

Wilhelm Dilthey's Thoughts on Understanding, Hermeneutics and Communication

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ABSTRAK

Wilhelm Dilthey, a towering figure in the realm of philosophy, dedicated his life's work to unravelling the complexities of human experience. Dilthey believed that life is not merely a series of random events, but a tapestry woven from these experiences, which collectively influence our perspectives and sense of being. By examining Dilthey's thoughts on communication as a process of shared knowledge and meaning making, we gain valuable insights into how we bridge the gap between different perspectives and forge deeper connections. Through a quantitative approach and literature review Dilthey's perspectives are analyzed. Dilthey believed a text goes beyond its literal meaning; it symbolizes deeper significance. Understanding the true depth of a symbol requires venturing beyond its surface meaning and delving into its historical context. Symbols are not merely arbitrary signs; they are often imbued with layers of meaning accumulated over time. These layers reflect the cultural, social, and political landscapes from which the symbol emerged. To fully grasp the symbolic meaning, then, requires an exploration of its historical journey. Despite the occasional inclusion of natural science objects in humanities, Dilthey saw a clear distinction between the two. He saw understanding as a process of grasping the intended meaning rooted in life experiences. Therefore, Dilthey's concept of meaning is historical highlighting the significance of personal and collective life experiences in interpretation.

INTRODUCTION

Wilhelm Dilthey (Born 1833 in Biebrich a. Rhein, dead 1911 in Seis am Schlern in the Southern Alps) Dilthey initially intended to follow a religious calling and become a theologian like his father. In the end, he changed his course to philosophy as he was unsure of the relevance of philosophy. At Heidelberg, Dilthey took the course in classical philology but afterward followed in the footsteps of Kuno Fischer; and under Fischer's influence he first began to question Hegel and Hegelianism, which remained one of his traditional objects of attack. He studied at the University of Berlin under Friedrich Schleiermacher, Friedrich von Trendelenburg, and August Boeckh. Despite his distance from religion, Dilthey remained respectful of religious experience and his approach to religion remained his trademark (Nelson, 2019).

In the field of hermeneutic philosophy following developers in hermeneutics is Wilhelm Dilthey and he is supported by phenomenological philosophy. Most of us know Wilhelm Dilthey as a German philosopher who called for a philosophy of life. Life is supposed by Dilthey to be constituted by human experiences, which make up the history of human life as a whole. In the words of Ricoeur (1991: 53), hermeneutics is "the theory of the operations of understanding in relation to the interpretation of text". Which is to say that hermeneutics as the philosophy of cognition sought out the rational interpretation and comprehension of the text (reality) in order to examine, discover or seek its essence.

In his hermeneutical research, Dilthey argued that traditional methods focused too much on objective facts and overlooked the subjective world of human experience (*erlebnis*). He proposed that understanding (*verstehen*) comes from interpreting these lived experiences, which are expressed (*ausdruck*) through various means, including art, literature, and historical documents. Dilthey believed that artworks, by capturing the essence of a particular era or culture, could serve as valuable objects for hermeneutical analysis. By studying these expressions, we gain insight into the historical context and the worldview of the artist or creator. Dilthey's hermeneutics emphasized the historical method. He argued that interpreting human experience requires considering the historical context in which it arose. This goes beyond simply understanding the author's intended meaning and delves into the broader cultural and social forces that shaped it. However, Dilthey did not advocate for complete subjectivity. He believed that through careful study and critical reflection, we can achieve a level of objective understanding that approximates the author's original intent. This objective understanding is not a singular, fixed meaning, but rather a reconstruction based on the available evidence and historical context. While Dilthey acknowledged the inherent subjectivity of individual interpretations, he emphasized the importance of striving for objectivity in hermeneutics. This involves a critical examination of one's own biases and a commitment to understanding the text or artwork on its own terms, within its historical context.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Ricard E. Palmer (2003) also stated that hermeneutics is one of the major fields of interpretive studies in theology, philosophy, and literature. It emphasizes the importance of interpretation in understanding human experience as expressed through texts, traditions, and cultural artifacts. According to Wilhelm Dilthey, hermeneutics goes beyond mere textual analysis. He argued that it's a philosophical approach that recognizes the inherent connection between understanding history and philosophical inquiry. Dilthey believed that to truly understand history, we cannot isolate it from the broader philosophical questions about human existence, knowledge, and values. To address this interconnectedness, Dilthey famously divided science into two categories: *Naturwissenschaften* (Natural Sciences) and *Geisteswissenschaften* (Human Sciences). Natural sciences, according to Dilthey, focus on objective facts and utilize rigorous scientific methods. Their results can be verified through repeatable experiments. Human sciences, on the other hand, deal with the subjective world of human experience, culture, and meaning-making. They employ interpretive methods like hermeneutics to understand the expressions of human thought and feeling across history.

