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Dilthey, Empathy and Verstehen
A Contemporary Reappraisal

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Abstract

Wilhelm Dilthey's late nineteenth-century doctrine of 're-experiencing' the thoughts and feelings of the actors whose lives the social scientist seeks to understand has been criticized by several commentators as entailing a 'naïve empathy view of understanding' in which social scientists are said to transport themselves into other cultural contexts in a wholly uncritical, unreflective manner. This article challenges such criticisms by arguing that Dilthey's writings on hermeneutics amount to a highly sophisticated defence of the role of psychological feeling in understanding that should still be of interest to contemporary social theorists. Beginning with a review of the reception of Dilthey's work by Max Weber and the Neo-Kantians, the article goes on to enumerate a number of significant parallels between Dilthey's insights and more recent approaches in social and cultural theory.

Key words

■ Dilthey ■ empathy ■ hermeneutics ■ Neo-Kantianism ■ *Verstehen*

It is often said that to understand the thoughts and actions of other persons, unfamiliar cultures or periods of history, one must show 'empathy'. Empathy, however, is an ambiguous concept and is often invoked in quite imprecise ways. If it is taken to mean the process of grasping the specific cultural, linguistic and historical context of given events, its meaning seems legitimate. In all understanding of other persons, groups or forms of life, we have to imagine how others might think and act differently from ourselves in analogous situations but with different values, motives and beliefs. If, however, it is taken as an ability actually to *feel* others' experiences as states in ourselves, problems arise. To understand another's feelings is not the same as directly to experience those feelings, and does not require experiencing them. Weber's truism, 'One need not have been Caesar in order to understand Caesar' (Weber 1968: 5), tells us that we do not need actually to 'share' or participate in events in order to understand their meaning from the reports available to us. Often our very desire to be 'there' in the immediacy of the situation can interfere with our understanding of its uniqueness. Too

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ready to immerse ourselves in the world of others, we merely project our own experiences onto those of the participants.

It is usually in this specific, problematic sense that the German term *Einfühlung* is to be understood. Interpreters who try to understand other life-contexts by 'feeling themselves into them' (*sich einfühlen*) want to extinguish their own subjectivity; but in doing so they lose all consciousness of self, and consequently forego all consciousness of what it is that distinguishes their world from that of the others. Thus self-extinction culminates only in self-projection.

Given these difficulties with the notion of empathy and its considerable overuse in popular discourse, it is not surprising that Gadamer and Habermas both vehemently deny all value in it for the human sciences. It is, however, one thing to expose these difficulties in the abstract; it is another to speak of an 'empathy theory' or 'empathy view' of understanding and then identify a specific thinker or movement exemplifying such a 'theory' or 'view'. Yet Gadamer (1979: 153–214), Habermas (1973: 178–85; 1988: 154) and Apel (1984: 36–40) all suppose that it was not until the late work of Wilhelm Dilthey after 1900 that German historical thought started to overcome the 'naive empathy theory of understanding' embodied in the 'romantic hermeneutics' of Friedrich Schleiermacher and the pantheistic historicism of the early nineteenth-century Historical School. In their view, historical thought before this time remained locked in an inexorable logic of alternation between positivism and romanticism, objectivism and intuitionism.

In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer claims that Schleiermacher presented the art of interpretation as requiring 'feeling, an immediate, sympathetic and co-natural understanding' that reduced the act of reading to a process of 'placing oneself . . . on the same level as the author [*Gleichsetzung mit dem Verfasser*], through which the text is revealed as a unique manifestation of the life of the author' (1979: 168). This 'romantic pleasure of reflection' and 'intuition' (*Anschauen*) in the 'mighty spectacle' of history as a 'display of free creation' continued in Dilthey's vision of the human sciences, who also held that 'the author's meaning can be divined directly from his text' and that 'the interpreter is absolutely contemporaneous with his author' (1979: 172, 212). Dilthey 'felt himself to be the true perfecter of the historical world-view', but 'what his epistemological thinking tried to justify was fundamentally nothing other than the epic self-forgetfulness of Ranke'. By 'basing historical study on a psychology of understanding', Dilthey espoused 'the sovereignty of an all-round and infinite understanding' which claimed to 'give the historian that mental contemporaneity with his object which we call aesthetic' (1979: 204). Echoing Gadamer, Habermas likewise speaks of 'Dilthey's aestheticization of history' and 'anaestheticization of historical reflection' (1988: 154). Dilthey failed to see how

> . . . interpreters cannot abstractly free themselves from their hermeneutic point of departure and simply jump over the open horizon of their own life activity, unproblematically suspending the context of tradition in which their own subjectivity has been formed in order to submerge themselves in a sub-historical stream of life that

> allows the pleasurable identification of everyone with everyone else. (1973: 181, Habermas, trans. modified)

According to Habermas, Dilthey's earlier writings betray 'a clear danger of psychologism' – even though he later recognized this 'error' of grounding the human sciences on psychology (1973: 337, n.2, 147).

Only recently have Gadamer's and Habermas's views of Dilthey and nineteenth-century hermeneutics come into question. In a new preface to Schleiermacher's *Hermeneutics*, Manfred Frank (1977) pointed out that Gadamer misleadingly concentrates on Schleiermacher's 'psychological doctrine of understanding' at the expense of the other part of Schleiermacher's treatise called 'grammatical interpretation', which was concerned less with the divination of authors' intentions than with comparative analysis of discursive structures. Similarly, a growing number of scholarly monographs have made clear that Dilthey's psychological concept of understanding cannot be comprehended in terms of empathy in the naive sense, and that his consciousness of the historical situation of interpreters was considerably more critical and self-reflective than Gadamer and Habermas allow (cf. Schnädelbach, 1974; Makkreel, 1975; Ermarth, 1978; 1981; Riedel, 1978; 1981; Oliver, 1983; Rodi, 1983; Orth, 1985; Harrington, 2001).

