

The circle starts from the divination of the totality to which the element belongs; if the guess is correct, the element in question reveals part of the meaning, which in turn gives us the lead toward a better, fuller, more specific reconstruction of totality. The process goes on, in ever wider circles, until we are satisfied that the residue of opacity still left in our object does not bar us from appropriating its meaning. (Bauman 1978: 31)

The grammatical approach to interpretation uses a comparative method and proceeds from the general to the particular. The psychological approach is intuitive and uses both the comparative method and the 'divinatory' method. In the latter, the interpreter transforms him/herself into the author to grasp the mental processes involved. Although these two approaches have equal status, they cannot be practised at the same time: in considering the common language, the writer is forgotten; in understanding the author, the language is forgotten.

The first interpretation is called 'objective', since it is concerned with linguistic characteristics distinct from the author, but also 'negative', since it merely indicates the limits of understanding; its critical value bears only upon errors in the meaning of words. The second interpretation is called 'technical' [and through it] the proper task of hermeneutics is accomplished . . . What must be reached is the subjectivity of the one who speaks, the language being forgotten. Here language becomes an instrument at the service of individuality. This interpretation is called 'positive', because it reaches the act of thought which produced the discourse. (Ricoeur in Thompson 1981b: 47)

Ultimately, the aim in understanding the author or social actor from the psychological point of view is to gain access to what is meant in the text or in the social activity.

This process of interpretation is considerably more laborious and difficult for the interpreter than is the activity of understanding in which participants in a 'conversation' need to engage. Much of this latter understanding is taken-for-granted and is drawn on without reflection. However, as Schleiermacher has argued, the interpreter, as an outsider, is in a better position than the author to grasp and describe 'the totality'.

From its background in scriptural and other textual interpretation, hermeneutics came to be seen as the core discipline which provided a foundation for understanding all great expressions of human life, cultural and physical. The instigator of this transition was Dilthey (1833–1911) who referred to this range of concerns as the 'human studies' or the 'human sciences' (*Geisteswissenschaften*). Dilthey argued that the study of human conduct should be based on the method of understanding (*verstehen*) to grasp the subjective consciousness of the participants, while the study of natural phenomena should seek causal explanation (*erklären*). He rejected the methods of the natural sciences as being appropriate for the human sciences and addressed his work to the question: how is objectivity possible in the human sciences? He set out to demonstrate the methods,

approaches and categories, applicable in all the human sciences, which would guarantee objectivity and validity. Whether he produced a satisfactory answer to the question is a matter of some debate but he is regarded by some as the most important philosopher in the second half of the nineteenth century.

In his early work, Dilthey hoped that the foundation of the human sciences would be based on descriptive psychology, an empirical account of consciousness devoid of concerns with causal explanation. He believed that psychology could provide a foundation for the other social sciences in the same way as mathematics underlies the natural sciences. All human products, including culture, were seen to be derived from mental life. However, he later came to realize the limits of this position and turned to Husserl's phenomenology, particularly his doctrine of *intentionality* of consciousness, for the foundation. Subsequently, he became convinced that this did not go far enough or deep enough. Finally, he moved from a focus on the mental life of individuals to understanding based on socially produced systems of meaning.

In his last years, then, Dilthey seems to have modified his earlier central interest in psychology substantially, first under the influence of attacks on it by Ebbinghaus and the neo-Kantians, then under the powerful influence of Husserl's phenomenological approach and his theory of intentionality, and finally under the influence of his hermeneutical approach to understanding not only individual men but also cultural systems and organizations that have acquired an 'objectified' form in history. (Betanzos 1988: 28)

He came to stress the role of social context and what he called 'objective mind' – objectifications or externalizations of the human mind, or the 'mind-created world' – which are sedimented in history, in what social scientists now call culture.

Every single human expression represents something which is common to many and therefore part of the realm of objective mind. Every word or sentence, every gesture or form of politeness, every work of art and every historical deed are only understandable because the person expressing himself [sic] and the person who understands him are connected by something they have in common; the individual always experiences, thinks, acts, and also understands, in this common sphere. (Dilthey, quoted in Outhwaite 1975: 26–7)

Dilthey now argued that phenomena must be situated in the larger wholes from which they derive their meaning; parts acquire significance from the whole and the whole is given its meaning by the parts. 'The emphasis shifts from the empathetic penetration or reconstruction of other people's mental processes to the hermeneutic interpretation of cultural products and conceptual structures' (Outhwaite 1975: 26).

