derive the whole human, cultural world by means of certain assumptions. Only on the basis of this descriptive procedure can such an explanatory psychology attain precise and unprejudiced material that makes possible the verification of its psychological hypotheses. But above all, only in this way can the particular human science obtain a foundation which is itself secure; at present even the best psychological accounts build one hypothesis upon another” (GS I, 32 f./SW I, 84).
life, and the nexus through which it is related with the entire inner life belongs to immediate experience” (GS V, 172/trans. D. A.).

Now, it is possible to raise numerous objections to this type of psychology, which employs the concept of lived experience (**Erlebnis**) as an inclusive term for all mental states. Above all, the common objection is that this must be more precisely specified. Besides, the fundamental question remains unanswered concerning “how we can have knowledge of the states of other people’s minds” (Scholz 2001, 76). A descriptive psychology that concentrates on the first-person perspective cannot offer access to the experiences of other persons, regardless of what is meant by experience. Besides, as soon as a regularity of any kind can be identified – in this case the “regularity consisting in the relation of parts to a whole” – it is always possible to grasp it with a nomological hypothesis. A hypothesis is nomological by virtue of the form of the sentence in which it is formulated, not its content, so a regularity of the kind Dilthey is analyzing could easily be nomologically apprehended.

Perhaps because of the immanent difficulties of this conception, there is less and less discussion of the psychological foundation of the human sciences in his later works. In fact, it is fully plausible to maintain that Dilthey changed his view. Lived experience (**Erlebnis**) remains the foundational category, but the human sciences are no longer concerned with the methodological knowledge of psychic processes, “but with re-experiencing, with understanding them. In this sense **hermeneutics** would then be the real foundation of the human sciences” (Groethuysen, GS VII, VII/trans. D. A.). If the young Dilthey is characterized by the search for an Archimedean point for knowledge,

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12 Dilthey is a very honest thinker, and he does not attempt to evade difficult questions. Thus, in this context he asks (GS VII 28/SW III, 49): “What happens now if I pay attention to this lived experience and ask myself what it contains? Here is a second important problem for the foundation of the human sciences.” In the pages that follow the quotation, however, one unfortunately does not find much that is concrete, except for a discussion of the “partial transcendence” of the objects from the lived experience (**Erlebnis**).

13 See Kalleri (1993, 70) as well: “Even if one, for example, presumes that self-understanding can be proven from a psychological basis, it is still not clear how understanding of something alien is possible, especially in its individuality, because understanding as re-experiencing, is also a process of one’s own inner perception” (trans. D. A).
which he believes he has found in the certainty of the lived experience, the mature Dilthey attempts to give a hermeneutical underpinning to the human sciences, which would definitively establish their autonomy.

1.2 ON THE ROLE OF UNDERSTANDING

In his well-known article “The Rise of Hermeneutics” (1900), where Dilthey deals with “the problem of the scientific knowledge of individuals and indeed the main forms of human existence in general,” he asks: “Is such knowledge possible, and what means are at our disposal to attain it?” (GS V, 317/SW IV, 235). Thus the question arises about the objectivity and the general validity of knowledge of the states of other minds. Distancing himself from his earlier opinions, Dilthey ascertains that inner experience is not enough to secure an objective view of other persons (GS V, 318/SW IV, 235). He thus proposes a specific process for achieving such knowledge, namely, understanding. “[T]he existence of other people is given us at first only from the outside, in facts available to sense, that is, in gestures, sounds, and actions. Only through a process of re-creation of that which is available to the senses do we complete this inner experience. Everything – material, structure, the most individual traits of such a completion – must be carried over from our own sense of life. Thus the problem is: How can one quite individually structured consciousness bring an alien individuality of a completely different type to objective knowledge through such re-creation? What kind of process is this, in appearance so different from the other modes of conceptual knowledge? Understanding is what we call this process by which an inside is conferred on a complex of external sensory signs” (GS V, 318/IV, 236).

It must immediately be emphasized that Dilthey characterizes understanding, ambivalently, as a ‘process.’ To a certain extent, this ambivalence is constitutive of the entire discussion on understanding, and, indeed, in Dilthey and many modern proponents of hermeneutics. On the one hand, with understanding a type of knowledge is meant, which is oriented toward certain signs and symbols. Understanding thus appears to be a subcategory or a subclass of knowing. On the other hand, understanding appears to be a method, and in fact the method proper for the human sciences, which among other things is supposed to legitimate the claim to the autonomy of those sciences.
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Now, it would be desirable for clarity in the discussion if this process – the understanding – were interpreted either as a type of knowledge or as a method. Unfortunately, Dilthey does not do this, although it must be immediately pointed out that his discussion of this process is less confusing and less mystical than that of Gadamer and Heidegger. Nonetheless, it remains ambivalent.

