

2. Interpretation and Life Connection

Schleiermacher's influence continued in Dilthey's (1833–1911) hermeneutical philosophy. As a student of Schleiermacher, he published in 1871 his monumental *Life of Schleiermacher*. Dilthey began to see in hermeneutics the foundation for the *Geisteswissenschaften* (human studies, or human sciences, or the social and human sciences), which means the humanities and social sciences aiming at interpreting expressions of human inner life. Human understanding penetrates into alien expressions of life through a transposition of the fullness of one's own experience. The cultural sciences seek transposition, transferring mental objectifications back into reproductive experience.¹

In 1883, Dilthey published his *Introduction to the Human Sciences*, which has as its subtitle "attempt at a foundation for the study of society and of history."² His task was to assert the importance and independence of the human sciences against the predominance of the natural sciences.³ According to Dilthey, philosophy must start with experiences that are immediately given, namely, facts of consciousness. The facts of consciousness are apprehended as ultimately "the standpoint of experience and of unprejudiced empirical inquiry" which is distinct from empiricism.⁴ What is analyzed is the socio-historical reality of all human experience; not rationality, but life conceptualized as the dynamic source for all creativity and meaning.

Critique of Historical Reason and Understanding of Life

Dilthey's extensive posthumous opus concerns *Critique of Historical Reason*.⁵ Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* was written to lay the epistemological foundations for the human sciences. According to Kant, the knowing self constructs the world of objects it perceives by means of certain transcendental principles (for instance space and time). These are *a priori* principles: They originate in the mind or understanding itself. Kant elevates the mind to the center of the human knowing process.

1 Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests*, 144.

2 Dilthey, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol.1.

3 Dilthey: *Selected Works*. Vol. 1, 3.

4 *Ibid.*, 130

5 Dilthey, *Selected Works*. Vol. III, 213-311. "To Supplement Kant's Critique of Pure Reason (1781)."

Counter to the Kantian tradition, Dilthey argues that the structures of thought are not *a priori*, nor do they belong to the active mind. Rather, they arise out of experience and derive their meaning from it. Life must be understood from the experience of life itself. As Dilthey argues, “no real blood flows in the veins of the knowing subject constructed by Locke, Hume, and Kant, but rather the diluted extract of reason as a mere activity of thought.”⁶ In the tradition of Locke, Hume, and Kant, as Dilthey argues, a knowing subject and its cognition are treated in separation from the historical context of human inner life.

For Dilthey, all experience and all thought arise out of this interaction. This work must be undertaken in the category of self-interpretation, instead of the theory of knowledge; a critique of historical reason instead of ‘pure’ reason. Furthermore, “not through introspection but only through history do we come to know ourselves.”⁷ At this juncture, Dilthey accepts Hegel’s concept of objective spirit.

Hegel posed the problem of finding a comprehensive system of concepts through the movement of human consciousness. In the ideal stages of spirit, the self finds itself as spirit, objectifies itself in the external world, and finally, recognizes itself as absolute spirit. Within this framework, Hegel intellectualized history.⁸ “Objective spirit” as the objectification of life is the medium through which we participate in our socio-historical situation, understanding our place in it while interacting and communicating with each other.

However, Dilthey argues that Hegel’s notion of the objective spirit leaves empirical and historical relations behind. Hegel’s error is that he does not acknowledge that spirit in its ideational interiorization is already the product of the dynamics of the social world, its exteriorization.⁹ In fact, Dilthey replaces “Hegel’s universal reason by life in its totality [lived experience, understanding, historical context, and power of the irrational].”¹⁰

Our knowledge gained through lived experience is extended through the interpretation of the objectifications of life. This interpretation, in turn, becomes possible only on the basis of the subjective depth of lived experience. Interdependence exists between interpretation, criticism, the combination of sources, and the synthesis of a historical context. Dilthey seeks “to find a method of answering the question of how universally valid knowledge of the historical world is possible on the basis of the given” and “through lived experience and the understanding of the objectification of life.”¹¹

6 Dilthey, *Introduction to the Human Sciences*, 50.

7 Palmer, *Hermeneutics*, 101.

8 Dilthey, *The Formation*, 277.

9 *Ibid.*, 290.

10 *Ibid.*, 173.

11 *Ibid.*, 174.

