

HISTORICITY AND DILTHEY'S MODEL OF HISTORICAL UNDERSTANDING

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WHILE it might be assumed that Dilthey's concept of historical understanding has been appropriated by philosophers such as Heidegger or by the notion of the sociology of knowledge, his goal of establishing a "universally valid basis of historical knowledge" has often been either accepted uncritically or casually dismissed by analytical philosophers. What I will be concerned with in this essay is a critique of the model of historical knowledge Dilthey proposes, as well a defense of this account of the possibility of historical knowledge. In addition, an attempt will be made to defend the role which *Verstehen* plays in Dilthey's account of historical reconstruction.

Human Historicity

Although Dilthey raises the question of the possibility of historical knowledge in the manner of Kant by asking, *Wie ist historisches Wissen möglich?*¹ he approaches this question in an anti-Kantian way. For, he does not seek the universal *a priori* forms of thought

¹ Wilhelm Dilthey, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Stuttgart, 1958, VII, 278.

which constitute any object of knowledge. Rather, he formulated "categories of life" (*Lebenskategorien*) which are derived from "lived experience" (*Erlebnis*) itself. These categories are analogous to the existential categories of Kierkegaard and are, like them, assumed to be derived from man's immediate experience of meaning (*Bedeutung*), purpose (*Zweck*), development (*Entwicklung*), structure (*Aufbau*), temporality (*Zeitlichkeit*), actuality (*Wirklichkeit*), possibility (*Möglichkeit*), value (*Wert*), etc. All of the *Lebenskategorien* are intimately related to man's understanding of himself and of human experience in the light of history. It is Dilthey's basic assumption that man comes to understand what he is fundamentally not through, introspective psychological analysis, but through a sympathetic, empathetic reconstruction of human history as such. Man is capable of understanding himself through history insofar as he is essentially historical in his being; there is a correlation between history and man as a seeker of historical knowledge.

This historical information, this knowledge of the past, is neither transparent to human knowledge nor immured in obscurity. To know "what actually happened" (*wie es eigentlich gewesen*) is not merely a matter of searching through archives, comparing a variety of versions of the same events or relying on objective empirical data. The form and content of history is preserved not only in documents, treaties, agreements, firsthand reports, etc.; rather, we invariably attempt to understand the past in terms of the present, in terms of our own limited or extensive acquaintance with the significant historical events of our own times. But this does not mean that by "reliving" the past or reconstructing it we distort it. Historical phenomena are "expressions of life" (*Lebensäußerungen*) which reveal, in objective form, the meaningful aspects of the "spiritual world" (*geistige Welt*) which we recognize as the creation of man or as the outward expression of the inner experiences of human beings who, in the spiritual dimension of their existence, have psychological, experiential affinities with ourselves. The categories of life we can discern in our own lived actuality provide one of the means by which we can understand the meaning of the past and the inner development of the lives of historical figures. It is precisely *das Leben* or "life" which is the basis of the affinity between the man of the present and the men of the past. It is the underlying continuity in human history and it is that which makes an understanding of history possible.²

² *Ibid.*, 261.

Dilthey's phenomenal description of the immediacy of individual experience — the *Erlebnis* or *innere Erfahrung* which is a fundamental meaningful unity of experience, but which cannot be known objectively —, his descriptive and analytical psychology of psychic processes, and his notion that the essence of man is historical (*Das Individuum . . . versteht die Geschichte, weil es selbst ein historisches Wesen ist.*) formed his answer to the question he raised concerning the possibility of historical knowledge. Each individual finds himself in life, activity and energy. As individual, he is, of course, unique. But as representative or repository of the tradition he shares with many others, he expresses a cultural system in microcosm in his own life. A reflective individual can discover in himself and in the outward expressions of the "objective spirit" the expressions of life and meaning which were originally immanent in the lived experiences of men.