Naturwissenschaften (Natural Sciences): The Realm of Measurable Laws. *Naturwissenschaften*, characterized by their organized, predictable, and explanatory nature, form the bedrock of our understanding of the physical world. Disciplines like biology, chemistry, and physics employ the scientific method, a rigorous process of observation, hypothesis testing, and experimentation. Through this method, scientists uncover universal laws that govern the behavior of matter and energy, from the subatomic level to the vast expanse of the cosmos. These laws are often expressed mathematically, allowing for precise prediction and explanation of natural phenomena. For example, Newtonian physics allows us to calculate the trajectory of a rocket, while the theory of evolution by natural selection explains the diversity of life on Earth. The success of *Naturwissenschaften* lies in its objectivity; it strives to eliminate bias and subjectivity, relying on empirical evidence to build a universally applicable body of knowledge.

Geisteswissenschaften (Human Sciences): Delving into the Human Experience. *Geisteswissenschaften*, on the other hand, delve into the rich tapestry of human experience. Encompassing disciplines like history, psychology, philosophy, and literature, these fields explore the subjective world of human thought, emotion, and creativity. Unlike *Naturwissenschaften*, which seek universal laws, *Geisteswissenschaften* grapple with the complexities of human meaning-making, the nuances of culture, and the ever-evolving values that shape our societies. Here, the methods are more interpretive. Historians analyze documents and artifacts to reconstruct past events and understand the motivations of historical figures. Psychologists employ a variety of techniques, including surveys and experiments, to understand human behavior and mental processes. Philosophers engage in critical reflection on fundamental questions about existence, knowledge, and ethics.

The Interplay Between the Two: A Holistic Understanding. Dilthey's emphasis on understanding the inner life through *Geisteswissenschaften* highlights a crucial aspect of human experience. Humans are not simply products of the natural world; they are also meaning-makers, constantly interpreting and shaping their surroundings. By understanding the values, beliefs, and motivations that drive human behavior, we can gain a more holistic perspective on our place in the universe. Although *Naturwissenschaften* and *Geisteswissenschaften* appear distinct, they are not entirely separate realms. For instance, the history of science itself falls under the domain of *Geisteswissenschaften*, as it explores the social and cultural contexts that shaped scientific discovery. Similarly, fields like social psychology bridge the gap between the two, using scientific methods to study aspects of human behavior shaped by cultural and social factors. In conclusion, both *Naturwissenschaften* and *Geisteswissenschaften* offer invaluable perspectives on the world around us. While *Naturwissenschaften* provide a framework for understanding the physical laws that govern the universe, *Geisteswissenschaften* illuminate the complexities of the human experience. Recognizing the importance of both is essential for achieving a more comprehensive understanding of ourselves and the world we inhabit.

The understanding of oneself cannot be separated from the understanding of humans in general, a concept central to Wilhelm Dilthey's hermeneutics. Dilthey argued that we grasp the world not just through objective facts, but also through interpreting the lived experiences (*Erlebnis*) expressed by others throughout history. We are social creatures, shaped by our interactions with others. Our experiences, from childhood development to cultural influences, are all part of the fabric of what makes us who we are. Dilthey would point out that these experiences are not isolated events, but rather expressions (*Ausdruck*) of a broader human condition. By studying the expressions of others – their art, literature, historical documents – we gain insight into the universal human experiences of love, loss, joy, and fear. Through this process of interpretation (*Verstehen*), we can bridge the gap between the self and the other. We can see how our own experiences are mirrored in the experiences of others, and in turn, gain a deeper understanding of ourselves. Dilthey believed that this cyclical process – interpreting the expressions of others to understand ourselves, and using our self-understanding to interpret the world – is essential for achieving a comprehensive understanding of the human experience.