So, on the one hand, understanding is brought into connection with lived experience (Erlebnis) and expression: “Thus thought receives a definite function in relation to life. In its tranquil flow, life constantly produces all sorts of realities. Many of its remnants are deposited on the banks of our little ego” (GS VII, 6f./SW III, 27). Lived experiences are thus formed and brought to expression. “The givens […] are always manifestations of life. They appear in the world of the senses, but express something spiritual, which they make it possible for us to cognize” (GS VII, 205/SW III, 226). These manifestations of life, which draw from the source of life, encompass everything mental: texts as well as individual human actions and all sorts of ‘objectifications of life.’ The process of understanding consists in mentally grasping these texts, these human actions, and these objectifications of life, that is, in knowing. Understanding appears to be nothing more than a specific type of knowledge, namely, the perception of specific objects, which is available in principle to every person, not only to the social scientist. Thus, in the discussion of the elementary forms of understanding, Dilthey sketches out an operation that can be characterized as a fully normal, if not banal, sociopsychological communicative process. “Understanding comes about, first of all, through the interests of practical life where persons rely on interchange and communication. They must make themselves understandable to each other. One person must know what the other wants. This is how the elementary forms of understanding originate” (GS VII, 207/SW III, 228).

On the other hand, Dilthey repeatedly speaks of understanding as ‘transposition’ (hineinversetzen), ‘re-creating’ (nachbilden), and ‘re-experiencing’ (nacherleben) (GS VII, 213ff./SW III, 234ff.) and interprets it as “the fundamental procedure for all further operations of the human sciences” (GS V, 333/SW IV, 252). The impression thus arises that understanding ought to be a method, and, in fact, the specific method for the human sciences. What does this method look like in concreto, and what is its logical status? “The fundamental relationship
on which the process of elementary understanding depends is that of
an expression to what is expressed in it. *Elementary understanding is not
an inference from an effect to a cause.* Nor must we conceive it more cau-
tiously as a procedure that goes back from a given effect to some part
of the nexus of life that made the effect possible" (GS VII, 207f./SW
III, 228f.). It is thus clear that understanding is proposed as an alterna-
tive to explanation. Unfortunately, one searches in vain for a concrete
specification of the logical status of this method. Besides a few poetic
phrases, such as “Understanding is a rediscovery of the I in the Thou”
(GS VII, 191/SW III, 213), it is only stated that understanding is not
supposed to be a logical operation: “There is something irrational in
all understanding, just as life itself is irrational; it cannot be repre-
sented in a logical formula” (GS VII, 218/SW III, 239). The question
arises then: What kind of method is it supposed to be exactly?

One point seems clear: Understanding is neither a *mental* process
nor a *logical* operation, that is, neither a *type of knowledge* nor a *logi-
cal method* for acquiring knowledge. But what, then, does it deal with?
“Here too we are not dealing with logical construction or psycholog-
ical analysis but with analysis of interest for a theory of knowledge”
(GS VII, 205/SW III, 226). Here the ambivalence culminates. This
“analysis of interest for a theory of knowledge,” as we can conclude, is
a nonlogical method, which, while being generally valid, does not lead
to nomological knowledge about mental facts, although such mental
facts may be grasped. It is the hermeneutic method à la Dilthey, which
proposes that scholars in the human sciences tap the manifestations
of mind by means of re-experiencing and transposition.

1.3 THE PROBLEM OF THE AUTONOMY OF
THE HUMAN SCIENCES

The ambivalence of the method of understanding would have been a
lesser evil had Dilthey not connected a claim to the autonomy of the
human sciences with it. Dilthey’s systematic claim was thus to plead
for the autonomy of the human sciences on the basis of this hermeneutic
method.14 This claim has been carried forward since Dilthey’s time

14 In this sense, he remains indebted to Droysen’s historicism, which, as is well known,
proceeds from a radical dichotomy between nature and history and views under-
standing as “the most perfect knowledge possible for humans” (Droysen, 1943, 26).