Life is a historical reality, so history is an expression of life. Understanding the content of objective spirit is not psychological knowledge, but rather, experience itself is organized by particular symbolic structures and laws. Historical life is comprehended as a permanent self-objectivation of the spirit.¹² The efficacy of life and the historical world is to be understood in terms of productivity; the productive nexus or system capable of producing value and meaning and in some cases realizing purposes. For Dilthey, “the fundamental form of a productive system arises in the individual who gathers together present, past, and possibilities of the future in a life-course.”¹³ This perspective makes references to the three aspects of lived experience – the cognitive, the evaluative, and the volitional. The productive system comes about because of the need for communication, interaction, and cooperation among individuals who put their stamp on its mode of productivity, participating in these processes with their whole being, contributing to the realization of the function.¹⁴

Hermeneutical Experience in Life Connections

Dilthey further expands his concept of understanding as a methodological concept rooted in the process of human life itself. It is primarily a category of life, according to which human behavior reflects lived understanding and comprehension of the social or cultural environment. Understanding is a process determined first of all by interest. A dialectics between knowledge and human interests is framed by Dilthey’s project of interpretation. Dilthey emphasizes that “only in language does human inner life find its complete, exhaustive, and objectively understandable expression.”¹⁵

Psychological interpretation starts by projecting into the author’s creative inner-process; proceeds onward to the outer and inner form of the work, and beyond that, grasps the unity of an author’s works in relation to his/her development and spiritual tendencies. A hermeneutical circle “repeats itself in the relation between an individual work and the development and spiritual tendencies of its author, and it returns again in the relation between an individual work and its literary genre.”¹⁶ Nevertheless, all understanding always remains partial and can never be competed: *Individuum est ineffabile*.¹⁷

In Dilthey’s hermeneutics, understanding is a discovery of the “I” in the Thou at the higher levels of connectedness.

12 Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests*, 147.

13 Dilthey, *The Formation*, 177-8.

14 *Ibid.*, 208.

15 Dilthey, “The Rise of Hermeneutics” (1900), in Dilthey, *Hermeneutics and Study of History*, 237.

16 *Ibid.*, 249.

17 *Ibid.*

The course of a life consists of parts, of live experience that are inwardly connected with each other. . . . Everything having to do with spirit manifests this connectedness of a nexus. Interconnectedness is thus a category that stems from life itself.¹⁸

Thus, life is a structural nexus in which lived experiences stand in relationships formed by the connectedness of life.¹⁹ In approaching life through understanding, the triadic formula of experience-expression-understanding is of special significance. Transposition, re-creation, and re-experiencing, point to the overall nature of psychic life which is at work in the process of understanding.²⁰ The German term *Erlebnis* is used by Dilthey to denote the immediacy of life experience in an emphatic form. Dilthey defines *Erlebnis*, or lived experience, as a unit held by a common meaning.

Experience is pre-reflexively given in meaning, becoming an object of reflection. Experience exists before the subject-object-separation. *Erlebnis* represents the direct contact with life, which is called immediate lived experience. Rejecting the subject-object model of human encounter with the world as insufficient, Dilthey put emphasis on the temporal context of relationships which is pre-given in experience. In the context of experience as a unified meaning, experience tends to reach out and include both recollection of the past and anticipation of the future. The past and the future form a structural unity with the presentness of all experience. Experience is intrinsically temporal and historical. With the idea of the temporality of experience in mind, he affirms the historicity of the human being-in-the-world in the Heideggerian sense. Historicity is essentially the affirmation of the temporality of human experience. Therefore, we understand the present only in the horizon of the past and future.

Expression and Socio-historical Reality

For the second term of the triadic formula (expression), Dilthey distinguishes expression from life-expression. Expressions are reflections of something general regarding a type of gesture or action and has a range of usage; however, a life-expression points back to a lived experience as its source. The *Äusserung* has the basic meaning of “to externalize.”

Dilthey, in his 1910 treatise *Drafts for a Critique of Historical Reason*, employs Hegel’s term *objektiver Geist* to denote the intersubjective products human culture has created, as constituted by the systems of law or economy, political and social institutions or natural languages. In this objective spirit (the style of life, forms of social intercourse, custom, law, state, religion, art, science, and philosophy), the past is a permanently enduring present for us. The objective spirit, objectifying itself in the world of the senses,

18 *Ibid.*, 217.

19 *Ibid.*

20 *Ibid.*, 239.

is the medium in which the understanding of other persons and their life-manifestations takes place. It contains something common to the I and the Thou.²¹ Manifestations of life within a common context are facilitated by the objective spirit which encompasses particular homogeneous systems that have a stable and regular system like law or religion.²²

Nevertheless, Dilthey opposes Hegel's abstract construction of the absolute spirit, because Dilthey always starts from the reality of life. For Dilthey, a concept of objective spirit includes language, customs, every form of life, as well as the family, civil society, state, and law. Therefore, what Hegel calls absolute spirit, namely, art, religion, and philosophy, comes under Dilthey's concept of an objective spirit.