In this article I argue that Gadamer and Habermas fail to distinguish properly between the specific problematic concept of *Einfühlung* and a wider legitimate function of feeling and imagination in understanding. I also go on to pinpoint a number of important features of Dilthey's work that make it of especial relevance to contemporary debates over the nature of cultural production and the precise relationship between individual agency and the collective cognitive structures of social life. I begin by reviewing the debate over psychology in the human sciences in the reception of Dilthey's thought by Weber and the Neo-Kantians (1) and then turn to Dilthey's account of the fusion of psychology and historical analysis in his short essay of 1900, *The Rise of Hermeneutics* (2). The last part of the article is devoted to a reappraisal of Dilthey's significance for contemporary social theory in the light of various movements that either follow directly in his wake or evince notable parallels with his insights (3).

1 Dilthey, Weber and the Neo-Kantians

In several respects, Gadamer's and Habermas's view of Dilthey repeats the objections of the early twentieth-century German Neo-Kantian philosophers, Wilhelm Windelband and Heinrich Rickert. From the mid-1890s onward, Windelband and Rickert each argued that while Dilthey was right to differentiate the natural sciences from the cultural sciences, he was wrong to ground this difference on the notion of the foundational role of psychology in historical studies. Psychology in their view belonged only with the natural sciences and could never capture the intrinsic normative validity (*Geltung*) of cultural forms:

it could only reduce these forms to psychic processes in the minds of individuals. They therefore rejected Dilthey's concept of the *Geisteswissenschaften* in favour of the term *Kulturwissenschaft*, seeing in *Geist* little more than the subjective organ of thought, not the objective 'thought-content' of cultural productions. Although Windelband did not hold to this view as forcefully as Rickert, at one point conceding that 'to judge by its subject-matter, it [psychology] can only be characterized as a humanity, and in a certain sense as the foundation of all the others' (1998: 11), he never went so far as Dilthey's more forthright and extensively defended statement of 1883 that psychology was to be the 'first and most fundamental of the particular human sciences' (1989: 84). The significance Dilthey attached to psychology in the human sciences was well-known in German philosophical circles by the late 1880s, and it was in opposition to this that Windelband still insisted that psychology's 'entire procedure, its methodological arsenal, is from beginning to end that of the natural sciences' (1998: 11). This emphasis on method and mode of concept-formation rather than subject-matter as the essential criterion of distinction between the sciences also led to Rickert's asserting in 1899 that psychology and psychological understanding played no major role in the cultural sciences:

> Certainly it cannot be denied that those empirical disciplines which do not belong to the natural sciences have to do pre-eminently with psychic being and that therefore in this respect the term *Geisteswissenschaft* is not directly false, but this . . . does not consider the criterion of distinction which is essential for a theory of science. For the concept of the psychical makes clear neither the fundamental difference between two different types of scientific *interest* . . . nor any appropriate logical, *formal* opposition between two different *methods* of research. (Rickert, 1986: 29)

Weber likewise derided the concept of psychic being as a criterion of distinction between the sciences, and generally seems to have been prejudiced against Dilthey by Rickert at Heidelberg. Preferring Rickert's 'methodological' to Dilthey's 'ontological' criterion, Weber, as is well-known, defended a more rationalistic approach to *Verstehen* based on a standard of intelligibility derived from the ideal-type of purposive-rational action, confining feeling and psychological understanding to the status of auxiliaries. As he put it in *Economy and Society*, 'the "recapturing" of an experience [*die Nacherlebbarkeit eines Erlebnisses*] is important for accurate understanding [*Evidenz*], but not an absolute precondition for its interpretation' (1968: 5). That type of action which affords 'the highest degree of verifiable certainty' [*Evidenz*] of understanding for Weber is purposive-rational action. Psychological acts of sympathy and imagination could be used to grasp the 'artistic' or 'emotional' context of action, but where another culture's ultimate values radically differed from our own, even empathic understanding might fail:

> [M]any ultimate ends or values toward which experience shows that human action may be oriented often cannot be understood completely, though sometimes we are able to grasp them intellectually. The more radically they differ from our own ultimate values, however, the more difficult it is for us to understand them empathically.

> Depending upon the circumstance of the particular case we must be content either with a purely intellectual understanding of such values or when even that fails, sometimes we must simply accept them as given data. Then we can try to understand the action motivated by them on the basis of whatever opportunities for approximate emotional and intellectual interpretation seem to be available at different points in its course. (Weber, 1968: 5–6)

In *Roscher and Knies* (1975, written in 1903–6), Weber associated Dilthey's name with the views of Friedrich Gottl, Hugo Münsterberg and Theodor Lipps, each of whom spoke in various ways of interpreters 'displacing' and 'transposing' themselves (*sich versetzen*) into the psyche of the other person. Weber's objections to Lipps are especially worth noting in this connection.

