

REVIEW OF W. DILTHEY'S CONCEPT OF  
UNDERSTANDING  
AS A METHOD IN SOCIAL SCIENCES

The purpose of this paper is to bring out the limitations of Wilhelm Dilthey's approach to understanding human action and then to stipulate the notion of understanding in a more radical fashion. To a great extent Dilthey's Philosophy of Cultural Sciences is responsible for creating an anti-naturalistic and antipositivistic stance among the methodologists of social sciences, although it could not make a complete departure from positivistic norms and categories. As the recent debate over the method of understanding owes a great deal to Dilthey, shortcomings of his philosophy have obviously staggered it to take a radical turn. This paper attempts to show this path through a critical assessment of Dilthey's contribution to the movement. The ground of this critique is the ground of communion - the reality *between* man and man.

The concept of understanding (*verstehen*) is an outcome of search on the part of social scientists to devise a method that may be appropriate to explain human action. The nature of goals and the character and limitations of explanations in the social sciences has been a major point of controversy among the philosophers of social sciences and the social scientists themselves. One side there are those who believe in a unity of the scientific method and thus envisage the social sciences to be basically no different from the natural sciences. Underlying this approach there is a conception of society as the *second nature* -

as independent of human experience and interference as the physical nature is. As Peter L. Berger says :

In terms of social scientific method, one is faced with a way of thinking that assumes *a priori* that the human world is a causally closed system. The method would not be scientific if it thought otherwise. Freedom as a special kind of cause is excluded from this system *a priori*.<sup>1</sup>

From this standpoint, social facts are considered to be a par with the physical facts. They are real, empirical and measurable ; they are capable of producing the same kinds of law-like propositions and explanatory coverage that are believed to be present in the natural sciences. Against this positivistic – naturalistic trend, there are humanistic – culturalistic camps. They argue in favour of basic distinctions between physical events which are the focus of attention in natural sciences, and man's social actions which are focus of attention in social sciences. From the latter view-point, man's social actions are 'meaningful', and they are so not only to the scientist-observer, but also to the subject-actors themselves. Their meaningfulness can not be grasped by sheer cause-and-effect relationship or S-R psychology, but by an empathetic involvement in the perspective under investigation. Thus, a social scientist, from this point of view, does not remain a scientist-observer, but becomes a participant observer. This trend originated largely from the writings of Wilhelm Dilthey. He is the central figure in the history of the concept of 'understanding' (*Verstehen*). He called the process by which we comprehend the meaning of an expression 'understanding'. Thus it is a technical term. The meaning of it can be grasped better if we bear in mind that it is significantly different from any other form of knowing, such as perceptual awareness. As Rickman puts it :

Understanding as a distinctive approach to human beings is necessary because the human world is pervaded by meaning in a way in which the physical world is not ... human actions are accompanied by consciousness and prompted by purposes. They spring from the interpretation of situations and the appreciation of values. Behind the actions of a historical figure, the ritual dances of a primitive tribe the practices of trade unionists or the twitches of a neurotic lie ideas, beliefs and feelings which make the behaviour meaningful. The task of the historian, sociologist, social anthropologist or psychologist does not end when he has described this behaviour; he can also discover its meaning by the process of understanding. Ultimately this is based on the fact that we ourselves experience *how* feelings and thoughts give rise to actions.<sup>2</sup>

The particular function of human knowledge or the specific form of human awareness that is emphasized here has reference to human studies alone. 'Understanding' consists in a tendency to bring the overt aspects of human phenomena back into their inner dimensions. Dilthey says :

This tendency makes use of every expression of life in order to understand the mental content from which it arises. In history we read of economic activities, settlements, wars and the creating of states. They fill our souls with great images and tell us about the historical world which surrounds us; but what moves us, above all, in these accounts is what is inaccessible to the senses and can only be experienced inwardly, this is inherent in the outer events which originate from it and, in its turn, is affected by them. The tendency I am speaking of does not depend on looking at life from the outside but is based on life itself.<sup>3</sup>

The above passage indicates the specific way human studies are related to humanity. This is clearly different from the way natural sciences are related to natural phenomena as well as human phenomena. The tendency in the latter is just the opposite. It tends to relegate human phenomena which consist in meaningfulness, purposiveness, and are open to understanding, to physical objects. In the context of philosophy of life, epistemology, philosophy of history and philosophy of man, Dilthey rejects this tendency as arising out of scientism. Because of its own premises, scientism can not go beyond explanation.