Individuals do not usually understand life-expressions in isolation, but in a common context which is articulated in the objective spirit. Transposition occurs in a life-relationship, transferring one's self into a given network of manifestations of life. In this transposition the highest form of understanding arises when the totality of psychic life is active – re-creating or re-experiencing the sense of events.²³ In the process of re-experiencing, Dilthey argues, every lively presentation of an external situation stimulates a re-experiencing in us. The imagination can increase or diminish the intensity of the attitudes, powers, feelings, strivings and thought. These elements characterize our own life-nexus in order to re-create the psychic life of another person. Here, the connectedness of sympathy and empathy is clear insofar as sympathy strengthens the energy of re-experiencing.²⁴

In the study of the Reformation movement, for instance, we can experience Luther's development in terms of the connectedness proceeding from the universally human, through the religious sphere in a historical context and, finally, from his individuality. This process serves to widen our horizon of the possibilities of human existence. We can re-experience it, transposing ourselves into circumstances. Human beings bound and limited by the reality of life are liberated not only by art, but also by the understanding of the historical. As Dilthey argues, "This effect of history is widened and deepened at more advanced levels of historical consciousness."²⁵ Thus, understanding for Dilthey has its true goal in the objectification of life itself.²⁶ His concept of hermeneutics is relevant to understanding a socio-historical reality in which life is disclosed and expressed. For Dilthey, "Understanding of other people and their life-expressions is developed on the basis of experience and self-understanding and the constant interaction between them."²⁷

21 Dilthey, *The Formation*, 229.

22 *Ibid.*, 230.

23 *Ibid.*, 235.

24 *Ibid.*

25 *Ibid.*, 237.

26 Palmer, *Hermeneutics*, 112.

27 *The Hermeneutic Reader*, ed. Kurt Mueller-Vollmer, 152.

Lived experience is structured through internal symbolic and cultural interconnection, and mediated through the act of an understanding of meaning. Here, his previous notion of psychology turns out to be anthropology, because the contents of a culture are grasped through the context of life and in its meaning. The value and meaning of life entails a determinate expression in terms of the structural relationship between elements of culture. All this finds its expression in anthropological, cultural reflection.²⁸

Language and History as Effect

For Dilthey, exegesis or interpretation is defined as rules for the understanding of relatively permanent objectifications of life. The art of understanding centers on the exegesis, or interpretation, of human reality preserved in written form. To be concise, “hermeneutics is the theory of the rule of interpreting written monuments.”²⁹ In language, the life of mind and spirit finds its complete and exhaustive expression. “Exegesis culminates in the interpretation of the written records of human existence. . . . The science of this art is hermeneutics.”³⁰ Interpretation and criticism have constantly developed new means over the course of history.

Through empathy, a human being re-transforms him/herself into another life through the inner context of lived experience. Therefore, understanding requires a projection of oneself into some given expression. On the basis of this empathy or transposition, there arises the highest form of understanding in which the process of re-creating or re-experiencing becomes operative. In this way, empathy or transposition expands. A lived experience is a unit with parts connected by common meaning. With reference to a life-course, particular events as they unfold in the sensible world have a relationship to that which they mean. The togetherness of these lived experiences produces the meaning of a life-course.³¹

Dilthey presented a model of methodological connection based on lived experience, expression, and understanding. Through objectification and life-expression, the history of the human species is integrated into the process of the mind. Therefore, every daily existence of socialized individuals moves within this connection of lived experience, expression, and understanding. Human being is historical being. “Put generally, man, tied and limited by the reality of life, is liberated not only by art . . . but also by historical understanding. This effect of history . . . is widened and deepened in the further of historical consciousness.”³²

28 Dilthey, *The Formation*, 288.

29 Dilthey, *Hermeneutics and Study of History*, 238.

30 *Ibid.*, 237-8.

31 Dilthey, *The Formation*, 255.

32 *The Hermeneutics Reader*, ed. Kurt Mueller-Vollmer, 161.

