

THE CHALLENGES OF POSTMODERNISM

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Repositioning Interpretative Social Science after Postmodernism: Understanding, Interpretation and Self

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INTRODUCTION

Interpretative social science gained prominence as an antidote to the positivistic characterization of social sciences. Positivism conceives society as a “thing”—an object that confronts the subject. It treats the phenomena it undertakes to investigate as “objective” so as to discover the causal relations between them. Thus, by establishing causal relations among facts, it relegates the role of the subject. Interpretative social science, on the other hand, investigates how “facts” are constituted as meaningful phenomena and hence how social experience is possible in the first place. In his work, *Introduction to the Human Sciences*, Dilthey observes that the science of society broke the bondage of metaphysics only to subjugate itself to a new bondage imposed by the natural sciences. While appreciating the spirit behind the early positivist thought of Comte, Mill and Spencer in developing an objective science of society, Dilthey criticized them for supposing that the method of social sciences is essentially the same as that of the natural sciences. According to Dilthey, the world of natural sciences is a meaningless given, while the human world, which is the theme of social sciences, is inherently meaningful. Society is a construct

guided by human ideas, values and purposes. Thus there is a distinction between the sciences of nature (*Naturwissenschaften*) and the human sciences (*Geisteswissenschaften*). The difference in the objects of the two sciences constitutes a difference in their methods too. While the natural sciences aim to explain the natural phenomena in terms of causal laws by focusing on the external relations, the human sciences seek to understand human phenomena in terms of the meaningful acts of the participants by focusing on the internal relations.

With the advent of Postmodernism there is a widespread disbelief in the philosophy of the subject. The “Cogito” that propelled the Modernist conceptions of truth and certainty seems to be no more available with the demise of the subject/author. This then poses a challenge to Interpretative social sciences as with the “death of the author”, the career of interpretative social sciences needs to be refashioned. The paper attempts to portray the trajectory of interpretative social sciences beginning with the methodical interpretation of Dilthey, passing through the philosophical hermeneutics of Gadamer and reaches Ricoeur’s hermeneutics. In doing so, we claim that the Postmodern challenge to interpretative social sciences, to a large extent, is preempted in the course of development of hermeneutics.

I

AUTHORIAL INTENTIONS: CENTRALITY OF AGENCY

Dilthey in order to lay the foundations of human sciences conceived social institutions and cultural forms interpretable as “expressions’ or “objectifications’ of mind. The products of mind, whether institutions or literary works, are “texts” which have to be read and interpreted in order to understand them. The method of interpretation or understanding is what hermeneutics emphasizes. For Dilthey, understanding is a rediscovery of “myself” in the other subject and it is possible because both the “other” and “me” are particularizations of the same “Spirit”.¹ The object of our understanding is thus the expression of the spirit. According to

him, understanding has always the particular as its object and this particular is the individual self. Thus, one understands objects and events as the expressions of other individuals, as an expression of lived experience.

Dilthey, in formulating the method of human sciences, thus turns not to some process of coming to know the events of an external world but to “lived experience”. The world of human sciences as distinct from the natural scientific world is a world constructed by historically and culturally located individuals in their everyday lives. The commonest understanding that all of us accomplish in our daily lives is empathy, that is “putting oneself in somebody else’s place.” This points to our essential community life, as it is the community that enables the individual to put himself or herself in the place of another. There are higher forms of understanding like “re-creation” (*Nachbilden*) and “re-living” (*Nacherleben*). The totality of the spiritual life is grasped in these activities of understanding. The transference of the subject’s own self into a given complex of expressions, the projection of the self into a person or work, that is empathy, is the basis of these higher forms of understanding. According to Dilthey, a perfect sharing of life is possible if our understanding moves along the actual sequence of events. Thus, understanding grows with the life-process itself. Reliving (*Nacherleben*) means creating along the line of events. It happens when “...we go forward with history, with an event in a far land or with something that is going on in the soul of a human being close to us. It reaches its fulfillment where the event has passed through the consciousness of the poet, the artist, or the historian, and now lies before us fixed and enduring in his work”.² Thus, a literary work helps us to relive the connected lived experience by unfolding the line of events depicted in it. In higher forms of understanding, unlike the elementary understanding, we do not follow the directions and intentions of our own life, rather “...the ‘interpreter’ takes some time in which he is not immediately involved in elementary understanding but thematizes his/her own or other’s life in its connectedness”.³ Though there is a connection between reliving and empathy, as empathy heightens our reliving, Dilthey argues that this is not to