Theodor Lipps was a psychological philosopher based in Munich, known chiefly for his *Grundlegung der Ästhetik* of 1903; and he if any appears to have approximated the closest to the 'naive empathy theory of understanding'. Lipps argued that in watching an acrobat on the tight-rope, we so empathize with and 'inwardly imitate' the acrobat's state of mind that the judgment that it is he or she and not us on the rope remains 'unconscious' for us. We do not merely 'represent' (*vorstellen*) the action to ourselves as an object; we live out a fantastic but nonetheless real experience of our own. Lipps maintained that an act of *Einfühlung* of this nature was necessary for all aesthetic appreciation and constituted a special kind of understanding that was more than 'barely intellectual'. Against this, however, Weber points out that,

> Irrespective of the value these claims might have for the foundations of aesthetics, for the purposes of a *logical* analysis, it is above all necessary to keep the following in mind: 'concrete understanding' – and even in the work of Lipps there is at least an intimation of this – is *not* an 'empathetically understood experience'. Nor is it developed out of an 'empathetically understood experience', in the way Lipps describes. Whoever 'empathizes' with Lipps's acrobat 'experiences' neither what the acrobat 'experiences' on the tightrope, nor what he would 'experience' if he were on the tightrope. What he 'experiences' does not even have any unambiguous, imaginative relationship to the experience of the acrobat. And, most importantly, it follows that it not only fails to qualify as 'knowledge' in any sense of this word. It also fails to constitute the object of 'historical' knowledge. For in the present case, the object of 'historical' knowledge is the experience of the acrobat, not the experience of the empathizing historian. (Weber, 1975: 165–6)

However, it is doubtful whether Dilthey's idea of feeling in understanding can be equated with Lipps's introspectionist position. Arguably, neither Weber nor Windelband and Rickert fully appreciated Dilthey's conception of the psychological aspect of understanding. Dilthey distinguished an interpretive, 'descriptive and analytical' (*beschreibende und zergliedernde*) psychology in the human sciences from a nomological 'explanatory' (*erklärende*) psychology characteristic of experimentation in the natural sciences (cf. Harrington, 2000a). Where the former involved disclosure of the uniqueness of individual case-histories through contextual 'thick description', the latter involved subsumption of multiple instances and atomic elements under predictive laws. Although Weber was aware

of this distinction, he seems not to have acknowledged its full significance for Dilthey's method.[1]

It can be argued that the roots of this under-appreciation go back to Windelband's and Rickert's rather dogmatic appropriation of Kant's transcendental logic. Recent scholars such as Makkreel (1975) and Ermarth (1978) point out that the prejudices of the Neo-Kantians in this connection seem more to have reflected their interests in intellectual self-distinction than a fair understanding of Dilthey's position. In particular, Makkreel (1975: 218–23, 274–79) demonstrates how Windelband and Rickert failed to see how, for Dilthey, the social-psychological factors of human experience in historical time themselves enter into the transcendental framework of human knowledge and cannot be reduced to purely contingent conditions. Dilthey sensitively eschewed Rickert's rigid dichotomy between objective thought-contents on the one hand and mere subjective *Geist* on the other, and thereby arrived at a conception of cultural phenomena which in its marriage of social-psychological context with logical evaluation strikingly anticipates the phenomenological method of Edmund Husserl. Although he was not to clarify the insight until reading Husserl's *Logical Investigations* of 1901 and subsequently meeting Husserl in 1905, Dilthey's early writings make clear that he did *not* regard mental expressions as reducible to empirical states of experience in the life of the subject. Cultural forms had to be understood both as expressions of psychic life in historical contexts *and* as intentional contents whose validity held independently of the particular experiences of their authors. One text that makes this especially clear is Dilthey's short essay of 1900, *The Rise of Hermeneutics* (1924b).

2 History, Psychology and Hermeneutics

Around 1900 Dilthey's thinking undoubtedly changes somewhat. He seems inclined to place more emphasis on the outward 'objectivation' of psychic contents in material forms, sounds and bodily movements that act as differential elements within publicly recognized systems of signs. He increasingly notes how these materially objectified 'life-expressions' (*Lebensäußerungen*) mediate between the twin processes of *Erleben* and *Verstehen* and embody the objective independence of symbolic meanings from the passing experiences of their authors and interpreters. Indeed he now describes not psychology but hermeneutics as the foundational discipline of the human sciences. In a late text, he even declares:

> [I]t is . . . a common error for our knowledge of this inner side [of cultural production] to rely upon the psychic course of life, i.e. to employ psychology . . . Our understanding of spirit is not psychological knowledge. It requires consideration of spiritual formations with their own structure and lawful autonomy. (Dilthey, 1981: 84)

Habermas (1973: 147) sees these lines as marking a complete *volte-face* in which Dilthey recognized the 'error' of his earlier 'naive empathy theory' and adopted an alternative quasi-Hegelian 'philosophy of reflexion' (*Reflexionsphilosophie*)

based on the self-recovery of the collective human subject in the productions of its past. This, however, is misleading. The lines quoted are from an isolated passage in which Dilthey warns specifically against psychologizing tendencies in the idea of the 'spirit of the laws' (recalling Montesquieu); but he does not generalize from this case to historical understanding as a whole. Furthermore, although he increasingly made use of the Hegelian concept of 'objective spirit' around this time, he had already invoked Hegel in this way a decade earlier in *Ideas for a Descriptive and Analytical Psychology* (1924a: 180) and had by no means embarked on a new tack. Newly edited manuscripts available in the *Gesammelte Schriften* since the 1970s indicate that Dilthey did not simply revoke his earlier programme of psychological understanding and did not simply regard it as an 'error' but rather sought continually to revise and redefine its relationship to hermeneutics and historical analysis (cf. Makkreel, 1975: 295).[2] He no longer spoke of psychology as the 'first and most fundamental of the particular human sciences' but he by no means abandoned his concept of the psychic nexus. Dilthey's aim throughout was rather to show how psychology stands in need of historical reference at the same time as historical and sociological explanation, for its part, stands in need of psychological feeling: to show that psychology and hermeneutics are not contradictory but complementary moments of the one whole arc of understanding. This is made especially clear in *The Rise of Hermeneutics*.