Although Dilthey's conception of the "dynamic system" of the psychic processes of individuals is a rather general psychological theory which seems to rely upon an assumption of uniform mental processes throughout history, it may be seen as a kind of functional hypothesis which, as a generalization, does provide us with an ideal type of man's general psychological functions. To be sure, Dilthey assumed that his psychological description was not merely hypothetical. That he was mistaken in this does not mean that his account of the dynamic interrelationship among psychic processes is entirely without substance. For, the unified integration of diverse psychic activities (e.g., reflection imagination, will, desire, memory, etc.) does appear to be characteristic of our actual psychological life. To my mind the central capacity he attributed to man — the capacity to relive the experience of others, imaginatively to reconstruct what has happened and to empathize with others — is quite sufficient for his description of historical *Verstehen*. There is, as Dilthey repeatedly stressed, a basic continuity in the experiences of men and, more importantly, in the spiritual expression of these experiences in law, drama, art, literature, religion and philosophy. Despite the centuries that separate us from him, we understand Socrates' analytical intelligence, his irony and his moral integrity just as all men, despite the cultural diversity of their backgrounds, understand the dilemma of Hamlet, his conflict, his frustrated anger and his guilt. Whatever has been touched by the spiritual action or creativity of man is accessible to us at least in an ideal sense. Just as we have some self-knowledge through a reconstruction or reliving of our life-history,

so, too, are we able, to some extent, to interpret the past by means of sympathetic *Verstehen* and reconstruction of the states of being, the cognitive-emotional milieu of others far removed from us in time. The material conditions of human life have changed far more radically than the psychological or spiritual life of men.

There is a high degree of plausibility in Dilthey's general conception of the historical continuity of human existence even though his generalization tends to hold primarily for civilizations and not simple societies, for specific historical traditions and not world history as such. As is indicated in one of Dilthey's illustrations of historical *Verstehen*, it is not necessary that we actually share the values or *Weltanschauung* of the historical individuals whom we seek to understand. Thus, Dilthey avers that

Understanding opens . . . a wide realm of possibilities which are not at hand in the determination . . . of actual life. The possibility of experiencing religious states in my own existence is for me . . . strictly limited. But when I run through the letters and writings of Luther, the reports of his contemporaries, the records of the religious conferences and councils and of his official activities, I experience a religious process of such . . . power, of such energy in which life and death are at stake, that it lies beyond all possibility of being actually lived through by a man of our day. But I can relive it.³

To be sure, our present circumstances and the historical situations we have lived through in our lifetime do condition our historical consciousness insofar as we see the past through the prism of the present. But by immersing ourselves in the empirical data of a particular period, by familiarising ourselves with the art and literature of a period, and by opening ourselves to an imaginative-sympathetic understanding of the spirit of a time, as well as to its historically significant individuals, we are capable of reconstructive understanding. Clearly, it is Dilthey's constructive philosophical anthropology which provided the basis for historical knowledge. For, as he put it "the power and breadth of our own life, and the energy of reflection upon it, is the foundation of historical vision. It alone enables us to give a second life to the bloodless shades of the past."⁴ While the psychic and spiritual *nisus* of our own lives

³ *Ibid.*, 215-216.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 201. Cp. Francisco Romero, *Filósofos y Problemas*, Buenos Aires, 1956, 94: El punto de partida en el saber de lo histórico es nuestra propia experiencia vital, nuestras vivencias."

(e.g., our goals, purposes or life-projects) are more or less accessible to us in serious self-reflection, it is by virtue of imagination and projective reconstruction that we endeavor to understand the purposes and motivations of historical individuals. This was understood by Dilthey as an approximation-process insofar as we are not dealing with logical certainty or apodictic knowledge in historical understanding. Historical understanding is not based upon *logische Konstruktion* or *psychologische Zergliederung* [logical construction or psychological analysis]. While self-reflection (*Selbstbessinnung*) is only *one* of the factors contributing to historical knowledge, it is a central aspect of the synthetic process of an understanding of previous epochs or historical periods. In seeking to know the remote or recent past we seek to discern the external, public manifestation of man's mental and spiritual life by means of the categories of life we discover in self-reflective understanding. A continuity among the diverse expressions of life discovered in historical inquiry is, in a sense, a fundamental presupposition of *all* historical understanding and not only Dilthey's specific, complex formulation of such understanding. While historical events may legitimately be construed as unique and literally unrepeatable, the spiritual history (*Geistesgeschichte*) of man is characterized by recognizable human expressions, feelings, desires and motivations. The "spiritual world" of other *Dasein* or human beings encompasses the *Lebenseinheit* ("the unity of life") and the dynamic structure of psychic experience which makes it accessible to us by a "comparative method" (*vergleichende Methode*) which illuminates the singular and the unique in such a way as to make it an object for the "humanistic sciences" (*Geisteswissenschaften*)⁵ The paradox of Dilthey's notion that self-reflection and the understanding of others by comparison and analogy is one basis for historical knowledge is intimately related to his conception of an understanding of types or of "the typical" (*des Typischen*).