give a psychological explanation of the process of reliving. Rather, we are interested in it only from the point of view of its function. Even though, the inherent possibilities of the life-process of every one are determined, understanding opens up a wide realm of possibilities before him. Re-creation or understanding by skilled reproduction (*Nachbilden*) attains a degree of perfection through inner affinity and sympathy. It is exemplified in scientific exegesis or interpretation and always has an element of ingenuity with it.⁴ According to Dilthey, this inner relationship, which makes the projection possible, is the presupposition of all hermeneutic rules. Understanding cannot be conceived exclusively in rational terms, leaving behind the subjective projection. Thus, he makes a distinction between the method of natural sciences and that of human sciences; one that is based on the attitude of mind, in an inner perception, in lived experience that is immediately given to us. The neo-Kantian philosophers of South-West German school, namely Rickert and Lask, Dilthey and Weber were all concerned with the distinctiveness of social scientific inquiry as consisting in the subjective reference it makes against the objective reference of the natural sciences. It is this subjective reference that makes interpretative social sciences to adopt the “intentional stance”.

The intentional stance derives from the belief that the purpose of social scientific explanation is to recapture the “motives” or “purposes” of the agents, as it is these subjective characteristics that make action meaningful. In other words, according to the intentionalists, action is not merely bodily movement, but has something over and above the manifested behaviour, especially the accompanying mental processes that bestow meaning on it. For them, the mental processes are “...not merely an epiphenomenon and, hence, irrelevant to the nature of the action, but is precisely that which bestows upon action its nature as action; moreover it gives each particular action its individual essence”.⁵ Thus, the intentionalists seek to understand social reality by explaining it in terms of intentions and motives of the actors.

Many philosophers of social sciences insist that social enquiry should uphold the same interpretations the agents themselves adopt. This conception derives its rationale from the doctrine

of social construction of social reality, a form of voluntarism. It construes social fact as a product of the agent's conceptions and meanings.⁶ Thus, Alfred Schutz argues that each and every "... term in a scientific model of human action must be constructed in such a way that a human act performed within the life-world by an individual actor in the way indicated by the typical construct would be understandable for the actor himself as well as for his fellow-men in terms of common-sense interpretation of everyday life".⁷ That is, for Schutz, the explanation of social action must be carried out in terms of the everyday interpretations provided by the agents themselves. The intentionalist stance gives rise to the metaphor of "inside" or "inner" description, contrasted to the external description, as relevant for understanding action. This commitment to the inner side of action often becomes problematic as many philosophers argue against the possibility of recapturing such subjective characteristics of the agents. That is, even if these motives and intentions are to be understood not as some mysterious "inner" springs of action,⁸ but as objective meanings, the critics of subjective interpretation point out that there is no such "fact of the matter". However, the proponents of the subjective interpretation of actions believe that intentional or subjective set of beliefs determines the meaning of action and accordingly they construe the goal of social scientific investigation as to recapture what the agents "have in mind."