In this essay, Dilthey defines *Verstehen* as 'that process by which we know something interior from signs given outwardly to the senses'; and then more precisely, 'that process by which from signs given to the senses we recognize something psychic, of which the signs are the expression' (1924b: 318/236).[3] 'Interpretation' (*Auslegung* or *Interpretation*) describes a distinct 'art of understanding', concerned especially with meaningful objects such as texts, documents and works of art that can be returned to over time. Hermeneutics is the theory of this art (*die Kunstlehre der Auslegung*); and the present task of hermeneutics, Dilthey declares, is 'to preserve the general validity of interpretation against the inroads of romantic caprice and sceptical subjectivity, and to give a theoretical justification for such validity, upon which all the certainty of historical knowledge is founded' (1924b: 331/250). Two points should be clarified in this statement, the first concerning Dilthey's idea of the progress of hermeneutics, and the second his view of the role of authors' intentions.

Gadamer (1979: 209) claims that in this essay Dilthey betrays his peculiarly triumphalist vision of a history of progressive emancipation from institutional authorities such as the church, papacy and the state toward the establishment of hermeneutics as an autonomous rule-bound discipline. However, this is a rather unfair reading. Dilthey certainly approved of the evolution of hermeneutics from a disparate collection of norms for interpreting canonical texts of scripture and law into a distinctive discipline; but he stressed that the task of hermeneutics today is not to prescribe didactic rules for interpretation, only to describe retrospectively what it is that makes interpretation a skilled 'art'. In the spirit of Schleiermacher, he reiterates that all meanings of texts and historical processes

are inexhaustible, that interpretation 'can only ever be accomplished to a certain degree' and that 'all understanding remains always relative and can never be completed' (1924b: 330/249).

Schleiermacher's importance was that where previous hermeneutics had regarded the text at best 'as a logical automaton, clothed in style, images and rhetoric', Schleiermacher restored the spontaneity of imagination in understanding and saw that 'all interpretation of written works is only the artful working out of the process of understanding which extends over the entirety of life and expresses itself in all forms of speech and writing' (1924b: 329/248). Schleiermacher also showed that the paradox of the hermeneutic circle contains the clue to its solution: that while 'the whole of a work should be understood from its individual words and their interconnections, . . . complete understanding of the parts presupposes already the whole', but that one could nevertheless 'begin with an overview of the division [of the text], comparable to a fleeting first reading', 'tentatively sketch its total structure . . . and highlight places permitting insight into its overall composition', and then the real work of interpretation could begin (1924b: 330/249). In this way, our initial projections need not impede access to the evidence; rather they first allow us to relate each piece of evidence to a meaningful whole on the basis of which we can then gradually correct the initial vagueness or inaccuracy of our projections.

On the question of authorial intentions, Dilthey makes clear that intentions represent only one of several different moments on which an interpreter can concentrate and by no means form a privileged source of textual meaning (1981: 97–9, 264–66). As Ermarth (1978: 271) has put it, in Dilthey's triad of *Erlebnis, Ausdruck* and *Verstehen*, elevating one moment above the other, such as the biography of the author over the semiotic structures of the text or the creative licence of the interpreter, would have been like attempting to remove two sides of a triangle: all three moments are equally essential. In adopting Schleiermacher's idea of the art of 'divining' textual meanings by delving into the author's 'unconscious creative process', Dilthey's concern was to stress the way in which any such unconscious process would be socially constructed by the spirit of the age and culture to which the author belonged. Interpreters could understand the text 'better than the author himself', in Schleiermacher's famous dictum (Schleiermacher, 1977: 94), in the sense that not being part of the author's world, they would be able to survey the author's world as an objective totality, whereas the author would have been too much entangled in it as a participant. Thus Dilthey's aim was to stress that interpretation involves both an art of eliciting meanings through feeling for the psychology of creative expression and, at the same time, a firm grasp of the structuring of all psychic states and intentions by historically specific frameworks of communication and social action. It is therefore very hard to see this position as either objectivist or naively intuitionist.

The key terms Dilthey uses for empathy in *The Rise of Hermeneutics* are *Nachfühlen* and *Nacherleben*. These terms must be strictly distinguished from *Einfühlen*, which he uses to describe Herder's philosophy (*Herders kongeniales Sich-Einfühlen in die Seele von Zeitaltern und Völkern*) (1924b: 326/246) but

seldom endorses himself. *Nachfühlen* and *Nacherleben* mean that what I 're-feel' and 're-experience', I do so at an essentially secondary reflective level. *Nach-* carries the sense that my understanding is essentially retrospective, that the other's experience is essentially past and therefore not immediately reproducible and repeatable for me. I do not try to 'feel myself into' others' experiences or 'enter into their psyche' and thereby stimulate their experiences as states in me. Although the difference between these prefixes *Ein*, *Mit* and *Nach* may seem negligible to English (and even present-day German) readers, they signified a crucial conceptual difference in the technical literature of the time. As Max Scheler made clear in *The Nature of Sympathy* of 1912, *Nachfühlen* and *Nacherleben* imply neither the taking of any moral stance on something nor any active investment of emotion. *Einfühlen* and *Mitfühlen*, on the other hand, involve both actively shared feeling and ethical agreement about something:

> *Nachfühlen* remains still in the sphere of cognitive behaviour . . . Intellectual historians, novelists and dramatists must possess the gift of *Nacherleben* to a high degree; but they need not in the slightest have 'sympathy' [*Mitgefühl*] for their objects and persons. *Nachfühlen* and *Nacherleben* must therefore be strictly distinguished from *Mitfühlen*. Certainly they involve a feeling of others' feelings, not mere knowledge of them, or mere judgement that the others have these feelings; but they do not involve experience of the actual feelings as states in us. In *Nachfühlen* we grasp experientially the quality of the other's feelings – but without these feelings migrating into us or stimulating similar actual feelings in us. (Scheler, 1985: 20)

This passage captures precisely what distinguishes Dilthey's concept of reflective empathy from the confused doctrine of *Einfühlung* criticized by Weber in Theodor Lipps.