This aspect anticipates Gadamer's notion of history of effect. Dilthey anticipated the importance of the effect of the history and historical understanding of human beings and their linguisticity. For Dilthey, history is not like something from the past standing over us as an object. Historicity refers to two things: a human being understands him/herself not through introspection but through objectifications of life. Therefore, human self-understanding is indirect, taking a hermeneutical-historical detour through fixed expressions dating back to the past. Thus, we understand life only in a continual approximation. Furthermore, the human being as historical being is not a fixed essence like Nietzsche's concept of human beings as the not-yet-determined animal; Nietzsche's delusion lies in trying to grasp human nature through introspection. This is because Nietzsche could not grasp the significance of history.³³ In contrast, Dilthey insists that history is life apprehended from the perspective of the whole of humanity, which is conceived as interconnected.³⁴ By grasping the formed expression in the past, human beings become creative historically and linguistically; they have freedom to realize themselves as newly and creatively in the future.

If Dilthey locates a human being in and through history, and if history is a series of world views, we are not in a position to judge which world view has superiority over another. Meaning stands in a horizontal context that stretches into the past and into the future. The concept of historicity does not merely refer to human dependence on history and tradition, but human creative praxis in determining one's own essence. The concept of historicity and human praxis is fundamental to Dilthey's hermeneutics. Now a human being appears to be a hermeneutical animal imbued with practical orientation.

Meaning and the Hermeneutical Circle

For Dilthey the term "understanding" was previously connected with the theory of interpreting the written document; however, he broke through such an understanding. Beyond textual interpretation, understanding assumed the meaning of a category of life with a methodological concept in the human sciences. Meaning takes place in a hermeneutical circle, because it refers to what we grasp in the reciprocal interaction between the whole and the parts. The connectedness of the course of life can only be apprehended through the category of meaning individual parts of life have, in relation to an understanding of the whole. "Meaning is the all-inclusive category in which life can be apprehended. . . . Thus meaning establishes itself as the form of life-comprehension."³⁵ The limits of

33 Dilthey, *The Formation*, 269.

34 *Ibid.*, 275.

35 *Ibid.*, 252-3.

understanding lie in the modes of category. Understanding becomes an intellectual process, one that cannot be fully realized.³⁶

Meaning is something historical, a part of a hermeneutical circle which is always defined historically. As far as meaning and meaningfulness are part of the historical circle and situation, they are contextual. Meaning is not hybrid and fixed, but rather, historical, contextual, and evolving with time, relating to a perspective in different social contexts. Meaning is always embedded within an interconnection, relationship, and context. Life exists in the relationship of parts to a whole as their nexus or connectedness.

As Dilthey argues, “meaningfulness fundamentally grows out of the relation of part to whole that is grounded in the nature of living experience.”³⁷ Because life is known from within, we cannot go behind it. “Life cannot be brought before the bar of reason.”³⁸

Significance is the determinateness of the meaning of a part for a whole that comes about as the basis of a productive nexus or system. In the life connection, seen within a productive nexus, significance manifests itself as the relationship of its constituents extending further than the lived experience. The science of psychology cannot do justice to the historical course of life. Thus Dilthey develops an anthropology which is closely involved in questions about the meaning and the value of life. The nexus of anthropology is based on a productive system; this expresses the significance of the systems for the whole of life. Anthropology, close to a concrete definition of life, has attempted to distinguish certain types through life-courses. Herein, the significance of life is fulfilled according to a specific archetype (for instance, the neo-Platonic type; the mystical type of the Middle Ages).³⁹

History as a whole is never possible to complete. History is the domain of life, which is apprehended as its objectification in the sequence of time; its formation stands in accordance with temporal and productive relationships.⁴⁰ Therefore, Dilthey demonstrates an insight to overcome Feuerbach’s critique of religion based on a projection of human wishful thinking. If we see Dilthey’s concept of life in terms of social-historical reality, it demonstrates insight into hermeneutical self-reflection associated with a historical, structural, and linguistic dimension of life. Hermeneutics is not merely the teaching of the art of understanding concerning the fixed life of literatures and their assertions and objectifications, but it concerns the background of historical life and structure embracing the linguistic communication and dialogical relations.

36 *Ibid.*, 246.

37 Palmer, *Hermeneutics*, 120.

38 *Ibid.*

39 Dilthey, *The Formation*, 259.

40 *Ibid.*, 260.

Seen within a hermeneutical circle, there can be no presuppositionless understanding. Every act of understanding is in a given context or horizon, and understanding has a relationship with the historicity of lived experience. Because our understanding is within our horizon, a part of the hermeneutical circle, it transcends the intention of the author. To gain objectively valid knowledge is to be historical and contextual within one's own horizon. In this light, Schleiermacher's dictum is meaningful to Dilthey in a qualified sense of historicity: "The ultimate goal of the hermeneutic process is to understand an author better than he understood himself."⁴¹

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41 "The Rise of Hermeneutics," in Dilthey, *Hermeneutics and Study of History*, 250.