Dilthey's project of explicating the notion of "understanding" in the human sciences is the result of his firm belief in the distinction between *Naturwissenschaften* and *Geisteswissenschaften*. The distinction between the two sciences calls for a special methodology for studying the human sciences. As Dilthey says, the object of natural sciences, namely "nature" needs "explanation" while that of the human sciences, namely "mental life" needs "understanding". Thus, in the study of human action, Dilthey brings in the triad of "experience", "expression" and "understanding". By experience, he refers to the indissoluble unity of thought, desire and will. Thus, the empiricist's separation of conative and cognitive aspects of human action stands negated in Dilthey's concept of experience. In other words, "experience" for Dilthey is man's subjectivity,

which is realized in his lived existence. “Expression” refers to the exteriorization of experience. That is to say, experience never remains merely subjective. It is rather expressed in actions and the permanent traces that action leaves behind by way of artifacts, institutions, etc. Thus, through “expression”, “experience” is crystallized. It is “understanding” which, at a later point, retrieves the experience from these expressions. Dilthey uses terms such as “recreating”, “reexperiencing” and “empathizing” to characterize understanding. Thus, for Dilthey, understanding is to be seen as replicating the experience the agent had when s/he performed the act. This, however, does not mean that Dilthey was reducing understanding to a simple sort of intuitive act, rather it is a discursive process in which the object of understanding is viewed from a larger perspective of comparable actions that has reference to the agents’ life-history and the socio-cultural milieu. This is evident from the fact that Dilthey includes grammatical and historical hermeneutics within the purview of methodical hermeneutics. Thus, even when Dilthey endorses Schleiermacher’s first canon of hermeneutics, which states that a text is to be understood from the viewpoint of a reader of the author’s own temporal milieu and environment, he does not thereby introduce some private intuitive act to grasp the same. As Seebohm points out:

Dilthey has given an interpretation of the first canon which eliminates the suspicion that this canon demands some kind of a mysterious travel through time which has to reach the psychological states of readers in the past or even the author. Grammatical hermeneutics and critique allows us to select, methodically with the aid of comparatistic methods, a group of texts which use approximately the same language.... Historical interpretation allows us to locate texts within this set of texts taking into account the hints given in the texts to historical events in the presence and the past of the text which include other texts to which the text in question refers explicitly or implicitly.⁹

Thus, according to Dilthey, the context of a text is determined methodically and hermeneutical understanding is carried out within this context. Thus, even when Dilthey talks about reliving the agent’s intentions or recreating the author’s intended meanings, his hermeneutics in contrast to Schleiermacher’s, does not require the forging of a psychological unity with the author. Nevertheless,

Dilthey shares with Schleiermacher the belief in the availability of a methodical hermeneutics through which one can retrieve the intended meanings.

II

ELUSIVE INTENTIONS: HEIDEGGER AND GADAMER

Against the methodical hermeneutics of Dilthey, Gadamer advances his philosophical hermeneutics. In doing this, he closely follows Heidegger's hermeneutic phenomenology. For Heidegger, understanding is a basic mode of being-in-the-world. According to him, the Aristotelian categories like quantity, quality, space and time are not adequate to study the being of man. Nor any causal explanation of human behaviour as a chain of events in the external world will throw any light on the nature of Man. Dasein, the being-in-the-world, is to be understood by the "existentialia" that give us access to Dasein's overtness. These constitutive factors of Dasein's being-in are "state-of-mind", "understanding" and "discourse". State-of-mind and understanding are equiprimordial and characterized as such by discourse. A state-of-mind (mood) always has its understanding and understanding always has its state-of-mind. Thus, understanding is an existential structure of Dasein. This implies that "understanding" as an existential is to be distinguished from "understanding" as cognitive faculty contrasted with explanation. Understanding as a possible cognition is only a derivative of the primordial understanding as existential.¹⁰ The primordially of understanding according to Heidegger consists in its structure of projection. Understanding is the potentiality-for-Being. And because of this "projection", Dasein is always "more" than what it is factually. In other words, "Understanding is Dasein's mode of being as openness, for in understanding it projects itself on the possibilities of its ability-to-be".¹¹ It is this projective character of understanding that constitutes the peculiar "sight" (sicht), which is always present in Dasein's basic ways of Being. Only because understanding is primarily a kind of seeing that it can display the various modes of sight such as