The understanding that takes place in a scientific framework may at most be called 'explanatory understanding' (in Weberian sense). At this level of understanding there is no intimacy in terms of subject's participation where man's social actions are involved. We can talk about explanation and explanation alone of social actions when they are reduced to mere *behaviour*. Durkheim says :

I consider extremely fruitful this idea that social life should be explained, not by the notions of those who participate in it, but by more profound causes which are unperceived by consciousness, and I think also that these causes are to be sought mainly in the manner according to which the associated individuals are grouped. Only in this way, it seems, can history become a science, and sociology itself exist.<sup>4</sup>

As against this approach, the distinction is made between *behaviour* and *action*; and the form of awareness in human situation is announced as characteristically different form that in natural science. It is 'expression-meaning-agent-oriented'. Thus, the issue is joined in the methodological debate. The antinaturalistic tradition in human sciences may therefore be regarded as having its origins in Dilthey.

The history of the concept of understanding from Dilthey through Weber to Winch has sharpened this concept in opposition to a non intimate approach in terms of explanation alone. The uniqueness of the concept, according to Dilthey, lies in that it is rooted in a 'lived world'. A 'lived world' is a world which we 'live through' without making it an object. It consists of human expressions that are meaningful. 'Expression' and 'meaning' go hand in hand. This may be elucidated in the following way. According to Dilthey, our knowledge of minds including that of our own ones, depends on the ways they express themselves. The basic feature of human mental life is to express or 'objectify' itself. So far as man's self-knowledge is concerned, introspection has its limitations. It is not possible to get a stable view of what is going on in ourselves in a flux of psychic events unless they are brought out and organized into forms of expressions. To hold any such event before the mind for a manageable length of time is to put it into a form of expression. This is introspection aided by expression. Direct introspection or introspection unaided by expression amounts to a seeing experience which passes into its successor immediately without waiting for its examination, analysis, classification or even description by the knowing subject. So far as our knowledge of other persons is concerned, introspection is of no help because the mental life of others is not directly accessible to me unless it is conveyed by some expression. Overt expression of an experience in someone's mind has the power to evoke a corresponding experience in the observer's mind. It comes alive in observer's mind as a reproduction of itself (*Nachbild*). This is the foundation of our knowledge of the other person. His lived-experience is externalized in the form of an expression, it is again internalized as a *Nachbild* by the observer.

Understanding apprehends the meaning of an expression. For Dilthey, meaning is simply a relation between a sign or expres-

sion and what it signifies or expresses, and understanding is the deciphering of it. Alternatively it indicates a living unity consisting in placing a fragment of mental life in the whole of mental life, the part within the whole. But these are the two aspects of the same concept "meaning", and these two are closely related. As Hodges points out :

The "meaning" of a word from one point of view may be the object to which it refers; from another it may equally lie in the part which the word plays in the development of the sentence, its relation to what comes before and after. It is safe to say that the ambiguity in Dilthey's use of the words 'understanding' and 'meaning' testifies a real unity between the two facts, the fact of expression and the fact of living unity, which are distinct but are not found apart. To "understand" the "meaning" of an expression is also to "understand" the "meaning" (in a different sense of both words) of a fragment of mental life.<sup>5</sup>

Thus an expression is meaningful in either of these two senses of "meaning" or more accurately speaking, in both senses because they two are inseparable. An expression consists in an 'objectification of mind' and its meaningfulness then follows in terms of the relation between this expression and what it expresses in the context of a totality. This totality consists in a "teleological" or vital unity maintained by the structural relations and processes in the life of an individual mind or of a group.<sup>6</sup>