Finally, Dilthey reinforces his argument by stating that understanding involves 'reconstructing' (*Nachbilden*) others' psychic life through an 'inference of analogy' (*Analogieschluß*) (1924b: 318/236). From the at first disparate sensory evidence available to us, we recreate the unity, vitality and individuality of others' experiences by both 'investing our own life-experience' and critically comparing our manner of expressing this experience with the others' symbolic framework. If other persons experience something that they express by an outward sign S, I must seek an experience from my life that I too express by S or by a sign resembling S; then I can reflectively infer from this experience to theirs; but I must ensure that my sign resembles theirs as closely as possible and is not a distortion of it. This will make my understanding neither arbitrarily subjective, on the one hand, nor a mechanical deduction from principles, on the other. As Dilthey had already emphasized in his *Introduction to the Human Sciences* of 1883, the diversity of human cultures 'does not permit us to directly infer the conditions of earlier times from human nature as we know it today or to derive current conditions from a general type or pattern of human nature'; but nonetheless, 'all of this is more than outweighed by the fact that I myself . . . am a constituent of this social body and that the other constituents are similar to me and are thus for me likewise comprehensible in their inner being' (1989: 88–9). It follows also

that in seeking to understand myself, I can gain no knowledge of myself solely by 'inner perception'. I can only understand myself *through others*:

> The inner experience in which I become aware of my own states can never by itself make me conscious of my individuality. Only through comparison of myself with others do I know what is individual in me; only then do I become conscious of what makes me different from others. (Dilthey, 1924b: 318/236)

Or as he put it later: 'Man knows himself only in history, never through introspection' (1981: 279).

3 Dilthey and Contemporary Social Theory

So far I have argued that Dilthey was not guilty of the 'naive empathy theory of understanding' and that it is therefore mistaken to see his philosophy as founded on some misguidedly 'aestheticizing' ideal of immediate contemporaneity with historical subjects. Dilthey did not simply imitate Ranke's pantheistic ethos of 'self-effacement' before the past: from the very first, he highlighted this 'deep longing of the true historian for objective reality' which Ranke 'expresses very beautifully and powerfully', but warned that 'this longing can be satisfied only through a scientific knowledge' and that history 'cannot be grasped by mere contemplation or intuition, but only through analysis' (1989: 143).

None of this is to deny that popular notions of empathy can often be grossly imprecise, nor that other writers of the period may have come close to the difficulties Gadamer and Habermas evoke. But Dilthey's early writings indicate that no conception of *Verstehen* that espouses controlled empathic understanding of social action in historical context need necessarily degenerate into the kind of romantic intuitionism and simultaneous objectivism of lived feelings and fixed intended meanings that both Gadamer and Habermas and, in a different way, Weber and the Neo-Kantians, all impute to him. In this light, I now want to dwell more closely on the contemporary relevance of Dilthey and Diltheyan thinking for our conception of the nature of social and cultural life.

Hans Joas (1985: 41–3) has pointed out the centrality of Dilthey's thought to the subsequent development of G.H. Mead's pragmatist social psychology and, through Mead, to the symbolic interactionist movement. Dilthey is undoubtedly a formative influence behind Mead's idea of the process of 'taking up the attitude of the other', and since Mead studied with Dilthey, both thinkers not surprisingly hold similar views about the significance of daily communicative practices and the fallacies of both reductionist naturalism and transcendental idealism. However, Joas also points out that where Dilthey saw no need to explain the practico-social generation of the sense of self and 'inner experience', Mead achieved far greater insight into the intersubjective construction of selfhood through bodily interaction between persons. One might object that this difference is only one of degrees since Dilthey certainly emphasizes the inner dependence of our

understanding of ourselves on our understanding of others in communication. Nonetheless, it is undoubtedly true that Dilthey's concept of 'life' cannot by itself help illuminate the specific processes of ego-formation and cognitive development in communicative situations, at least not with anything like the empirical rigour achieved by the American writers. Alfred Schütz took significant steps toward resolving these questions by means of a fusion between Weber's concept of social action and Husserlian phenomenology of the lifeworld, while distancing himself from Dilthey's approach (Schütz, 1967: 240); but he too soon found himself grappling with the Cartesian residues behind Husserl's conception of the transcendental ego, and it is significant that Schütz also later turned to Mead's work for greater empirical clarification of these questions, both before and especially after emigration to the USA.

However, it should not be forgotten that Dilthey also defended a notion of the 'objective spirit' (*objektive Geist*) of particular cultural communities and historical periods. In Dilthey's understanding of this originally Hegelian term, objective spirit denotes the tissue of affinities between particular dimensions of social action that go to make up the cultural identity of particular groups, or 'the manifold forms in which the communality which exists between individuals has objectified itself in the sensible world' (Dilthey, 1981: 256). Here Dilthey's outlook takes on a special relevance to contemporary debates over the nature of cultural production and its cognitive structures.