the circumspection of concern and considerateness of solicitude. Thus, by showing all “sight” as grounded in understanding, which is a fundamental existentials of Dasein, Heidegger strips “... pure intuition (*Anschauung*) of its priority, which corresponds noetically to the priority of the present-at-hand in traditional ontology. ‘Intuition’ and ‘thinking’ are both derivatives of understanding, and already rather remote ones. Even the phenomenological ‘intuition of essences’ (*Wesensschau*) is grounded in existential understanding.”¹² Now, for Heidegger, interpretation is the working out of possibilities projected in understanding. In this sense, interpretation is not something added on to understanding; rather it is the development of understanding itself. “In interpretation, understanding does not become something different. It becomes itself. Such interpretation is grounded existentially in understanding; the latter does not arise from the former. Nor is interpretation the acquiring of information about what is understood; it is rather the working-out of possibilities projected in understanding.”¹³ In Interpretation, the “as-structure” of that which is understood is made to stand out explicitly. So, to interpret is to lay bare the “as-structure”. According to Heidegger, this “as-structure” of interpretation is grounded in the “fore-structure” of understanding, which comprises fore-having (*vorhabe*), fore-sight (*vorsicht*) and fore-conception (*vorgriff*). The “ready-to-hand” is understood always in terms of a totality of involvements. Thus the “fore-having” is what I have in advance of any interpretation, the totality of involvements by which I relate to an object. This in turn, is always guided by a point of view, a “fore-sight” with regard to which what is understood is to be interpreted. In other words, the fore-sight “makes a start” on what we have in advance. But over and above, Dasein has a “fore-conception,” something we grasp in advance. That is, in interpretation the way in which we conceive the entity to be interpreted is decided in advance. All these imply that, as Heidegger says:

...interpretation is never a presuppositionless apprehending of something presented to us. If, when one is engaged in a particular concrete kind of interpretation, in the sense of exact textual interpretation, one likes to appeal... to what “stands there,” then one finds that what “stands there” in the

first instance is nothing other than the obvious undiscussed assumption... of the person who does the interpreting...[the assumptions] presented in our fore-having, our fore-sight, and our fore-conception.¹⁴

Thus, like Quine, for Heidegger too, there is no “fact of the matter”. However, “the non-determinacy” that emanates from Heidegger’s hermeneutic phenomenology is different from Quine’s thesis of indeterminacy of translation. Quine’s thesis has to do with the unavailability of meanings that are right or wrong in course of translation from one belief system to another. Dreyfus illustrates this point by the example of trying to capture the intentions of the author to determine what a literary work means. For both Quine and Heidegger it is impossible to determine the meaning of the text by capturing the author’s intentions, precisely because what the text means is relative to an interpretation and interpretations do change in accordance with changing background assumptions and practices. Now Dreyfus points out that for Quine, the impossibility of grasping the agent’s intention lies in the fact that our evidence for the so-called intentions is only the behaviour of the agent, which is again in need of interpretation. Thus, Quine points out that a theory is always underdetermined by evidence. Heidegger’s argument for the non-determinacy of interpretations is different from this. He would rather say, Dreyfus points out:

...an artist or a thinker, just like anyone else, cannot be clear about the background practices of his life and his age, not just because there are so many of them that such explication is an infinite task, but because the background is not a set of assumptions or beliefs about which one could even in principle be clear. The artist is thus in no better position than his contemporaries to make explicit the pervasive individual and social self-interpretation his work embodies.¹⁵

Heidegger refers to this problem as the “essential unthought in the work”. Thus, for Heidegger, we cannot get at “the meaning” of a work not because our only evidence for meaning is the behaviour of the subject/author, but because for hermeneutic explication there is no fact or theory explicitly stated, about which we can be right or wrong. Nevertheless, hermeneutical explication has to be fraught with and we can still decide as to whether a particular interpretation is better than another one. Thus, Dreyfus says that

Heidegger maintains that "... a better interpretation is one that makes the interpreter more flexible and open to dialogue with other interpretations....[Nevertheless in] the later works he holds that a better interpretation is one which focuses and makes sense of more of what is at issue in a current cultural self-interpretation".¹⁶ This, then, is to say that with regard to interpretation, "something really is at issue", even though no final answer comes forth "as to what that something is".