METODOLOGY

This research employs a quantitative approach, prioritizing the collection and analysis of numerical data. Foundational to this approach is a comprehensive literature review, a systematic process of identifying, evaluating, and synthesizing existing scholarly work relevant to the research question (Cooper, 2010). The literature review acts as a springboard for the current investigation, providing a critical understanding of the existing knowledge base and potential gaps in research (Grant & Booth, 2009). The literature review process entails a meticulous search for relevant sources,

encompassing both offline and online resources. Offline resources include scholarly journals, books, and dissertations located within libraries. Online resources encompass academic databases specifically designed for literature searching, such as Mendeley and Google Scholar, as well as reputable online repositories maintained by universities and research institutions. By utilizing a combination of offline and online resources, the researcher ensures a comprehensive and up-to-date understanding of the relevant literature. However, within quantitative research, the inclusion of a literature review necessitates careful consideration of methodological assumptions. The literature review should be employed in an inductive manner, meaning it should not pre-determine the research questions or hypotheses (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Instead, the review should inform the development of research questions that emerge from a critical analysis of the existing literature. This approach ensures that the research questions are data-driven and contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In Dilthey's hermeneutics, interpretation goes beyond deciphering texts. It's a tool for understanding human history and the evolution of knowledge about our inner states. These inner states are expressed through outward signs – actions, images, and writings – that can be perceived by others. For instance, to grasp a lecturer's intellectual depth, we wouldn't solely rely on their words. Instead, we would interpret their activities (like research or classroom engagement), the imagery they use, and the content of their written works. By piecing together these elements, we can arrive at a more comprehensive understanding of their intellectual ability.

Wilhelm Dilthey's hermeneutics departs from traditional approaches by emphasizing the historical context in which a text is created. He argues that the meaning of a text is not static but rather a dynamic product of its historical moment. This dynamism arises from the evolving understanding of the world and the changing lens through which readers interpret the text over time (Palmer, 1963). To unlock the meaning of a text within its historical context, Dilthey proposes a three-pronged approach. First, it involves reconstructing the author's perspective and the insights that shaped their writing. This requires delving into the author's biography, social milieu, and intellectual influences (McCarthy, 1977). Second, it entails examining the author's engagement with historical events. By understanding the historical context in which the text was written, we gain a deeper appreciation for the author's motivations and the issues they were grappling with. Finally, Dilthey emphasizes the importance of critically assessing historical events through the lens of the ideas and values prevalent during the author's time. This process avoids projecting our own contemporary perspectives onto the past and allows for a more nuanced understanding of the text's original meaning (Misgeld, 2008). Dilthey further underscores the importance of three interrelated components in his hermeneutic methodology. The first component is the text itself, viewed as a record of the author's lived experience and a repository of their values. The

second component is the interpreter's own understanding, which should be open to the possibility of multiple interpretations arising from variations in the author's life and experiences. Finally, Dilthey emphasizes the strong reciprocal relationship between these two components. As the interpreter delves deeper into the text and the author's historical context, their own understanding evolves, leading to a more refined interpretation. However, Dilthey contends that under these ideal conditions, a definitive and final interpretation of the text's meaning can be achieved. This notion of a definitive interpretation has been a subject of debate among hermeneutic scholars, with some arguing for a more open-ended and evolving understanding of meaning (Thompson, 1981). Dilthey argued that philosophy is fundamentally dependent on history, as it provides the context and grounding for philosophical inquiry. In his classification system, science was divided into two distinct realms: *Naturwissenschaften*, concerned with the natural world, and *Geisteswissenschaften*, focused on the human world. *Naturwissenschaften* relies on a rigorous scientific method and focuses on the physical world, including subjects such as biology, chemistry, physics, and science. It is characterized by predictability, order, and explanation. On the other hand, *Geisteswissenschaften* includes disciplines that study the human mind, such as history, psychology, philosophy, social sciences, arts, religion, and literature. It is characterized by a value system and an emphasis on understanding (*verstehen*). Dilthey argued that to understand others, one must first understand oneself, as one's understanding of life is shaped by one's inner experiences. While *Naturwissenschaften* can be studied using the scientific method in a laboratory, *Geisteswissenschaften* cannot be approached in the same way due to its non-exact nature.

Priyanto (2001) explores the three pillars of Dilthey's hermeneutics as follows:

a. Experience (*Erlebnis*)

Erlebnis, a German term, captures the essence of direct, unfiltered life experiences lived in the present moment, rather than analyzed through the lens of hindsight. Dilthey's point of view of experience is a direct encounter interpreted through context. Wilhelm Dilthey proposed a unique perspective on experience, viewing it as a direct and unfiltered encounter with reality (*Erlebnis*). However, Dilthey argued that these lived experiences are not isolated events. Our understanding of them is shaped by reflection and interpretation within the specific historical, social, and cultural context in which they occur (Palmer, 1963). Unveiling the mind behind culture is the role of psychology in understanding expressions. Beyond the immediate experience (*Erlebnis*), psychological processes play a crucial role in shaping the cultural expressions that emerge from these encounters with reality. To fully grasp these expressions, we must delve into the inner workings of the human mind. These psychological processes – our emotions, perceptions, and ways of thinking – act as filters through which we interpret our experiences and ultimately give rise to the diverse expressions of culture (e.g., art, language, rituals). The duality of experience are immediacy and totality. Experience can be understood

