

Naturalistic Hermeneutics

Naturalistic Hermeneutics proposes the position of the unity of the scientific method and defends it against the claim to autonomy of the human sciences. Mantzavinos shows how materials that are “meaningful,” more specifically human actions and texts, can be adequately dealt with by the hypothetico-deductive method, the standard method used in the natural sciences. The hermeneutic method is not an alternative method aimed at the understanding and the interpretation of human actions and texts, but it is the same as the hypothetico-deductive method applied to meaningful materials. The central thesis advocated by Mantzavinos is, thus, that there is no fundamental methodological difference between natural sciences, social sciences, and humanities.

Advanced students and professionals across philosophy, social and political theory, and the humanities will find this a compelling and controversial book.

Professor C. Mantzavinos holds the Chair in Economics and Philosophy at the Witten/Herdecke University, Germany.

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Witten/Herdecke University

Translated from German by Darrell Arnold
in collaboration with the author



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A reader who does not have time to read the entire book might well start by reading Chapter 4 to the end of the book since Part II (the constructive one) is largely independent of Part I (the critical one).

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Preface

It is common to view human actions as meaningful and to view texts and other by-products of human action as meaningful material. It has also become common to view as problematic or impossible the apprehension of meaning with the method of the natural sciences. This book shows that it is possible to hold the view that human actions are meaningful, and at the same time the view that human actions and all meaningful material can be dealt with scientifically using the method prevalent in the natural sciences. I defend, in other words, the thesis that there is no fundamental methodological difference between the natural sciences, on the one hand, and the social sciences and humanities, on the other.

In order to accomplish my aim, I present two kinds of arguments, critical and constructive. In Part I of the book, I present a set of primarily critical arguments against the accentuation of the problematic of meaning, both in its strong and in its weak version. The strong version alleges that the totality of the facts in the world are endowed with meaning. This radical thesis normally involves the text metaphor, which is transferred to the world as a whole, and it is correspondingly maintained that the text model is universal. In the weak version, the possibility of grasping causal connections is commonly admitted for the realm of nature, but not for societal reality, a realm in which only meaning can be apprehended. In principle, then, this is a variant of the old dualism of man and nature. In both versions, placing the accent on the meaningful components of the facts that constitute the

world has two significant implications: Understanding is viewed as the sufficient way to access these meaningful components, and hermeneutics is viewed as the discipline specifically suited to deal with this way of accessing reality. The set of primarily critical arguments presented in Part I intend to show that it is not fruitful to dramatize the problematic of meaning.

More specifically, I critically discuss three hermeneutic conceptions in which the problematic of meaning arises – both in its strong and in its weak versions – and is treated differently from the natural sciences, that is, is treated as impervious to the standard scientific method. For this, I have chosen the approaches of Dilthey, Heidegger, and Gadamer, not only because they present the most influential hermeneutic views in the German-speaking world, but also because they are sources of inspiration for the hermeneutical wave that is flooding the French- and English-speaking worlds. I proceed here by choosing and discussing in detail a particular problem that arises in connection with the hermeneutic conception of each respective author and that is of great systematic relevance. In Chapter 1 I deal with the problem of the autonomy of the human sciences and argue that they are not methodologically autonomous. In Chapter 2 I deal with the hermeneutic circle, because it is the main point of reference in the standard arguments of those who plead for the special status of the social sciences and the humanities. In Chapter 3 I discuss the hermeneutic claim to universality and show why hermeneutics is not universal.

In Part II, I proceed to offer a set of constructive arguments proposing a way to deal with the problematic of meaning based on methodological naturalism. In accord with this position, the occurrences in the societal world can be viewed as natural events in continuity with other natural events. Consequently, in dealing with such occurrences, there is no need for a different method from that used in the natural sciences. In all areas in which increasing our knowledge about the real world can be presupposed as an aim, hypotheses can be formulated, consequences can be drawn by deduction, and these can be tested against empirical data. This operation, known as the ‘hypothetico-deductive method,’ is a methodological procedure that is in principle applicable to every subject matter, whether it is meaningful or not. Since the analytic philosophy of science has been too stepmotherly in its treatment of the concrete problems that come up when dealing with

meaningful material, I attempt to work out the concrete application of the hypothetico-deductive method for this case. It is shown here that, with the help of the hypothetico-deductive method, the apprehension of the meaning of actions as well as the apprehension of the meaning of texts can take place without any difficulty, whereas employing the method of understanding propagated by antinaturalism to solve these problems proves to be of no avail.

Since the notion of the hypothetico-deductive method is central to the whole enterprise, I want to be more specific about its exact character right at the outset. There are two essential characteristics of this method. The first consists in the fact that scientific work is generally viewed as being related to hypotheses. The propositions put forward in scientific work are not viewed as absolutely certain propositions, but as fallible hypotheses. The second characteristic consists in the fact that the hypotheses are tested by means of the deduction of consequences from them and by checking how well these consequences fit in with our experience and with our other well-supported beliefs. The empirical data with the help of which the hypotheses are tested manifest great variety. In the humanities and the social sciences the empirical data to a large degree consist of meaningful material, a fact that can in some cases complicate the process of testing the hypotheses but does not in principle render it impossible.

As will be shown in more detail, the proposal of the hypothetico-deductive method does not deny that different research styles and diverse research techniques dominate the various disciplines, nor does it deny the different structure of the object areas. As will be worked out, for example, in Chapter 1, the idea of the unity of the method is to be confused neither with the demand for a universal language nor with the demand for a unified science; instead it is a minimalistic requirement to set up hypotheses whenever one attempts to acquire knowledge and to test them critically using empirical evidence.

The protagonists of the hypothetico-deductive method, Popper and Hempel, originally viewed it as a method that is directed toward deductive causal explanations in the sciences. This seems to me to be the decisive weakness of their analysis. These original proponents of the hypothetico-deductive method always portrayed scientific activity as explanatory activity, which rightly led many representatives of scientific disciplines such as history, law, and so on to protest. There is

no reason to presume that alleging the existence of individual facts is of less scientific interest, however. I regard it as the main thrust of my argument to extend the range of application of the hypothetico-deductive method to what I call the ‘reconstructions of the nexuses of meaning.’ What is meant by that and how exactly it is supposed to happen are, in a way, the central enterprise of this book.

Acknowledgments

My first intuitions regarding the subject matter of this book go back to 1997, when I was at the University of Freiburg, and in the long gestation of it I have profited from interactions with many people whom I wish to thank.

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Though the book is now being published in the English language, I originally wrote it in German. I had the great luck to have the gifted philosopher Darrell Arnold as the translator of the (still unpublished)

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