Gadamer takes the cue from Heidegger and develops "philosophical hermeneutics" in contrast to Diltheyan "methodical hermeneutics". Like Heidegger, Gadamer insists on the ontological primacy of human historicity. Thus, he believes that hermeneutics is not merely methodological but is the very feature of our existence. Thus, "understanding" for Gadamer is the hermeneutical dimension of existence, it belongs to the being of that which is understood. Gadamer's hermeneutics presupposes a context or setting, which requires engagement on the part of the individual subjects. This engagement is shaped by the pre-understanding (in Heidegger's words the "fore-structure" of understanding). This way of conceiving understanding implies that we can never understand a text in itself, independently of our historicity through which we gain access to it. In other words, for Gadamer, interpretation is not a matter of reconstruction but is mediation. In order to understand the past, we mediate the past meaning into our situatedness. That is, our historicity is integral to our understanding. It is historicity, even though it involves presuppositions and prejudices that open the past for us. The metaphor of "fusion of horizons" captures this aspect of understanding. For him, genuine understanding is a "fusion of horizons" in which the subject and object of knowing are fused together such that in knowing the other, one knows oneself.¹⁷ It is this element of "prejudice" in our understanding that marks Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics as distinct from traditional hermeneutics. As Outhwaite points out:

Traditional hermeneutic theory postulates a subject who aims to understand an object (a text, a social practice, or whatever) as it is in itself. This means that the subject must be as open-minded and unprejudiced as possible,

approaching the object without preconceptions. For Gadamer, by contrast, preconceptions or prejudices are what make understanding possible in the first place. They are bound up with our awareness of the historical influence or effectivity of the text; and without this awareness we would not understand it.¹⁸

Thus, Gadamer holds that all our understanding involves situatedness and is essentially interpretative. For him, understanding, interpretation and application are interrelated. “Just as understanding is always interpretation, similarly understanding also relates to application or praxis. In order to understand the true meaning of a text the interpreter must take into account its *consequences* and *significations*”¹⁹ (emphasis added). Thus, for Gadamer, the effect or consequences of a text (or action or social practice) is significant in the determination of its meaning. This intertwining of meaning and effect of the text has its legacy in Aristotle’s conception of “phronesis” or practical knowledge. Gadamer says:

In order to work out an orientation which brings together *both* methodological access to our world *and* the conditions of our social life, it was natural for me to return to preceding philosophical orientations and ultimately to the tradition of the practical and political philosophy of Aristotle.²⁰

In “phronesis” thought and action or intention and consequence are inseparable and it is to this dialectical unity of action and thought that Aristotle refers by his notion of praxis. Gadamer notes:

Praxis is not restricted to the special area of technical craftsmanship. It is a universal form of human life which embraces, yet goes beyond, the technical choice of the best means of a pre-given end. Aristotle’s concept of prudence includes, as a matter of fact, the concrete determination of the end. ... Prudence as practical deliberation upon and discovery of concrete decision is both the finding of the means and the concretization of the ends.²¹

Thus, for Gadamer, the idea of application is inherent in hermeneutics. It is not something that succeeds theoretical knowledge; rather theoretical knowledge is co-terminus with practical knowledge as both are co-determined by application which is intrinsic to hermeneutics. As Bernstein points out, for