through two key aspects. The first is immediacy, which refers to the unfiltered and unreflected quality of lived experience. In these moments, meaning is grasped directly, without the need for rationalization. The second aspect is totality. Here, experiences transcend their immediate occurrence and take on a deeper significance. They connect seemingly disparate moments in our lives, weaving them into a meaningful whole. Dilthey categorized human life and experience into three main types: ideas that transcend time and space, purpose-driven actions that require interpretation, and expressive experiences seen in spontaneous statements, gestures, and art.

b. Expression (Ausdruck)

Beyond Artistic Expression, Dilthey's Broader View of Ausdruck. While "expression" (Ausdruck) might seem like simply communicating oneself, Dilthey's concept goes far beyond that. His theory isn't limited to the realm of artistic expression, which often emphasizes the artist as a subject creating an object (artwork). Dilthey's view is broader. He argues that Ausdruck encompasses the expression of one's entire life experience – not just emotions, but everything that reflects the human condition. This includes our thoughts, actions, and the way we interact with the world around us. Dilthey identified three types of expression: expression of ideas, which remain consistent across different contexts; expression of human behavior, which uses language as a means of communication; and expression of the soul, which includes spontaneous reactions such as smile, fear, sadness, and laughter. Dilthey's spectrum of Ausdruck is from ideas to emotions. Wilhelm Dilthey further elaborated on his concept of Ausdruck by proposing three distinct categories of expression. The *first* category is the expression of ideas. These expressions, often conveyed through language, transcend specific contexts and aim to communicate universal concepts or knowledge. The *second* category is the expression of human behavior. Here, language itself becomes the primary tool for expression, allowing us to communicate actions, intentions, and plans. *Finally*, Dilthey identifies the expression of the soul. This encompasses our most spontaneous and unfiltered reactions, manifested through nonverbal cues like smiles, frowns, laughter, and tears, which directly communicate our emotions. In essence, expression is the manifestation of connectedness and coherence in personal experience.

c. Understanding (Verstehen)

Beyond Scientific Explanation, Unveiling Human Behavior Through Verstehen. This concept introduces Verstehen, a distinct way of understanding compared to Erklären. Erklären, commonly used in natural sciences, focuses on providing clear-cut explanations for specific phenomena. In contrast, Verstehen delves deeper, aiming to grasp the complexities of human behavior. It goes beyond simply observing actions; it involves understanding the underlying thoughts, motivations, and intentions that drive human choices. Verstehen also encompasses the interpretation of expressions within the context of lived experience. This is crucial because human experiences are not always straightforward. They are often layered with emotions, cultural nuances, and personal histories. Verstehen equips us to interpret these expressions – verbal

and nonverbal – to grasp the deeper meaning behind them. Finally, *Verstehen* is a distinctly human mode of understanding. Unlike the natural sciences, where explanations are often universal and objective, the human world is filled with a multitude of meanings and interpretations. *Verstehen* acknowledges this complexity and allows us to navigate the richness of human experience. The distinct approaches of *Verstehen* and *Erklaren* yield different kinds of results. *Verstehen* provides a deeper understanding of human behavior, while *Erklaren* delivers clear-cut explanations for natural phenomena. The choice between *Verstehen* and *Erklaren* depends on the research question. *Erklaren*'s focus on explanation is limited in the realm of human behavior, where *Verstehen* offers richer insights. In other words, *Verstehen* helps to understand why people do things, while *Erklaren* explains how things work in the natural world. *Verstehen* plays a critical role in unraveling the rich tapestry of human experience. This understanding hinges on the concept of meaning. Meaning doesn't reside in isolated parts; it emerges from a dynamic interplay between the whole and its individual components within the hermeneutic circle. Through interpretation of these parts, we gradually grasp the overall meaning, a process that can evolve over time. Furthermore, meaning is not fixed; it is shaped by history and context. The relationships in which we view events influence the significance we attribute to them. *Verstehen* allows us to navigate this complexity, fostering a deeper appreciation for the unique meanings woven into human activity.