The first point to be underlined in this connection is that Dilthey's related concept of the 'common spirit' (*Gemeingeist*) of a people that is objectified in their life-expressions must in no way be mistaken for a notion of the 'collective psyche'. Psychologistic notions of the *Volksseele* ('soul of a people') and *Volksgeist* ('spirit of a people') were familiar vocabulary in the early romantic period of nineteenth-century German scholarship since Herder; especially, for example, in the *Völkerpsychologie* of Wilhelm Wundt. Against these notions, however, Dilthey emphasizes that only individuals possess psyche (*Seele*), not the collective, and consciously warns against use of such terms:

> The individual unity of life in a people that is manifested in the affinity of all its life-expressions, such as its law, language and religion, is mystically expressed in terms such as *Volksseele* . . . and *Volksgeist* . . . But these concepts are as useless for history as that of vital impulse in physiology. What the expression *Volk* means can only be explicated analytically. (Dilthey, 1989: 92)

Dilthey spoke of different regions, periods, groups and communities as evincing definite affinities between different component elements of the social system, such as economic practices, laws, language and literature. The culture of the early Teutons, for instance, arose from a peculiar conjunction of pastoral economy with warrior virtue, feudal political organization and folk epic (1981: 214). However, the *Gemeingeist* was not to be understood in terms of some singular mental substance that animates the community like the psyche in the body. Periods and milieus could be 'centred in themselves' and demonstrate definite ways of seeing the world, particular ways of feeling, valuing and knowing,

particular schemes of salience and relevance, but they were only 'subjects of an ideal kind', not to be compared with concrete persons (1981: 163):

> The bearers of this continual generation of values and goods in the spiritual world are individuals, communities and cultural systems, in which individuals interact with one another. The interaction of individuals is determined by the fact that they posit goals for themselves and submit themselves to rules for the realization of values. Thus in every kind of interaction we find a life-relation (*Bezug des Lebens*) . . . that unites individuals with each other – an inner core, so to speak, which cannot be grasped psychologically but which manifests itself in every such system of relations between men. (Dilthey, 1981: 187)

Here Dilthey's concept of the 'cultural system' and of the 'complex of interactions' (*Wirkungszusammenhang*) between individuals shares much in common with Simmel's contemporaneous theory of the 'forms of sociation' (*Formen der Vergesellschaftung*) that generate personal identities through the crystallization of social roles and professions and through the confrontations and exchanges between these roles and professions that result from the social division of labour, as laid out most famously in Simmel's *The Philosophy of Money*. In Dilthey's terms, the individual is a 'point of intersection' (*Kreuzungspunkt*) between increasingly complex patterns of interaction that grow out of economic transactions and the 'external organization of society' (Dilthey, 1989: 114) as well as artistic and religious movements. This same account also arguably anticipates in an interesting way Ferdinand de Saussure's theory of meaning as a product of differentiation between signifiers (cf. Riedel, 1981: 9). One may argue that in a way that is at least loosely analogous to Saussure's theory, Dilthey holds that the shared meanings underpinning the 'spirit' of a particular culture rests on no intrinsic relation of resemblance between the culture's collective representations and its natural environment, landscape or climate but only on differential relations between both the internal components of its social organization – between its laws, customs, language, artistic traditions and so on – and the other cultures with which it comes into communication. Similarly, Ernst Cassirer's early twentieth-century *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* reflects and elaborates these insights (Cassirer, 1953). Working under the significant influence of Dilthey's programme of the *Geisteswissenschaften*, contemporary German art historians such as Aby Warburg and Erwin Panofsky had sought to place the study of art on a scientific footing by tying the evaluation of visual forms to iconography and cultural analysis, and these principles were then developed by Cassirer into a general theory of symbolic forms in the social generation of collective schemes of representation (cf. Ferretti, 1989). In Cassirer's terms, in the transition from 'mythic' to 'linguistic consciousness', in which one culture meets with another where before it believed itself alone in the universe, people realize henceforth that the signification of signs is arbitrary, that meanings are not natural but conventional and that words are not pictures, nor substances, but symbolic functions (Cassirer, 1953: vol. I, 186–205; vol. II, 235–55). This account shares much in common with Dilthey's conception of the transition from 'elementary

forms of understanding' to certain 'higher forms of understanding' through increased distanciation and differentiation between communities (Dilthey 1981: 259).

These parallels help us to see that for Dilthey and associated contemporary writers, the term *Geist* denotes not some reified mental substance but a complex of relationships between practices, experience and signifying activities. Although these writers operate with a conceptual armoury that antedates the discovery of language as the key to intersubjectivity in the way that became so central to twentieth-century philosophy after Wittgenstein, the concept of *Geist*, for all its Idealist heritage, does not have to be seen in terms of some deterministic supra-individual force that sweeps through history and cultural life like a wind above the heads of embodied agents. We do not have to sense the spectre of some Hegelian caricature in every use of the term *Zeitgeist* in the way once felt by, for instance, Ernst Gombrich in his comments on nineteenth-century German art scholarship (Gombrich, 1969: 30–2). Rather, it is possible to discern elements of a way of thinking here that resurface in the work of several recent theorists influenced by the French Structuralist movement such as Pierre Bourdieu or the many exegetes of Mikhail Bakhtin's writings on literature or the 'New Historicists' in English literary studies. Clearly, Dilthey has no conception of 'speech-acts' or of the 'performative' effects of linguistic utterance, but this absence of any explicit thematization of language and its social uses need not debar his work from suggesting insights into the complex relationship between the cognitive structures of cultural production and the intuitive understandings of ordinary actors that could be of relevance to contemporary social and cultural theory.