Gadamer the central thesis of philosophical hermeneutics is the fusion of hermeneutics and praxis.²² Gadamer elaborates his hermeneutics by the notion of a “play” that consists of a back and forth movement resulting in understanding. For him dialogue is praxis. In order to explicate the notion of understanding, Gadamer takes the model of “dialogue”. When we are in a “...dialogue with another person and then is carried along further by the dialogue, it is no longer the will of the individual person, holding itself back or exposing itself, that is determinative...the law of the subject-matter (*die Sache*) is at issue in the dialogue and elicits statements and counter-statements and in the end plays them into each other”.²³ Thus, understanding as play is not the expression of the intentions of the subject but rather is a praxis in which the player is absorbed into understanding. In other words, understanding relieves the subject from the burden of taking the initiative, which goes into the making of actual existence.²⁴ Here another important dimension of Gadamer’s hermeneutics comes to the fore, namely the central place he accords to language in hermeneutic experience. It is the “linguisticity” of our experience that enables us to participate in a tradition. It is language that mediates our experience of the world and concretizes the effective historical consciousness. Thus he remarks “...language, not in the sense of *langue*, but in the sense of real exchange and work, manifests itself in the dialogue. In any form of dialogue, we are building up. We are building up a common language, so that at the end of the dialogue we will have some ground.”²⁵ Thus, for Gadamer understanding as permeated by language and manifested in dialogue makes hermeneutic experience identical with human existence.

Unlike the methodical hermeneutics of Dilthey, which bears the imprint of the Romantic ideal of reliving or recreating the experience of the subject, the philosophical hermeneutics of Gadamer rejects the idea of capturing the authorial meanings or the intentions of the subject as constitutive of understanding. Thus, Gadamer construes the trajectory of hermeneutics as an overcoming of the romantic hermeneutics by the ontological turn it accomplished through Heidegger’s phenomenology.

III

BRINGING THE SUBJECT BACK: PAUL RICOEUR

Paul Ricoeur, another prominent hermeneutically oriented thinker, argues that we can never give up Dilthey's perspective altogether as Dilthey elevated hermeneutics from mere textual exegeses to the domain of human sciences. The epistemological paradigm of Diltheyan hermeneutics has decisively shown how human sciences are qualitatively different from natural sciences. At the same time, Ricoeur points out that Heidegger's ontological twist to phenomenology shows that hermeneutics even in its methodological or epistemological moorings is grounded in the existential structure of Dasein. Gadamer in following Heidegger, could dispel the subjectivism implicit in the hermeneutics of Schleiermacher and Dilthey. Though Dilthey has explicitly stated that the psychological basis he tried to provide for the human sciences is not to be identified with empirical or scientific psychology of his time, he could not precisely state the nature of descriptive psychology to which he attempted to reduce the cultural sciences. Moreover, Dilthey subscribed to the view that "understanding" belongs to the domain of human sciences alone and counterpoised understanding to explanation²⁶. In doing so, Dilthey excluded "explanation" from the purview of human sciences and limited it to the sciences of nature. Moreover, Dilthey interpreted the process of understanding as "empathy" or subjective identification with the other. According to Ricoeur hermeneutical understanding is compatible with explanation, as these are mutually complementary. In Ricoeur's phenomenological hermeneutics, the dialectic of interpretation "...culminates in an act of understanding that is mediated by the explanatory procedures of structural analysis. These procedures ensure that the object of understanding is not identified with something felt, but rather with a potential reference released by explanation..."²⁷ Thus, by integrating explanation and understanding within the "hermeneutical arc", Ricoeur attempts to provide a non-psychological and objective account of hermeneutics. Nevertheless, such an attempt should not be

construed as obliterating the difference between human sciences and natural sciences. Ricoeur demarcates the two sciences by showing that the phenomena of human sciences are constituted by language. In other words, the notion of explanation that Ricoeur refers to is not a projection from the natural sciences, but from the field of language itself.

