

Wilhelm Dilthey

When we speak about the theories of understanding and interpretation in European Continental philosophy we cannot omit the philosophy of life („Lebensphilosophie“) of **Wilhelm Dilthey** (1833-1911). Dilthey was born on 19th November 1833 in Biebrich, near Wiesbaden in Germany. In 1852 he entered the University of Heidelberg to study theology, philosophy and history. In 1855 Dilthey passed theological exams and a year later (1856) he graduated in philosophy and began teaching in secondary schools. His first great work was *Schleiermacher's Hermeneutical System in Relation to Earlier Protestant Hermeneutics*. This work was awarded a double prize, but not published. In 1866 he accepted an invitation to lecture in philosophy at the University of Basel, then he moved to the University of Kiel (1868). His reputation was established by publication of the book *Schleiermacher's Life* (1870). In 1871 he was invited to the University of Breslau and then (in 1882) he moved to the University of Berlin to take a chair in philosophy. At the mature period of his philosophical development Dilthey published these books: *Introduction to the Human Sciences* (1883), *The Rise of Hermeneutics* (1900), *The Formation of the Historical World in the Human Sciences* (1910, unfinished). On 1 October 1911 Dilthey died in Seis am Schlern, near Bolzan, Italy.

Dilthey's theory of understanding and interpretation has been mainly influenced by F. D. E. Schleiermacher and especially in the first period of his philosophic development had psychological character. There is an obvious continuity between F. D. E. Schleiermacher's theory of understanding and the theory of understanding and interpretation in the life-philosophy of Wilhelm Dilthey who even in his first studies – paid his attention to the history of hermeneutics.

From the point of Dilthey the Geisteswissenschaften have very important social dimension, as it is stated in his book *Introduction to the Human Sciences*: „This introduction to the human sciences is intended to aid all those whose lifework is devoted to society: politicians and lawyers, theologians and educators - in coming to know how their guiding principles and rules relate to the encompassing reality of human society.“ (Wilhelm Dilthey: *Introduction to the Human Sciences*. Selected Works. Volume I. Edited, with an introduction, by Rudolf A. Makkreel and

Frithjof Rodi. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press 1989, p. 55.) In this way he also reflected the subject-matter of human sciences: „All the disciplines that have socio-historical reality as their subject-matter are encompassed in this work under the name „human sciences“. (Ebenda, p. 56.)

It is interesting that Dilthey's conception of science is very near to contemporary theories of science: „By a science we commonly mean a complex of propositions (1) whose elements are concepts that are completely defined, i. e., permanently and universally valid within the overall logical system, (2) whose connections are well grounded, and (3) in which finally the parts are connected into a whole for the purpose of communication.“ ... (Wilhelm Dilthey: *Introduction to the Human Sciences*. Selected Works. Volume I. Edited, with an introduction, by Rudolf A. Makkreel and Frithjof Rodi. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press 1989, p. 56.)

As Lawrence K. Schmidt points out, “Dilthey formulated an empirically based methodology for the human sciences that recognizes the distinctive nature of the human sciences”. (Lawrence K. Schmidt: *Understanding Hermeneutics*. Stocksfield: Acumen 2006, p. 29.) „That which has developed in the course of human history and which common usage has designated as ‘the sciences of man, of history, and of society’ constitutes a sphere of mental facts which we seek not to master but primarily to comprehend. The empirical method requires that we establish the value of the particular procedures necessary for inquiry on the basis of the subject matter of the human sciences and in a historical-critical manner.” (Wilhelm Dilthey: *Introduction to the Human sciences*. Selected Works. Volume I. Edited, with an introduction, by Rudolf A. Makkreel and Frithjof Rodi. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press 1989, p. 56.)

Wilhelm Dilthey reacted very sharply to the tendency in the human studies simply to take on the norms and ways of thinking of the natural sciences and apply them to the study of human being. Therefore in his book *The Introduction to the Human Sciences* he criticized positivism. According to Dilthey the human sciences cannot be conceived by means of methods in natural sciences as it was expressed in the conceptions of August Comte and John Stuart Mill: “The nature of knowledge in the human sciences must be explicated by observing the full course of human development. Such a method stands in contrast to that recently applied all too often

by the so-called positivists, who derive the meaning of the concept of science from a definition of knowledge which arises from a predominant concern with the natural sciences.“ (Ibid., p. 56)

Wilhelm Dilthey began to see in hermeneutics the foundations for *Geisteswissenschaften*: “I shall follow those thinkers who refer to this second half of the *globus intellectualis* by the term *Geisteswissenschaften*. In the first place, this designation is one that has become customary and generally understood, due especially to the extensive circulation of the German translation of John Stuart Mill’s *System of Logic*.” (Ibid, p. 57.)