H.H. Kögler (1996) has drawn attention to some interesting connections in this regard between the Foucauldian analysis of discursive and institutional structures and symbolically embedded power-relations on the one hand and phenomenological and hermeneutic accounts of subjectively lived meanings on the other. Kögler suggests that far from our having to see these two sets of approaches, the structuralist/post-structuralist and the phenomenological/hermeneutic, as diametrically opposed, each can be seen as both complementing and capable of benefiting from the criticisms of the other. While the Foucauldian approach tends to universalize the power and brute facticity of discursive structures at the expense of the internal normative validity of communicative rules, without, however, entirely abrogating the latter dimension, the phenomenological and hermeneutic approach, conversely, tends to place too much trust in dialogical processes as purely normatively motivating factors of communication, albeit without also ruling out the effects of tradition and custom in the routine reproduction of everyday life. Although Kögler mainly has in mind Gadamer's hermeneutics as exemplary for the latter approach, one might equally substitute Dilthey's work; and this substitution seems all the more suggestive as Dilthey explicitly analyses the outward 'objectification' of subjectively lived meanings and experiences (*die Objektivation des Lebens*) in materially and institutionally embodied 'cultural systems' and complexes of 'objective spirit' that at once constrain and enable cultural innovation. In this sense, the view of Dilthey as displaying unappealingly

'objectivist' tendencies again loses much of its force (cf. Harrington, 2000b). For it is not that Dilthey operates with some indefensibly scientistic idea of the objectivity of cultural life and meaning but that his stress on the at once experiential *and* objective character cultural production correctly elucidates an irreducible element of facticity in social forms: the same element that the theorists influenced by structuralism also evoke in their various ways.

I now turn to two aspects of Dilthey's significance for contemporary assessments of the status of social theory as 'science'. The first concerns Dilthey's relation to Durkheim and the idea of 'rules of sociological method', and the second the controversy over the 'dualistic' implications of the *Verstehen/Erklären* or *Geist/Natur* dichotomy.

Donald Levine (1995) has remarked that where Simmel and Weber form the counterpart to Durkheim as founding progenitors of the discipline of sociology in Germany, Dilthey more than any other figure played Durkheim's role as codifier and spokesman for a national tradition of social thought. 'Like Durkheim', Levine writes, 'Dilthey exerted himself to recover and enhance the visibility of earlier participants in the transgenerational dialogue that prefigured modern social science' (Levine 1995: 194), writing voluminous essays on Lessing, Goethe, Kant, Hegel, Schleiermacher and others. However, at least one key difference of attitude distinguishes Dilthey's synthesis of the German national tradition from Durkheim's appropriation of the French *sciences de l'homme*, and this is his fundamental aversion to the idea of 'rules' of method.

Dilthey's position is that there can be no 'rules of sociological method' insofar as these rules attempt to legislate correct ways of deciphering symbolic objects. Interpretation is an art of divining and intuiting meanings, not a prescribed sequence of operations. In this sense, 'feeling' and 'empathy' are Dilthey's words to defend a point more familiar to contemporary readers through the work of Wittgenstein and his followers, namely that while all understanding of social-linguistic codes involves 'following rules', there can be no further rules for how to apply these rules. Speech and understanding are rule-governed acts, but following rules also involves knowing how to apply these rules creatively to unexpected situations and circumstances, which is not something for which the speaker or reader can in turn rely on rules. Hirsch (1967: 180-207) and Ricoeur (1991: 158) indicate in just this sense that literary and cultural interpretation involves a dialectic of 'guessing' and 'validating': both guessing the meaning of the text creatively and simultaneously correcting or consolidating one's guess by following the rules of grammatical analysis and gaining deeper acquaintance with historical facticity. All interpretation thus requires skilled, rule-bound expertise based on validation against determinate evidence, but no amount of expertise will ensure imaginative insight of interpretation. On another level, this insight also suggests commonalities with the views of contemporary Wittgensteinian writers who object to the very possibility of social theory wherever such theory is expected to yield generalizing constructs capable of defining in some transcendental sense what 'must' obtain in social reality for agents to behave and believe as they do (cf. Pleasants, 1999). There are no set rules of sociological

method capable of invariably guiding social inquiry, any more than there are set constants of interaction capable of delimiting behaviour and expression in invariable ways.

Lastly, it has been argued that the nineteenth-century antithesis of the *Geisteswissenschaften* and *Naturwissenschaften* contains 'metaphysical' and 'dualistic' implications and consequently can no longer be upheld today after the challenges to inductive empiricism in the natural sciences posed by writers such as Popper, Quine and Kuhn (cf. Hesse, 1980; Bernstein, 1983; Apel, 1985; Bohman, 1991; Hiley et al., 1991). Since the natural sciences do not develop by progressive accretions of knowledge from observations but by discontinuous paradigm shifts where facts are intertwined with prior theories and discursive frameworks, the difference of the sciences cannot be as simple as Dilthey's original criteria suggest.[4]

It is, however, difficult to see why Dilthey's 'dualism' should be inherently problematic. Certainly his picture of the methods of the natural sciences was not elaborate, and like many nineteenth-century German literati, he tended to assimilate all natural sciences to the mechanistic principles of physics. But while the language of spirit and nature may seem incorrigibly romantic to us today, it may be argued that a basic difference of subject-matter still remains between the sciences that his concepts rightly address.

Dilthey accepted that the natural sciences also require practices of interpretation and symbolic analysis, and further that the human sciences, for their part, cannot afford not to make use of the findings of the natural sciences where the explanatory functions are appropriate:

> At both points of transition between the study of nature and that of the human world – i.e., where nature influences the development of the mind and where it is either influenced by or forms the passageway for influencing other minds – both sorts of knowledge always intermingle. Knowledge of the natural sciences overlaps with that of the human sciences. (Dilthey, 1989: 70)

Furthermore, Dilthey did not invoke any material distinction between different kinds of entities, as Rickert (1986: 30) once complained. Rather, Dilthey distinguishes between two types of 'facts' (*Tatsachen*), allowing us to regard the same sensory material as relevant to the human *or* natural sciences depending on whether we apprehend it in the context of inner *or* outer experience (Dilthey, 1924a: 248). Thus physiology studies human life, but not from the perspective of lived experience: its appropriate facts are not directly meaningful to the subjects of whom they are predicated. Conversely, historians can study natural phenomena like the Lisbon earthquake of 1755 or the Black Forest in Germany, yet not as instances of physical regularities but rather as unique cultural facts.