Although the relationship between understanding and what Dilthey calls an "eye for the typical" is well-known, there is an aspect of this relationship which has not received proper emphasis. For Dilthey, the apprehension of the typical is essential for understanding in general and historical understanding in particular. It is the paradoxical interrelationship of the singular and the general, the existentially unique and the expression of life or existence which has general characteristics. There is a correlation, then, between the

⁵ G. S., V, 268-269.

grasping of the meaning of the singular historical event (or cluster of events) and the recognition of common patterns (or, in the language of Koffka, *Gestalten*) in the life of individuals. Through self-reflection the individual comes to discover the typical in his own existence. Thus, as Heidegger will express it in *Sein und Zeit*, I experience *Angst* or anxiety as an individuating mood and, at the same time, I understand that this feeling of anxiety in the face of the possibility of death is also a universal, ontological characteristic of any self-reflective *Dasein*. Just as we ourselves discern the "common element" in our own, subjective *Erlebnis*, so, too, can we discover common elements in a biography of Napoleon or of Simón Bolívar. Our own capacity to understand ourselves in the lived actuality of our existences is the experiential basis for our capacity for historical understanding. Insofar as self-knowledge is acquired, as far as it is possible, by virtue of an understanding of ourselves in terms of the life-categories of temporality, meaning, value, purpose, power actuality and possibility, we also interpret historical phenomena in the same way. Historical consciousness (*geschichtliches Bewusstsein*) in general is possible because our individual consciousness is pervaded by an historical sense. We grasp the essential in the specificity of the actual in the same manner in which we apprehend the typical in our own psychological states of consciousness and in our existential states of being.⁶

Although Dilthey proclaimed that the individual as such is ineffable (*Individuum ineffabile est.*), he also maintained that it is the individual which is always the proper object for understanding (*Verstehen*). This may seem paradoxical if we forget that the individual which can be known through understanding is known insofar as it expresses something typical. Thus, as Dilthey expresses it,

for every aspect of the manifestations of human life, there arises a type of their apt fulfilment. . . . One typical expression of life thus represents an entire class. This is the primary sense in which we apply the concept of the typical . . . The concept of the type then denotes the emphasized common element . . . The entire individuation of the human-historical world comes at first in poetry then to understanding, long before science itself struggled to know it.⁷

Strictly speaking, the human-historical world is accessible and

⁶ G. S., VI, 186.

⁷ G. S., V, 279-280.

intelligible not only at first in poetry, but in the lived actuality, the *Erlebnis*, of man as such. In effect, I believe that it is Dilthey's description of man in his anthropological reflection (*anthropologische Reflexion*) which serves as the foundation for historical knowledge insofar as he suggests that man's being is such that he has a pre-philosophical ability to recognize the typical immanent in the individual and has a fundamentally temporal and historical orientation to his own life and the life of others. Hence, it is Dilthey's philosophical anthropology which answers the question concerning the possibility of historical knowledge. His critique of historical reason is based upon his psychological analysis of man's mental processes and his derivation of categories of life from the experience of actuality in self-reflective understanding. Although it is somewhat anachronistic, it could be said that Dilthey's criticism of historical reason (*Vernunft*) rests upon an empirical phenomenology of human existence which revealed that man must approach historical phenomena not in terms of cognitive models derived from the natural sciences, but on the basis of a personalist mode of understanding which is manifested in the life of man in his ordinary concrete experiences in what Husserl described as the *Lebenswelt*. To be sure, we find the most creative uses of *Verstehen* in the work of poet, the dramatist and the philosopher. But such individuals only express and articulate what is implicit in the understanding of any self-reflective man. A more perfect understanding of the typical requires an "inner affinity and sympathy" (*innere Verwandtschaft und Sympathie*) with the phenomena for understanding.⁸ Dilthey insists that there is a continuity between the ordinary man's capacity for understanding and that of the genius. The hermeneutic understanding of literature or philosophy requires the cultivation of the method of *Verstehen* insofar as everyone is not equally as capable of "reliving" or "reconstructing" the creative process which led up to an outer expression of life. Needless to say, this same limitation holds for historical understanding as well. Obviously, the more complex the phenomena for understanding are, the more difficult will be the process of interpretation.