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

According to Dilthey the practice of regarding these disciplines as a unity distinct from the natural sciences is rooted in the depth and totality of the human self-consciousness. He argues that even before he is concerned to investigate the origin of the human spirit, man finds within his self-consciousness a sovereignty of the will, a responsibility for the actions, a capacity for subjecting everything to thought and for resisting, from within the stronghold of his personal freedom, any and every encroachment.

It was Dilthey’s aim to develop methods of gaining objectively valid interpretations of “expressions of inner life”. In his conception of hermeneutics **the concrete, historical, lived experience** must be the starting point and ending point for **Geisteswissenschaften** (“human sciences”). Just in this context Dilthey pays attention to the expression („Ausdruck“) of lived experience („Erlebnis“). According to him there is a special relation between lived experience, the life from which it

stems, and the understanding that it brings about. Dilthey argues that „an expression of lived experience can contain more of the nexus („Zusammenhang“) of psychic life than any introspection can catch sight of. It draws from depths not illuminated by consciousness“. (W. Dilthey, *The Formation of the Historical World in the Human Sciences*. Selected works. Volume III. Edited, with an introduction, by Rudolf A. Makkreel and Frithjof Rodi. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press 2002, p. 227.) In this context we sense in Dilthey some of the fundamental conflicts in the 19th century thinking: the romantic desire for immediacy and totality ever while seeking data that would be valid from the objective point of view.

Wilhelm Dilthey consciously set for himself the task of writing a “critique of historical reason” which would lay the epistemological foundations for the “humanities”. He saw in categories of natural sciences: space, time, number, etc. little possibility for understanding the inner life of human being. “Dilthey argues that the human sciences require a unique methodology different from the natural scientific method. The natural sciences *explain* a phenomenon by subsuming it under universal causal laws. The human sciences *understand* the mental or spiritual meanings that are expressed in external, empirical signs. Although the human sciences will sometimes require knowledge from the natural sciences, their conclusions refer to the inner realm of human meaning. The human studies have available the possibility of understanding the inner experience of another person through a process of mental transfer. Understanding occurs when the interpreter is able to recognize the inner state of another by means of that other person’s empirical expressions.” (Lawrence K. Schmidt: *Understanding Hermeneutics*. Stocksfield: Acumen 2006, p. 36.)

The problem of understanding man was for Dilthey one of recovering a consciousness of the historicity (“Geschichtlichkeit”) of our own existence which is lost in the static categories of science. He decided to lay this conception of historicity and understanding on the category of life which according to his opinion could grasp better the spontaneous, dialectical and moving character of social and cultural reality. However, to return to life does not mean for Dilthey to return to some mystical ground of source for all life both human and non human. Rather, **life** – especially in the mature period of his philosophical development - is seen in terms of “meaning”; life is human experience known from within. We can observe Dilthey’s

antimetaphysical sentiment in his refusal to treat phenomenal world as mere appearance: „Behind life, thinking cannot go.“ (Gesammelte Schriften V, p.184)

The top of Dilthey's philosophical development is characterized by his masterpiece *The Formation of the Historical World in the Human Sciences* (*Der Aufbau der geschichtlichen Welt in den Geisteswissenschaften*). This monograph demonstrates also Dilthey's fundamental belief that the method pervading human sciences is that of understanding and interpretation: „All the functions and truths of the human sciences are gathered in understanding. At every point it is understanding that opens up the world.“ (Dilthey, W.: *The Formation of the Historical World in the Human Sciences*. Selected works. Volume III. Edited, with an introduction, by Rudolf A. Makkreel and Frithjof Rodi. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press 2002, p. 226.)

Forms of Understanding

According to Dilthey understanding comes about, first of all, through the interests of practical life where persons rely on interchange and communication. They must make themselves understandable to each other. One person must know what the other wants. This is how the elementary forms of understanding originate: “By such an elementary form, I mean the interpretation of a single manifestation of life. ... The tapistry of human action consists of elementary acts, such as the lifting of an object, the swing of a hammer, the cutting of wood with a saw, that indicate the presence of certain purposes. In such elementary understanding we do not go back to the overall nexus of life that forms the enduring subject of life-manifestations. Nor are we aware of any inference from which this nexus might result.” (Dilthey, W.: *The Formation of the Historical World in the Human Sciences*. Selected works. Volume III. Edited, with an introduction, by Rudolf A. Makkreel and Frithjof Rodi. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press 2002, p. 228.)