Wilhelm Dilthey's Hermeneutics in the Context of Communication

Beyond words, Dilthey on humans as Meaning-Makers. Dilthey argued that humans are not just defined by language (reading, writing, interpreting). We are also existential beings, actively engaged in making sense of the world around us. This goes beyond simply deciphering words on a page. It's about finding meaning in every aspect of life experience. Hermeneutics, for Dilthey, provided a method for unlocking this deeper understanding. This approach wasn't limited to written texts. It was a way to interpret the expressions of life itself – the experiences, thoughts, and perspectives that shape who we are. In simpler terms, hermeneutics can be seen as a tool for grasping the ideas, viewpoints, and lived experiences that others express, allowing us to connect with the human stories behind the words. In everyday life, hermeneutics can be used to understand news, text, information, or the hidden meaning of scripture (Apel & Krois, 1987).

Dilthey's Paradigm Shift in Communication Theory

Wilhelm Dilthey's groundbreaking work in hermeneutics significantly reshaped the understanding of communication, moving beyond a mere transmission of information. Dilthey argued that communication serves a far richer purpose – the creation of shared experiences and the co-construction of meaning (Misgeld, 2008). He emphasized that communication is intrinsically linked to its historical and cultural context. Through a process of dialogue and interpretation (*Verstehen*), individuals can bridge the gap between diverse

perspectives and worldviews, fostering a deeper understanding of one another (Palmer, 1963).

This emphasis on dialogue and interpretation as fundamental pillars of communication had a profound and enduring impact across various disciplines. Linguists now consider the cultural and historical underpinnings of language, recognizing that meaning is not solely defined by the words themselves, but also by the context in which they are used (Verschueren, 2019). Anthropologists utilize dialogue and interpretation to bridge the gap between themselves and the cultures they study, fostering a more nuanced understanding of their practices and beliefs (Clifford & Marcus, 1986). Literary analysis has undergone a shift, adopting hermeneutics to understand texts within the rich tapestry of their historical and cultural contexts. The hermeneutic approach has become a cornerstone. It allows scholars to delve deeper into a text's meaning by examining its historical and cultural background (Jauss, 1982).

Dilthey's Legacy: The Enduring Influence on Communication Theory

The impact of Dilthey's ideas extends far beyond his time, continuing to influence contemporary scholars and thinkers. A key figure in this lineage is Karl-Otto Apel, a prominent German philosopher known for his contributions to hermeneutics and communication theory. Building upon Dilthey's foundation, Apel introduced the concept of "communicative action" (Apel, 1982). This concept underscores the centrality of mutual understanding and dialogue in achieving meaningful communication. Apel argues that communication strives not only for the exchange of information, but also for a process of reaching a "consensus" through reasoned argument and a willingness to revise one's own perspective in light of new information and understanding.

Dilthey on Schleiermacher on Understanding (Verstehen) and Interpretation (Auslegung)

Palmer stated, Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911) developed a distinct hermeneutic approach, distinct from previous theories like Schleiermacher's. While Schleiermacher focused on the overall structure of a text for interpretation, Dilthey placed greater emphasis on historical context. He argued that understanding a text's meaning requires considering the historical period in which it was created.

Dilthey also challenged the limitations of traditionalist realist and idealist schools. Realists, according to Dilthey, confined interpretation to religious doctrine, hindering a richer understanding of life experiences. He believed human life is enriched by ongoing interpretation through the lens of history. Similarly, Dilthey disagreed with idealists who viewed history as a static process. He argued that human history is dynamic and constantly evolving, shaping our understanding of ourselves and the world around us. Through this evolving historical context, individuals gain insights into their own lives, fostering personal growth and the pursuit of knowledge.

CONCLUSION

Dilthey's hermeneutics focuses on interpreting human history and inner experiences through signs. It emphasizes understanding an author's context, perspective, and actions. He saw philosophy as intertwined with history and divided science into natural sciences (explanation) and human sciences (understanding).

Dilthey's hermeneutics has three parts:

- Experience (Erlebnis): Direct life experiences in historical context.
- Expression (Ausdruck): More than emotions, reflecting the human condition.
- Understanding (Verstehen): Interpreting expressions and human behavior complexities.

Verstehen is key to grasping the unique meaning of human activity. Humans, for Dilthey, are not just language-based but also "existential beings" who find meaning in every aspect of life. Hermeneutics helps us understand these life-related expressions, fostering shared experiences within a cultural context.

Dilthey's ideas influenced fields like linguistics and literature. Others, like Karl Otto Apel, built upon his work, emphasizing dialogue and mutual understanding in communication.

ADVANCED RESEARCH

The author recognizes that this article may have shortcomings in language, writing, and presentation due to the limitations of the researcher's knowledge and experience. To improve the work, constructive criticism and suggestions from readers are welcome.

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