The fundamental historicity of man is not only revealed through anthropological reflection or the "anthropological method," but in the material and spiritual expressions of life (and, hence, of meaning) which are preserved in the variety of phenomena for historical

⁸ *Ibid.*, 278.

inquiry, in the objectifications of spiritual life which have been preserved through time. To be sure, even the objectifications of man's spiritual being are ultimately traceable to an individual's capacity to interpret the underlying meanings expressed in them. Hence, the expressions of the *objektive Geist* may be described as the external manifestations or significations of the primordial historicity of man.

For the historian or the philosopher of history the past is most immediately known by means of the examination of the records, documents, monuments, architecture, literature and philosophical writings of an historical epoch. The Gothic cathedrals tell us as much about the *Zeitgeist* of the late medieval period as do the documents pertaining to canonical law. The interpretive understanding of such phenomena cannot be restricted to a positivistic analysis of empirical data alone. Rather, it requires sympathetic imagination and the kind of analogical inference which, as Dilthey argues, is the basis for our understanding of others. As already indicated, there is a limitation upon our capacity to understand and, hence, to "relive" or "reconstruct" the meaning of the experiences of those who lived in remote historical epoch. And yet, as Dilthey suggests, by immersing ourselves in the details of the available facticities of a particular historical period we may acquire the condition for the possibility of gaining access to the personal, spiritual sources which have given distinctive style or form to such a period.

Although Dilthey himself does not place emphasis upon it, it is clear that the notion of *Verstehen* he formulates refers to what is primarily an imaginative and psychological inference from what is given or preserved as relevant historical data to the life, energy, desires, feelings, motives and actions of historical peoples. From an understanding of the phenomena of a cultural system the historian ought to proceed to the discernment of the idiographic content of an historical period or of historical figures. But the meaning of the relationship between the objectifications of spiritual life (which is not understood in terms of Hegel's metaphysics, but in terms of an empirical *Lebensphilosophie*) is discoverable by virtue of a presumed relationship of similarity between the psychological and empirical life of the historical investigator and the individual who contributed to the creation, directly or indirectly, of these historically significant structures. For, as Dilthey puts it, "significance is extracted from life itself" — *Die Bedeutsamkeit ist aus dem Leben selbst herausgeholt*. A general psychology of individuals in relation to the application of categories of life is, according to Dilthey, one dimension

of historical knowledge. It is clearly not intended to be the sole method of interpretive understanding, but one which enables us to fill in lacunae ignored by positivistic or analytic approaches to historical knowledge. It is a means by which we can attempt to reach down to the life of historically significant individuals and to the existential conditions which impinged upon such individuals. What is sought in historical knowledge is not a catalogue of objective facts alone, but the spiritual life-processes which brought these facts into actuality. In effect, it is the historicity of man himself, his psychological make-up, his capacity for reflection upon his lived actuality which make the apprehension of the meanings (whether creative or destructive, good or evil) immanent in history accessible in understanding. For, "the category of meaning [discovered in lived experience] has . . . a specific close relationship to understanding (*die Kategorie der Bedeutung hat offenbar einen besonders nahen Zusammenhang zum Verstehen*)".⁹

The meanings we seek to comprehend in historical inquiry are discovered not only in the permanent outward results of the actions of men, but in the inferred mental and spiritual processes which brought possibilities to fruition. While the inferences we draw from actions preserved in some objective form to the presumed mental content which originated the action is limited,¹⁰ we have the ability to engage in such a reconstructive activity because we employ it in our interpretive understanding of ourselves (e.g., in endeavoring to understand our life-histories), others, and the significations we encounter in our practical experiences. To be sure, Dilthey insists that we do not find out what human nature as such is through mere introspection—*Nicht durch Introspektion erfassen wir die menschliche Natur*. Rather, it is by virtue of man's ability to interpret phenomena in terms of *Lebenskategorien*, to discover the typical immanent in the individual, and to recognize new forms of life (*Formen des Lebens*) that we can transcend our limited experiences and understand historical individuals.¹¹ Hence, historical understanding is a creative activity in a fundamental sense. The dialectical relationship between the individual and the cultural systems and organizations in which his life is embedded reveals that the individual is not imprisoned in his own subjectivity. What Husserl says