According to Dilthey the fundamental relationship on which the elementary process of understanding depends is that of an expression to what is expressed in it: “Elementary understanding is not an inference from an effect to a cause. Nor must

we conceive it more cautiously as a procedure that goes back from a given effect to some part of the life that made the effect possible.” (Ibid. . 229)

What is Wilhelm Dilthey’s greatest merit for the development of hermeneutical thought? It is important that Dilthey renewed the project of general hermeneutics and significantly advanced it. He placed it in the horizon of historicity, within which it has subsequently undergone important development. He laid the foundations for Heidegger’s thinking on the temporality of self-understanding. He may properly be regarded as the father of the contemporary hermeneutical “problematic”.

Literature:

Wilhelm Dilthey: *Introduction to the Human Sciences*. Selected Works. Volume I. Edited, with an introduction, by Rudolf A. Makkreel and Frithjof Rodi. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press 1989.

Martin Heidegger’s Contribution to Hermeneutics in *Being and Time*

Just as Dilthey saw hermeneutics in the horizon of his own project of finding an historically oriented theory of method for the *Geisteswissenschaften*, so Heidegger used the word “hermeneutics” in the context of his larger quest for a more “fundamental” ontology. Like Dilthey, Heidegger wanted a method that would disclose life in terms of itself, and in *Being and Time* he quoted with approval Dilthey’s aim of understanding life from out of life itself. But in Heidegger’s conception *understanding* lacks its psychological dimension on the one hand and on the other hand it is tightly connected with the existential dimension of the human being. As H.-G. Gadamer points out, “Dilthey’s work mediated essential stimuli to the thinking of the young Heidegger, and he used these to further develop and reshape Husserlian phenomenology. But what Dilthey was dealing with was psychology. Martin Heidegger had developed a hermeneutics of facticity – that is to

say, a hermeneutics of the human being as concretely existing here and now, and he published this in the book *Being and Time* in 1927.” (H.-G. Gadamer: *Gadamer in Conversation. Reflections and Commentary*. Edited and translated by Richard E. Palmer. New Haven and London: Yale University Press 2001, p. 38).

As far as Husserl’s phenomenology is concerned, Heidegger found there conceptual tools unavailable to Dilthey or Nietzsche, and a method which might lay open the processes of being in human existence in such a way that being, and not simply one’s own psychic processes, might come into view. According to Martin Heidegger phenomenology is the proper method for investigation since it tries to avoid traditional presuppositions and returns to the things themselves. Phenomenology means “to let what shows itself be seen”. (Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*. Gesamtausgabe. Bd. 2. Vittorio Klostermann, Frankfurt am Main, 1977, p. 34. Compare to it Lawrence K. Schmidt: *Understanding Hermeneutics*. Stocksfield: Acumen 2006, p. 62)

There was important to Heidegger that phenomenology had opened up the realm of pre-conceptual apprehending of phenomena. This new “realm” had a quite different significance to Heidegger than to Husserl, however. 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 historical being-in-the world.

But there is a great difference between Husserl and Heidegger in relation to *hermeneutics*. Husserl never used this term in reference to his work, while Heidegger asserted in *Being and Time* that the authentic dimensions of a hermeneutical method make it hermeneutical; his project in *Being and Time* was a *hermeneutic of Dasein*: “Heidegger names human being ‘Dasein’ to avoid traditional metaphysical connotations and to emphasize that its mode of being is not the mode of being of an object. (...) To discover the meaning of being one must first discover the meaning of being of Dasein. The method of analysis is phenomenological hermeneutics, an interpretative self-understanding of Dasein as it shows itself from itself.” (Lawrence K. Schmidt: *Understanding Hermeneutics*. Stocksfield: Acumen 2006, p. 58.) Husserl’s scientific leanings are reflected in his quest for apodictic knowledge, his reductions, his tendency to search out the visualizable and conceivable through eidetic reduction; Heidegger’s writings make virtually no mention of apodictic knowledge, transcendental reductions, or the structure of the

ego. From the point of Heidegger “phenomenology is the correct method to gain proper access to describe Dasein in its factual life”. (Ibid., p. 58.)

In his philosophical work Heidegger stresses the *ontological* character of the hermeneutic process. In this context he insists on the situatedness and "thrownness" (Geworfenheit) of the human being (“Dasein”) in the world that cannot be analyzed by objective sciences. One of the most substantial properties of *Dasein* is its effort **to understand its being**: “Thus *fundamental ontology*, from which alone all other ontologies can originate, must be sought in the *existential analysis of Da-sein*.” (Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*. Gesamtausgabe. Bd. 2. Vittorio Klostermann, Frankfurt am Main, 1977, p. 13.)