Dilthey insisted that the foundation for understanding human beings is

in life itself, not in rational speculation or metaphysical theories. Life, by which he meant the human world – social, historical reality – provides us with the concepts and categories we need to produce this understanding. He was critical of the approaches to human understanding of philosophers, such as Locke, Hume and Kant, because there was ‘no real blood flowing in the veins’ of their human subjects, ‘only the diluted juices of reason as mere mental activity’. He regarded the core of life as being instinct, feeling, passion and thought. Thought can be about life and can articulate and explain it, but the most fundamental form of human experience is *lived experience (Eelebnis)*, first-hand, primordial, unreflective experience. Life, or lived experience, is a series of acts in which willing, feeling, thinking, imaginative and creative human beings interact with the physical environment and with other human beings and, in the process, create their world. This lived experience can only be understood through its expressions – gestures, facial expressions, informal rules of behaviour, works of art, buildings, tools, literature, poetry, drama, laws, social institutions – such as religion and cultural systems – which come to possess an independent existence of their own. These ‘objectifications of life’, or residues of our thoughts in cultural achievements and physical things, can be understood through an inner process of *verstehen*, of hermeneutic understanding.

[W]e understand [*verstehen*] ourselves and others only because we introduce our own lived experience of life into every kind of expression of our own life and that of others. Thus the combination of lived experience, expression, and understanding [*Erleben, Ausdruck, und Verstehen*] is the specific process whereby mankind [sic] exists for us as an object of the human sciences. Hence the human sciences are grounded in this connection of life, expression, and understanding. (Dilthey, quoted in Betanzos 1988: 24)

The dual process of discovering taken-for-granted meanings from their externalized products, and understanding the products in terms of the meanings on which they are based, is what Schleiermacher had earlier referred to as the *hermeneutic circle*. Dilthey continued to assert the view that objective understanding must be the ultimate aim of the human sciences even if they use this circular method of understanding.

The capacity of another person, or a professional observer, to understand human products is, according to Dilthey, based on a belief that all human beings have something in common. However, he accepted the possibility that human ‘expressions’ of one group may be unintelligible to members of another group; they may be so foreign that they cannot be understood. On the other hand, they may be so familiar that they do not require interpretation. ‘Interpretation would be impossible if the expressions of life were totally alien. It would be unnecessary if there was nothing alien in them. [Hermeneutics] thus lies between these two extreme opposites. It is required wherever there is something alien that the art of understanding has to assimilate’ (Dilthey, quoted in Habermas 1972: 164).

Many scholars have contributed to the development of hermeneutics. Two other early contributors will be discussed here because of their methodological relevance, Husserl and Heidegger. Heidegger was influenced by Dilthey but also by the phenomenological method of his mentor, Husserl. Heidegger, in turn, has helped to lay the foundation for one branch of contemporary hermeneutics.

Husserl was instrumental in establishing a parallel intellectual tradition to hermeneutics known as *phenomenology*. He set himself the task of developing a method that would achieve pure understanding, liberated from the relativism of historical and social entanglements. This was the method of *phenomenological reduction* in which consciousness is freed from presuppositions and thus is able to grasp meaning in its true essence. ‘[C]onsciousness liberated from the world will be capable of grasping the true meaning; not the contingent meaning, meaning as it happens to be seen – but meaning in its true, necessary essence’ (Bauman 1978: 111). Husserl wished to establish truth independently of what people in socio-historical situations happen to think it is. He argued that in everyday life, in what he called the ‘natural attitude’, people naïvely accept their world as self-evident; they complacently refrain from questioning or doubting it. Only an exceptional person is able to break out of this natural attitude, to bracket absolutely everything which such an attitude requires us to assume. What is required is nothing less than transcendental *epoche*, of suspending belief.

The act of *epoche*, so Husserl tells us, differs essentially from supposedly similar operations accomplished by philosophers of the past. It does not mean denying the world in the style of sophist, nor questioning its existence in the style of sceptics. *Epoche* means simply a methodological limitation which allows us to make only such judgments as do not depend for their validity on a spatio-temporal world . . . *Epoche* and transcendental reduction, the ‘suspension’ of everything empirical, historically transient and culture-bound, are the operations which have to be performed for this direct insight to become possible. As all the ‘empirically given’ data are to be disposed of on the way, they cannot be employed as steps leading to the final accomplishment: the capture of meaning. (Bauman 1978: 119, 123)

This desire for a path to pure truth, uncontaminated by taken-for-granted ideas, beliefs and prejudices, and unrestricted by the limits of personal knowledge and experience, is not new. What is new in Husserl is the belief that it is possible for a human being to exist in a state of pure consciousness, consciousness free from any earthly attachments, and thus be able to discover the essence of things. It is an act of faith, and a state that can only be imagined in a negative way – as emptiness. However, as Bauman has pointed out, to bracket the world away and leave the empirical individual ‘would be like installing burglar alarms on the door but leaving the thief inside the house’ (1978: 121). He was also critical of the elitism in Husserl’s

position, the claim that pure consciousness is a feat that only a few can accomplish.