Nonetheless, however true it may be that the natural sciences also involve skills of interpretation, one may argue that Dilthey was correct to insist that the objects of interpretation in the natural sciences are essentially the special theoretical constructs of previous scientists, not the taken-for-granted constructs of ordinary actors in society.[5] These special constructs may be embedded in general cultural

practices and world-views, but they are not *studied as such* by the scientists in question. Darwin's theory of natural selection is clearly a richly symbolic construct, deeply embedded in the heritage of European evolutionary thought; but the modern biological and zoological scientists who analyse its symbolic construction do so chiefly with a view to improving their capacity to explain natural processes, not with an eye to the light it sheds on nineteenth-century intellectual history. By contrast, in the human sciences, any such constructs, theories and ideas, scientific, philosophical, mythical or otherwise, are all treated as the unique ends of study. Thus in general, it is difficult to see why Dilthey's differentiation of *Verstehen* and *Erklären* should be dualistic in any inherently controversial sense. Although he remains essentially a theorist of the humanities in the sense of predominantly 'ideal' productions rather than of social behaviour more widely, and although he does not yet encounter the combination of interpretive with causal-explanatory and statistical methods that we know today in specifically social science, he does not present this opposition in a rigidly categorical manner and he still distinguishes what he calls the 'systematic' human sciences of economics and linguistics from the more purely narrative-based discipline of history itself. As he sums up at one point:

> To be sure, the reference to spirit in the term *Geisteswissenschaften* can give only an imperfect indication of the subject matter of these sciences, for it does not really separate *facts of the human spirit* from the *psychophysical unity of human nature*. Any theory intended to describe and analyze socio-historical reality cannot restrict itself to the human spirit and disregard the totality of human nature. Yet this shortcoming of the expression *Geisteswissenschaften* is shared by all the other expressions that have been used: *Gesellschaftswissenschaft* (social science), *Soziologie* (sociology), *moralische* (moral), *geschichtliche* (historical), or *Kulturwissenschaften* (cultural sciences). All of these designations suffer from the same fault of being too narrow relative to their subject-matter. (Dilthey, 1989: 58)

The aforegoing remarks have sought to elicit aspects in Dilthey's work of general significance to contemporary social theory. When these aspects are complemented by a reappraisal of the concepts of understanding and lived experience in Dilthey's writings on the human sciences, it should be clear that the late nineteenth-century German hermeneutic movement represents no mere episode in the historical formation of the disciplines of social science but a continual source of insights for our ongoing inquiries into the nature of social and cultural life today.

Notes

I am grateful to Professors Hans Joas and Gerard Delanty for comments in the preparation of this article.

1 Weber appears not to have read Dilthey in a concentrated manner (see Rossi, 1994). However, his historical method often shows him to be far closer to Dilthey than he acknowledges. In particular, one may argue that Weber's sociological analyses employ

techniques of psychological characterization in precisely the same subtle, non-reductive sense that Dilthey himself recommends. For instance, in *The Protestant Ethic* Weber relates Benjamin Franklin's personal maxims and attitudes to life to the historical structures of ascetic Protestantism in a very similar manner to the way Dilthey relates Luther's life-history to the spirit of Reformation Germany (cf. Dilthey, 1981: 266). Also, Weber's central concept of the 'spirit of capitalism' must be deemed a deeply psychological one in character, not, to be sure, in the confused sense of some inner mental essence that directly causally generates capitalist structures but in the complex Diltheyan sense of a configuration of emotive, volitive and cognitive attitudes that structure social practice and engender a unique 'ethos' of rational 'conduct of life' (*Lebensführung*). Like Dilthey, Weber rejected the naturalistic psychology of Comte, Mill and Spencer but did not reject all uses of psychology in history *tout court* (see in particular the Replies to H. Karl Fischer in Weber, 2001). Hennis (1998) remarks in this connection that one style of psychology for which Weber seems to have reserved especial respect was that pioneered by William James in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* of 1902. It is no coincidence that Dilthey too was very impressed by James (cf. Dilthey, 1924a: 167, 177)

2 This criticism of Gadamer's and Habermas' diagnosis of Dilthey's development is also made briefly by Hans Joas (1985: 223, n.22) in his study of G.H. Mead.

3 All quotations from this text (Dilthey 1924b) are in my own working translation. An alternative translation exists by Rickman (1976). Page numbers for passages translated by Rickman appear after the stroke (/).

4 One of the most extreme formulations of this view has been put by Richard Rorty, who asserts that the only difference between the sciences of nature and sciences of spirit is that the latter take variety and discontinuity of conceptual and linguistic frameworks for granted, whereas the former do not: 'Nature is whatever is so routine and familiar and manageable that we trust our own language implicitly. Spirit is whatever is so unfamiliar and unmanageable that we begin to wonder whether our "language" is "adequate" to it. Our wonder . . . is simply about whether somebody or something may not be dealing with the world in terms for which our language contains no ready equivalents' (Rorty, 1980: 352).

5 Compare this with the discussion of 'holism' in the sciences by Dreyfus (1980), Taylor (1985) and Makkreel (1983).

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