In this conception of fundamental ontology, Heidegger maintains that understanding is one of the original and essential properties of *Dasein* because living human beings understand themselves in a continuous process of interpretation, self-interpretation and re-interpretation, along with a constant effort to create and realize their intentions and goals: “Understanding projects possible ways that Dasein could be and in doing so reveals to itself the situation in which it is. Understanding is either authentic, about Dasein, or inauthentic, about other beings, and each case may be genuine or not genuine. Understanding is necessarily interpretation since understanding begins with fore-having, fore-sight and fore-conception.” (Lawrence K. Schmidt: *Understanding Hermeneutics*. Stocksfield: Acumen 2006, p. 76.) As the way in which *Dasein* understands itself is conditioned by time, the structure of understanding has the character of a projection (i.e. it refers to future) and Heidegger therefore considers understanding to be a so-called "thrown projection". (Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*. Gesamtausgabe. Bd. 2. Vittorio Klostermann, Frankfurt am Main, 1977, pp. 16-17.)

Yet in *Being and Time* Heidegger finds a kind of access in the fact that one has with his existence a certain understanding of what fullness of being is. It is not a fixed understanding but historically formed, accumulated in the very experience of encountering phenomena. Ontology must turn to the processes of understanding and interpretation through which things appear; it must lay open the mood and direction of human existence, it must render visible the invisible structure of being-in-the-world.

How does this relate to hermeneutics? It means that ontology must, as phenomenology of being, become a “hermeneutic” of existence. This kind of hermeneutic lays open what was hidden; it constitutes not an interpretation of an interpretation (which textual interpretation is) but the primary act of interpretation which brings a thing from concealment. So Heidegger defines the essence of hermeneutics as the ontological power of understanding and interpretation which renders possible the disclosure of being of things and ultimately the potentialities of *Dasein*’s own being.

On the other hand, it is interesting that Heidegger's conception of understanding is also based on purposeful human activity in the life-world (“Lebenswelt”). (Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*. Gesamtausgabe. Bd. 2. Vittorio Klostermann, Frankfurt am Main, 1977), pp. 106-107.) He conceives the life-world as a set of things with which we are in connection, and these things are endowed with meaning and sense. (Compare Jaroslav Kudrna, “K některým otázkám pojetí znaku u Diltheye, Freyera a Heideggera” [To Some Questions Concerning the Conception of Sign by Dilthey, Freyer and Heidegger], *Filosofický časopis* 12, 1964, Nr. 5, p. 640-656.) Understanding is, therefore, also conceived as the ability of a human being to find a social and practical orientation in the life-world.

For Heidegger - from the point of his fundamental ontology - understanding is the power to grasp one’s own possibilities for being, within the context of the lifeworld (“Lebenswelt”) in which one exists. Understanding is conceived not as something to be possessed but rather as a mode or constituent element of being-in-the-world. It is not an entity in the world but rather the structure in being which makes possible the actual exercise of understanding on an empirical level.

Understanding is thus ontologically fundamental and prior to every act of existing. Yet the essence of understanding lies not in simply grasping one’s situation but in the disclosure of concrete potentialities for being within the horizon of one’s placement in the world. For this aspect of understanding Heidegger uses the term “existentiality” (*Existenzialität*).

Meaningfulness of Understanding

According to Heidegger understanding operates in a fabric of relationships (*Bewandnisganzheit*). Heidegger coins the term „meaningfulness“ (*Bedeutsamkeit*) to designate the ontological ground for the intelligibility of that fabric of relationships. As such, it provides the ontological possibility that words can have meaningful signification; it is the basis for language. The point Heidegger is making here is that meaningfulness is something deeper than the logical system of language, it is founded on something prior to language and embedded in world – the relational whole. However much words may shape or formulate meaning, they point beyond their own system to a meaningfulness already resident in the relational whole of world. Meaningfulness, then, is not something man gives to an object; it is what an object gives to man through supplying the ontological possibility of words and language.

In his work *Being and Time* Heidegger had placed the question of understanding in a radically new context. Understanding as a foundational mode of existing transcended the definitional limits placed on it by Dilthey in conceiving it as the historical over against the scientific form of understanding. Heidegger went further to assert that all understanding is temporal, intentional, historical. He went previous conceptions in seeing understanding not as a mental but as an ontological process, not as a study of conscious and unconscious processes but as disclosure of what is real for man.

After *Being and Time*, Heidegger turns increasingly to reinterpreting earlier philosophers – Kant, Nietzsche, Hegel – and the poetry of Rilke, Trakl, or Hölderlin. His thinking becomes more „hermeneutical“ in the traditional sense of being centered on text interpretation. Philosophy in Husserl remains basically scientific, and this is reflected in the significance it has for the sciences today; in Heidegger philosophy becomes historical, a creative recovery of the past, a form of interpretation.