What Heidegger found attractive in Husserl's work was the notion of a preconceptual method of grasping phenomena. Like Dilthey, he also wanted to establish a method that would reveal life in terms of itself. However, Heidegger saw this new method differently from Husserl. In fact, he turned Husserl's position on its head. Husserl had demanded that we must stand back from, or radically disengage ourselves from, our involvement in our everyday world in order to free our consciousness to grasp the truth. Instead, for Heidegger, understanding is a mode of being and can and must be grasped by ordinary people; it is the foundation of human existence. 'Heidegger's hopes are lodged with a worldly existence uncontaminated by false philosophy, rather than with a consciousness unpolluted by existence' (Bauman 1978: 149). 'Whereas Husserl had approached it with an idea of bringing into view the functioning of consciousness as transcendental subjectivity, Heidegger saw in it the vital medium of man's [sic] historical being-in-the-world' (Palmer 1969: 125). The difference in their views may be related to the fact that Husserl was trained in mathematics and Heidegger in theology.

The central idea in Heidegger's work is that understanding is a mode of being rather than a mode of knowledge, an ontological problem rather than an epistemological problem. It is not about how we establish knowledge; it is about how human beings exist in the world. Understanding is the basis of being human.

For Heidegger, understanding is embedded in the fabric of social relationships and interpretation is simply making this understanding explicit in language. In this everyday world the need for understanding only occurs when the world does not function properly; understanding occurs when something goes wrong. 'I start looking for words when existence reveals to me its rough edges; I need words to patch up the cracks in my world . . . [W]e can easily do without it [understanding]. Or rather, we could, if the world functioned smoothly and without interruption' (Bauman 1978: 156, 159). Therefore, understanding is an achievement within the reach of all human beings. 'Understanding is, in fact, our fate, against which we can fight, but from which we cannot escape' (Bauman 1978: 166). This understanding consists of seeing possibilities, of opening oneself up to both the future and the past.

The implications of Heidegger's position, which he clearly recognized, is that history is viewed, as it were, from the inside not the outside; there is no understanding of history outside of history. As Heidegger has put it: 'Interpretation is never a presuppositionless grasping of something in advance.' To assume that what is 'really there' is self-evident is to fail to recognize the taken-for-granted presuppositions on which such assumed self-evidence rests. All understanding is temporal; it is not possible for any human being to step outside history or their social world. Hence, Heidegger moved away from both Dilthey and Husserl.

To recapitulate, early hermeneutics arose in order to overcome a lack of understanding of texts; the aim was to discover what the text means. Schleiermacher shifted the emphasis away from texts to an understanding of how members of one culture or historical period grasp the experiences of a member of another culture or historical period. He argued for a method of psychological interpretation, of re-experiencing the mental processes of the author of a text or speaker in a dialogue. This involved the use of the *hermeneutic circle* to piece together the fragments of meaning that are available; it is the process of grasping the unknown whole from the fragmented parts and using this in order to understand any part. Dilthey then shifted the emphasis again to the establishment of a universal methodology for the human sciences, one which would be every bit as rigorous and objective as the methods of the natural sciences. He moved from psychological interpretation to the socially produced systems of meaning, from introspective psychology to sociological reflection, from the reconstruction of mental processes to the interpretation of externalized cultural products. Lived experience provides the concepts and categories for this understanding. For both Schleiermacher and Dilthey, as an interpreter's prejudices would inevitably distort his/her understanding, it is necessary to extricate oneself from entanglement in a sociohistorical context. Whereas Husserl wished to establish the path to pure consciousness, and hence to pure truth, by bracketing the natural attitude, Heidegger regarded understanding as being fundamental to human existence and, therefore, the task of ordinary people. He argued that there is no understanding outside of history; human beings cannot step outside of their social world or the historical context in which they live. Prejudgements shaped by our culture are the only tools we have.

Dilthey . . . never ceased to be fascinated by the ideal of objective understanding of history, i.e. understanding which itself would not be historical; he earnestly sought a vantage-point above or outside human existence, from which history could be seen as an object of objective study . . . [However] Dilthey could only offer the end of history as this point from which true understanding would become a possibility. Husserl can be seen as a philosopher who has drawn logical conclusions from the failure of historical hermeneutics to offer solid foundations for objective understanding; he assumed that objective understanding can be reached only outside and in spite of history, by reason, which by its own effort lifts itself above its existential historical limitations. Heidegger's is the opposite solution of Dilthey's dilemma. There is no understanding outside history; understanding is tradition engaged in an endless conversation with itself and its own recapitulation . . . The end of history, instead of revealing the true meaning of the past, would mean the end of understanding; understanding is possible only as an unfinished, future-oriented activity. Far from being unfortunate constraints imposed upon understanding, prejudgements shaped by tradition are the only tools with which understanding can be attained. (Bauman 1978: 170)

Bauman (1990) has characterized these two hermeneutic traditions as