⁹ *G. S.*, VII, 234.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 322.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 250-251.

about the person—that he both constitutes and is constituted by the world—is applicable to Dilthey's concept of historically significant individuals: they are conditioned by the historical factors acting upon them and they condition the content of history through their actions. This reciprocal interaction between the temporal-historical individual and the complex cultural systems which affect his life are manifested also in historical understanding. We can possess historical knowledge, then, because we are conditioned by historical phenomena (e.g., the language we use evolved and developed historically) and because we can project ourselves into the life of the past by means of a sympathetic understanding which is itself derived from our understanding of life (*Verständnis des Lebens*). The understanding of history is rooted in the various aspects of the historicity of man.

The Universal Validity of Historical Knowledge

If we agree with Dilthey that historical knowledge is indeed possible, and if we grant some validity to his general description of how such knowledge is possible, an important residual question remains: that is, is it possible to attain a universally valid knowledge of history in terms of his own analysis of the nature of historical knowledge?

Before attempting to answer this question, there is one common mis-understanding of Dilthey's philosophy of historical understanding that must be clarified. It has been said that the notion of *Verstehen*.

does not in itself constitute an explanation; it rather is a heuristic device; its function is to suggest certain psychological hypotheses which might serve as explanatory principles in the case under consideration . . . the idea underlying this function is [that]. . . the historian tried to realize how he himself would act under the given conditions, and under the particular motivations of his heroes.¹²

In one sense, it is clear that *Verstehen* does not correspond to explanation; nor was it intended by Dilthey to perform this function. It was clearly intended by Dilthey to be a "heuristic device" which

¹² Carl G. Hempel, "The Function of General Laws in History," in *Readings in Philosophical Analysis*, New York, 1949, 467.

would supplement other typical means of acquiring knowledge of the past. Furthermore, it is simply false to say that this notion means that the historian identifies with ostensible "heroes". On the contrary, Dilthey believes that *Verstehen* is possible even in regard to historical figures who held an entirely different *Weltanschauung* or had quite different values than the historian. This is obvious in the case of his remarks about Luther and it is also quite apparent in his analysis of an understanding of Bismarck. For, Dilthey argues that the historian who would understand such an individual must carefully sift through his letters, documents, anecdotes about him, must see him as representing a particular class (e.g., "the Prussian landed aristocracy"), as a psychological type (e.g., a *Tatmensch* or "man of action") and as influenced by the political expectations and circumstances of his time.¹³

The method of *Verstehen* was intended as a corrective to the tendency to think of historical phenomena as similar to the phenomena analyzed by the natural sciences (*Naturwissenschaften*), as a supplement to the standard empirical methods of the historian. Through *Verstehen* we seek to discover the teleological causation expressed in history through human deliberations, motivations, choices, decisions and actions.

That such is the proper use of *Verstehen* is obvious from Dilthey's caution about its limitations and his stress upon its relationship to a systematic knowledge of the total historical situation to which it is applied. Thus, Dilthey remarks that

Understanding presupposes experience and experience only becomes insight into life if understanding leads us from the narrowness and subjectivity of experience to the whole and the general. Moreover, the understanding of an individual personality demands systematic knowledge [*das systematische Wissen*] in order to be complete, while systematic knowledge is equally dependent on the vivid grasping of the individual . . . in the *Geisteswissenschaften* everything from the process of understanding onwards is determined by the relationship of *mutual dependence*.¹⁴

Dilthey never intended that *Verstehen* entirely replace the multiplicity of empirical, comparative and interpretive methods developed by historians up to his own time. It was intended as a probe

¹³ *G. S.*, VII, 141-143.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 143.

by which we might uncover the living reality which is preserved only in an objectified form in the material evidence available to the historian. Amongst the "range of procedures" in historical inquiry Dilthey specifically extolled philology. For, he considered the "purification" of the often unreliable and confused memories of mankind as a primary condition for historical knowledge; for this purpose, the "scientific study of languages" and the "chronological ordering and combining of documents" was necessary.¹⁵ The notion that Dilthey had a weak or vague sense of "historical evidence" is entirely unjustified. On the other hand, there is a validity to the related view that it is questionable whether *Verstehen* can yield objective historical knowledge insofar as there is no criterion provided by which we could settle a dispute between historians who disagreed about the motives or reasons why an individual or group of individuals acted in such and such a way. The imputation of motives to others who are living contemporaries is difficult; the imputations of such motives to historical figures of the past is questionable.