What follows is that objectification is a necessary condition for our knowledge of man in the philosophical sense. Dilthey's characterization of human studies as *descriptive* and opposed to *explanatory* disciplines is grounded on his emphasis on mental facts along with their relations and interactions, as consciously lived through and perceived by the students of humanities. For

him, we do not need to provide explanation of such facts by going behind them to types of entity and process other than the ones we perceive. Dilthey points to a presuppositionless approach towards human phenomena. On the other hand the procedure that is fundamental in natural sciences consists in "accounting for observed facts in terms of factors whose number and nature is determined not by descriptive analysis of the observed facts, but by the requirements of a methodological assumption e.g. accounting for physical processes in terms of entities not observable and possessing only primary qualities, or accounting for memory in terms of physical traces or "engrams" in the brain".<sup>7</sup> But while Dilthey avoids presuppositions from beyond his own conceptual framework, he presupposes certain notions like "lived experience", (*Das Erleben, Das Erlebnis*), 'meaning', 'significance', sense' (*Bedeutung, Bedeutsamkeit, Sinn*) etc. from within his own framework as necessary to describe mental facts. These mental facts lead to the construction of an 'objective mind' vis., "that body of expressions of mental life which are not momentary and transient, but in various ways permanent and enduring, and which constitute a most important factor in our environment".<sup>8</sup> Works of art, books of all kinds, systems of ideas, habits and customs, social and cultural institutions are included within it.

"I understand by it the manifold forms in which the common background subsisting among various individuals has objectified itself in the sensible world. In this objective mind the past is for us a permanent enduring present. Its realm extends from the style of life and the forms of economic intercourse to the whole system of ends which society, has formed for itself, morality, law, the state, religion, art, science and philosophy. For the work of genius too rep-

resents a common stock of ideas, mental life, and ideals at a particular time and in a particular environment. From earliest childhood our self receives its nourishment from this world of objective mind. It is also the medium in which the understanding of other persons and their expressions takes place. For everything in which the mind has objectified itself contains in itself a factor common to the I and the Thou."<sup>9</sup>

This formulation of the concept of objective mind has a distinct positivistic flavour. In spite of a subjectivistic and personalistic overtone of the passage quoted above, it does not sound very different from Karl Popper's conception of 'world 3t which is "the world of the logical *contents* of books, libraries, computer memories" etc.<sup>10</sup> As a result for Popper 'understanding' in humanities is similar to 'understanding' in natural sciences. Popper finds at least four similarities :

- (1) As we understand other people owing to our shared humanity, we may understand nature because we are part of it.
  - (2) As we understand men in virtue of some rationality of their thoughts and actions, so we may understand the laws of nature because of some kind of rationality or understandable necessity inherent in them...
  - (3) The reference to God in Einstein's letter\* indicates another sense shared with the humanities-the attempt to understand the world of nature in the way we understand a work of art : as a creation.
- And 4) There is in the natural sciences that consciousness of an ultimate failure of all our attempts to understand which has been much discussed by students of humanities and which has been attributed to the 'otherness' of other



people, the impossibility of any real self-understanding and the inevitability of over-simplification which is inherent in any attempt to understand anything unique and real.<sup>10</sup>

The question is not of finding out the similarities or dissimilarities between scientific and humanistic understanding. Understanding at the interhuman level is marked by a mutuality which, as Michael Polanyi holds, 'prevails to such an extent here that the logical category of an observer facing an object placed on a lower logical level becomes altogether inapplicable'. At this level, "The I-it situation has been gradually transformed into an I-Thou relation,"<sup>11</sup>

Understanding in the sense of Dilthey is understanding of that which is meant. Hence, it is 'understanding' of object. But human action involves both human agent and his world which thrives with the fecundity of his expressions, his culture, society and history. In short 'human action' signifies a human continuum which cannot be snapped through facts or objects – mental or non-mental. This is a dynamic that exerts power in human life. The first requisite for a social scientist is to be conscious of this dynamic and then to participate in it through direct and face-to-face relation with his subjects i. e. the other human persons. This amounts to invoking the 'Thou' in the other.

It is not always possible to understand a social life in terms of a given objective life-world as the only background of it. If the purpose of social science is to understand a monological pattern of life then the presupposition of it—an ontological unity of the society/community to be studied – may serve as a necessary condition to generate the same understanding. The result of this type of social inquiry is in a way confirmation of what is already presupposed. A concept of unified process of socialisation underlies this approach. To learn the process would amount to an

understanding of human life and individual actions within that purview. But the purpose of social sciences is to look for unique patterns too. Freedom, which is not there in a closed system, may be found in deviants' activities or in the form of religious sects and cults which are technically known as 'subcultures' as also in people's urge for utopian fulfilments. Habermas says :

... Society is not just a system of self-preservation. There is also a restless urge, present as a libide in the individual, which has unharnessed itself from the functions of self-preservation and presses toward utopian fulfilment.<sup>12</sup>