Despite his heroic attempt to create a secure foundation for objective historical knowledge independent of the methods of the natural sciences, Dilthey did not succeed in doing so. In point of fact, his very conception of the nature of history and of the historicity conditioning all men precluded him from achieving this goal. The historical consciousness which Dilthey did so much to develop reveals the finitude of every historical phenomenon, the relativity of beliefs and the way in which the present historical circumstances of one's life constitute the historical phenomena studied. In attempting to understand the past we inevitably read the present into it. If, as Dilthey avers, the self is an intersection of reciprocal social and historical forces (as well as being individual), then it must be the case that our selectivity of relevant historical facts, our methodology and our valuations will affect our understanding of the past. Hence, the claim of objective validity in any scientific sense is undermined, to some extent, by Dilthey's conception of the historicity of man. There is in his work an obvious commitment to a form of historicism.

In addition to the above, there is a strain in Dilthey's notion of history which suggests that the dynamic process characteristic of it makes it an unstable object of knowledge. Thus, he remarks that historical experience provides no answer to the question of the uni-

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 261. Cp., "Stufen des geschichtlichen Verstandnisses," 163-171.

versal validity of norms, values or goods, but only uncovers "unreconciled conflict."¹⁶ If this is so, one may wonder about the normative principle implicit in a notion of the universal, objective validity of historical knowledge insofar as this norm, too, must be subject to revision, question, or abandonment. If "history is itself the productive force which generates the value-determinations, ideals, ends, by which the meaning of men and events is measured,"¹⁷ then it is clear that our present historical consciousness determines the meaning of the events of the past and of the lives of the men of the past. This clearly prohibits universal or purely objective knowledge of the past.

Not only does Dilthey's notion of historicity undermine a conception of objectivity validity, but his ascription of change to historical phenomena themselves serves, *a fortiori*, to produce the same effect. He has argued that

No part of history, such as a period, can be grasped through concepts bringing to expression something fixed in it—i.e., a system of relations between fixed qualities . . . Rather we have to do with a system of relations whose parts are dynamic, i.e., show continual qualitative changes in their interaction. Even the relations themselves, because they rest on interaction between forces, are changeable.¹⁸

While this is certainly true of contemporary historical events or processes, it is an extreme view to hold that we cannot have conceptual knowledge of any *Zeitalter* ("period") at all. If historical knowledge is to be possible, there must be something that is "fixed" (*Festes*) or relatively stable. We may grant that spiritual existence is characterized by a "dynamic system" and that present history is similar. But to project this dynamism into the past is unwarranted. Even Dilthey himself abandons such an extreme position when he proclaims that "it is through the idea of the objectification of life that we first obtain a glimpse into the essence of the historical"—*Durch die Idee der Objektivation des Lebens erst gewinnen wir einen Einblinck in das Wesen des Geschichtlichen*.

Even if we grant that Dilthey's considered position is that we are, in fact, able to discern what is "firm and enduring in the flow of events" or that the objectifications of spiritual existence are pre-

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 173.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 290.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 281.

served in relatively stable form, the crucial weakness in his claim to have established a method for acquiring objective and universal knowledge of the past lies in the psychological inferences we are required to make from "outer expressions" to personal motivations, reasons or purposes. This process of sympathetic understanding is a creative, imaginative activity which no doubt gives life to history; but it provides no certainty. Re-creation or reconstruction has an ineluctable aesthetic element in it which undermines the apprehension of objectivity. Dilthey is correct in arguing that the historian needs a 'clear eye for... factuality' (*klaren Blick für... Faktizität*), that he must develop empirical precision, and that such a methodology should ideally be supplemented by *Verstehen*. But he is clearly mistaken in assuming that one can attain anything other than a plausible and coherent account of a sequence of historical events which is consistent with the relevant empirical evidence and which is supplemented by a probable account of the underlying mental or spiritual motivations of historical agents.