A complete understanding of a social life, and a wholesome approach to human activities which constitute that social life can be best accomplished by invoking the *Thou*. The point is not merely to participate in the consciousness of the people whom the social scientist has gone to survey, but also to make them participate in his own consciousness. Knowledge of language spoken in a community, and of its customs, habits and religion may indeed be considered to be a pre-requisite to our understanding of a social life. But it is far from being the sufficient condition for the acquisition of such understanding, because, invoking the *Thou* is an even more fundamentally necessary condition for it. The centrality of the concept of society lies in the concept of *Thou*. Without this a lived-world is impossible. While maintaining that 'Robinson Crusoe' would never think : 'There is no community and I belong to none : I am alone in the world' Max Scheler speaks of 'the general evidence for the *Thou* : He says :

... Crusoe's evidence of the existence of a *Thou* and of his own membership of the community is not merely a contingent, observational, inductive 'experience', but is certainly *a priori* in both an object and a subjective sense and has a definite *intuitive basis*, namely a specific and well-defined consciousness of *emptiness* or absence (as compared with

the presence of some genuine entity already there), in respect of emotional acts as represented, for instance, by the authentic type of love for other people. In the case of conative acts one might also refer to the consciousness of 'something lacking' or of 'non-fulfilment' which would invariably and necessarily be felt by our Crusoe when engaged in intellectual or emotional acts which can only constitute an objective unity of meaning *in conjunction with* the possibility of a social response. From these necessarily specific and unmistakable blanks, as it were, where his intentional actions miss their mark he would, in our opinion, derive a most positive intuition and idea of something *present to him as the sphere of the Thou, of which he is merely unacquainted with any particular instance.*<sup>13</sup>

Acceptance of a given 'objective mind' and knowledge of man being based on a constant approximation to it (as held by Dilthey) results in a very narrow conception of philosophical anthropology. The dynamic that exerts power in human life owes to the *Thou*, to man as a dialoguing being.

The concept of understanding needs to be more radical. Acceptance of a given "objective mind" and knowledge of man being based on a constant approximation to it (as held by Dilthey) results in a very narrow conception of Philosophical Anthropology and Philosophy of Social Sciences. Social scientists need a soil of communion beneath their feet where divergent world-views meet and understanding develops through dialogue. When both the 'observer' and the 'observed' come to agree upon the observer's mode of conceptualization with regard to the class of experiential events under study only then can the understanding be said to be complete. Such an agreement would be a mutually acceptable evidence that the observer has been able to penetrate through the concepts to the experiential flux and has been able to reconceptualize it in his own framework; and also

that the subject has done similarly with reference to the understanding of the observer. To give an example, an observer who has no grasp of the notion of 'sacred' (in non-reductive terms) can never understand any member of the whole class of sacred objects or experiences. That means that the observer should grant the ultimate irreducibility of certain fundamental categories in which alone a certain experience can be articulated. The translation of such categories into what the observer believes independently to be its equivalents in *his* framework constitutes a methodological absolutism which can never be justified as an endeavour towards understanding.

Fellow,

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NOTES

1. Peter L. Berger : *Invitation to Sociology*, U. S. A., Penguin Books, 1966, PP. 143-144.
2. H. P. Rickman : *Understanding and The Human Studies*, London, Heinemann Education Books Ltd., 1967, P. XV.
3. Wilhelm Dilthey : *Selected Writings*, edited by H. P. Rickman, Cambridge University Press, 1976, P. 172,
4. Quoted by Peter Winch in his *The Idea of a Social Science*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, PP. 23-24.
5. H. A. Hodges : *Wilhelm Dilthey : An Introduction*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1944, P. 21.
6. See *Wilhelm Dilthey : An Introduction*, P. 15.
7. *Ibid.*, P. 31.
8. *Ibid.*, P. 118.
9. See Karl Popper's *Objective Knowledge*, Oxford, 1979, P. 74.
10. *Ibid.*, P. 184.
11. *Personal Knowledge*, P. 346.
12. Jurgen Habermas : 'Knowledge and Interest', in *Sociological Theory and Philosophical Analysis*, ( eds. ) by D. Emmet and A. MacIntyre, Macmillan, 1970, PP. 36-54.
13. Max Scheler : *The Nature of Sympathy*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1954, P. 235.