Since Dilthey himself sometimes indicated his awareness of the limitations of *Verstehen*—precisely because it requires processes of *Nacherleben* ("reliving") and *Nachbilden* ("reconstruction") which are relative to the creative or imaginative powers of the historian—, there is no reason for him to assume that he had actually provided the conditions for the possibility of establishing history as a universally valid objective science. However, despite the ambiguity of the method of *Verstehen* (in so far as it is sometimes used in an explanatory sense and, at other times, in a sympathetic sense), it is a heuristically valuable instrument of historical inquiry which extends historical knowledge into a realm of legitimate speculative reconstruction. Invariably, the historian does, in fact, engage in some investigation of motives, purposes and values as relevant material for historical understanding. The spiritual and psychological motivations of men are as much a part of history as are the overt, public events that are recorded or preserved. Certainly, Dilthey is correct in seeing that the teleological causation in historical development is a significant factor which is obscured by an appeal to natural scientific laws or the concepts of explanation in the physical sciences.

Neither in Dilthey's analysis of historical knowledge nor in those theories modeled on the physical sciences is there *Allgemeingültigkeit* ("universal validity"). Ironically, the reasons why this is the case are implicitly present in Dilthey's various assertions about the

nature of history, the historicity of man, the problems of interpretation and the difficulty of making valid inferences from "outer manifestations" or objectified expressions to the dynamic, spiritual existence of historical individuals. Most of the non-systematic writings of Dilthey point to the general notion that we need not surrender to historical scepticism nor to a positivistic conception of historically relevant facts which attempt to subsume the *Geistesgeschichte* or "spiritual history" of man under categories and explanatory principles which have proved effective in the quantitatively orientated physical or natural sciences. *Verstehen* is characterized by gradations, by the cultivation of exegetical or interpretive skills (or "skilled reproduction") and is more an art than a strictly scientific instrument. Dilthey admitted that the analysis of *Verstehen* indicates to the *Geisteswissenschaften* "the possibility and the limitations of universally valid knowledge in them."¹⁹ If he had held fast to this notion of historical understanding as a process of approximation which approaches but does not reach objectivity, he would not have exposed himself to the criticism that he did not (and, in terms of his own phenomenological description of historical consciousness and historical experience, could not) reveal "universal validity and necessity" (*Allgemeingültigkeit und Notwendigkeit*) in historical knowledge as such.

Perhaps in a poetic sense it may be said that the principles of *Verstehen* do have a general validity insofar as they emphasize the continuity of the past and present, bringing into clearer focus the spiritual and psychological affinities among men of different periods. In general, Dilthey did seek to discern the typological analogies in the varieties of human history and, in a sense, attempted the ambitious task of providing an impressionistic phenomenology of historical experience. The challenge to seek to understand history "from within", from the psychological perspective of the historical agents, is still a vital one. But the ability to relive (*Nacherleben*) the historical experiences of others seems to require an aesthetic sensitivity and not a scientific temperament. The accuracy of this refined process is clearly subject to doubt. Perhaps we may grant a "relative validity" to *Verstehen* in the sense that it can aid the process of analogical reasoning in the historian and cultivate a search for a coherent relationship among the "life assertions" or objective phe-

¹⁹ G. S., V, 317-320.

nomena subjected to interpretation.²⁰ But it is clear that the entire process of interpretive understanding—despite its unquestionable value—cannot attain universally valid objectivity in any scientific or logical sense of the phrase. That he reminded us of the importance of inner life, of our tendency to search for meaning, of the *Geistesgeschichte* which expresses the highest values of men, that he formulated the useful method of *Verstehen* and created the influential notion of ideal types, more than compensates for Dilthey's inability to establish history as a universally valid objective science. While his project fell short of its goal, the descriptions and analyses he provided in pursuit of this goal have an enduring value for the kind of understanding of history that is possible.

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²⁰ H. N. Tuttle, *Wilhelm Dilthey's Philosophy of Historical Understanding*, Leiden, 1969, 109.