Ricoeur's approach to human action comprises three types of discourse on action: descriptive, dialectical and hermeneutical discourse.²⁸ Descriptive discourse makes use of the resources of linguistic analysis and phenomenology. Linguistic analysis takes off from the utterances or practices, which express the phenomenological data of experience publicly, and thus avoids the difficulties of introspective methods. It is carried out in three levels, namely a conceptual, a propositional and a discursive level. At the conceptual level, the linguistic analysis attempts to elucidate the notion with which we describe action in everyday life, especially the notions like reason and motive. Proclamations of purpose or intention are analysed at the propositional level. It is at this level that we analyse the statements that employ the concepts of action. At the discursive level we try to clarify the relations between statements about action by classifying and distinguishing action. Nevertheless, Ricoeur points out that we cannot remain content with linguistic analysis in the descriptive discourse, rather it must be reinforced with a phenomenological investigation as the linguistic analysis cannot reflect upon itself to justify the distinctions and elucidations it makes. According to Ricoeur, such justifications can come forth only by returning to the realm of pre-predicative experience. Phenomenological investigation with its noematic analysis alone is capable of objectifying the immediately lived experience by articulating such experience in the contents of the respective noemata.

In contrast to the descriptive discourse, action can also be grasped in a dialectical discourse. In the dialectical discourse, the problematizing of action proceeds through mediation and totalization instead of distinctions and classifications. In that it ceases to be neutral and descriptive and takes a prescriptive stance. The dialectical discourse "...does not limit itself to an analysis of

the motivated action of an isolated individual, but attempts to comprehend the relation between motivated and rational action, between practical and theoretical reason, between individual and collective will.”²⁹ Thus, the dialectical discourse reveals the dimensions of the objective structure of the society by showing how the main aspects of will namely “having”, “power” and “worth” presuppose the objective structures of society namely “economy”, “polity”, and “culture”. In economy is included all that result in an accumulation of human experience. Thus machinery as well as its products and the required knowledge for production belong to economy. The polity consists of the various institutions through which a historical community appropriates the resources of the economy. In doing so, it establishes relations between people, which are not just economic relations but that corresponding to the primordial passion of “power”. The cultural dimension of the social world reflects the values and attitudes that go into the making of the traditions of a society.

The third approach to the study of human action is the hermeneutical discourse. This approach is necessitated by the fact that we have to reinterpret the tradition in order to grasp the mode of being in the world. Thus, dialectical discourse inevitably points towards hermeneutical discourse. The possibility of this approach is revealed in treating action as a text. Thus, Ricoeur points out:

...if there are specific problems which are raised by the interpretation of texts because they are texts and not spoken language, and if these problems are the ones which constitute hermeneutics as such, then the human sciences may be said to be hermeneutical ... in as much as their *object* displays some of the features constitutive of a text as a text, and ... in as much as their methodology develops the same kind of procedures as those of ... text interpretation.³⁰

To capture the meaning of action in a textual analogue, we must be clear about the distinction between spoken and written language. According to Ricoeur “text” or “writing” is not the inscription of some anterior “speech”, rather “speaking” and “writing” are equally primordial aspects of discourse. That is, as “discourse” language is either spoken or written so “discourse” is the preliminary concept in Ricoeur’s hermeneutics. Discourse is always temporal; it exists in a present instance. In speech, the instance of discourse is a

fleeting event. That is, any utterance, as a discourse exists only in the act of saying. It is writing that fix the discourse in surpassing the event of saying by the “said” of speaking, the intentional exteriorization. In other words, “...what we write, what we inscribe is the *noema* of speaking. It is the meaning of the speech event, not the event as event”.³¹ Thus in the text as an inscription there is first a distancing of the event of saying by surpassing the event by the meaning. Moreover, in speech the intention of the subject and the meaning of the discourse overlap each other, while in writing this coincidence does not come through. So, in the text there is a second distancing between what is written and the original speaker. Ricoeur says:

With written discourse, the author’s intention and the meaning of the text cease to coincide. This dissociation of the verbal meaning of the text and the mental intention is what is really at stake in the inscription of discourse.... [T]he text’s career escapes the finite horizon lived by its author. What the text says now matters more than what the author meant to say, and every exegesis unfolds its procedures within the circumference of a meaning that has broken its moorings to the psychology of its author.³²

Thus, according to Ricoeur only interpretation can save the meaning, which its author can no longer secure. The third form of distancing is similar to the second form as there is a distance between the text and the original audience. In the case of a spoken discourse the dialogue refers to a situation or context which opens a world that is common to the partners in the dialogue, namely the speaker and the listener. But the text decontextualizes itself from the historical conditions of its writings and opens up a welter of readings. This distancing attests to the plurivocity of the text. In other words, in speech the reference is ostensive but in inscription the text no longer has such ostensive reference. This aspect of freeing the text from its limited ostensive reference engenders the fourth form of distancing. As Ricoeur notes:

In the same manner that the text frees its meaning from the tutelage of the mental intention, it frees its reference from the limits of ostensive reference. For us the world is the ensemble of references opened up by the texts. Thus we speak about the “world” of Greece, not to designate any more what were the situations for those who lived them, but to designate the nonsituational

references which outlive the effacement of the first and which henceforth are offered as possible modes of being...³³

Thus understanding a text, for Ricoeur, is also, at the same time, enlightening our own situation. According to Ricoeur, "action" becomes an object of scientific study under an objectification that is similar to the fixation of discourse by writing. As it happens with writing, the objectification of action is made possible by the inner traits of action itself. "In the same way as the fixation by writing is made possible by a dialectic of intentional exteriorization immanent to the speech-act itself, a similar dialectic within the process of transaction prepares the detachment of the *meaning* of the action from the *event* of the action."³⁴ In other words, the distanciation we find between the speaker's intention and the meaning of a text obtains in the case of action too, that is, a distanciation between the agent and his/her action. Ricoeur refers to this distanciation as the "autonomization of action" and argues that it is autonomization of human action that gives action its social dimension. "An action is a social phenomenon not only because it is done by several agents in such a way that the role of each of them cannot be distinguished from the role of the others, but also because our deeds escape us and have effects which we did not intend."³⁵ Thus Ricoeur points out that human actions become institutions through the sedimentation in social time with the result that the meaning of action no longer coincides with the subjective intentions of the actors. In other words, much like a text, the significance of an action goes beyond the relevance of its conditions of production. As Ricoeur says a "...work does not only mirror its time, but it opens up a world which it bears within itself."³⁶ Moreover, like a text, human action too is an open work that calls for a plurality of readings with the result that the "...problem of the right understanding can no longer be solved by a simple return to the alleged intention of the author."³⁷ However, the inherent plurivocity of the text need not abrogate the question of superiority or inferiority of one interpretation to another. Put it differently, the multiplicity of readings does not necessarily lead to arbitrariness or unmitigated relativism. Ricoeur points out that it is possible to arrive at an agreement in confronting different

interpretations. According to Ricoeur, the objectivity of the text is displayed in the dialectical character of the relation between explanation and understanding.

Ricoeur's employment of the model of text to understand meaning thus extends to speech, writing and action. Though human subjectivity is linguistically designated and mediated by symbols, Ricoeur places subjectivity in the human body and the material world, of which language is a second order articulation. As he puts it, "to say *self* is not to say say *I*... [where] the *I* is posited, the *self* is implied reflexively."³⁸ The hermeneutics of the self is different from the philosophy of the subject as while the latter asserts indubitable knowledge of truth or certainty, the former leads to a *belief* of truth or certainty.³⁹ According to Ricoeur, this does not mean that hermeneutic belief is inferior to knowledge, rather such a belief is a testimony by the individual self regarding the truth of what the self believes.

NOTES

1. Bauman, Zygmunt, 1978, *Hermeneutics and Social Sciences*, New York, Columbia University Press, p. 35.
2. Dilthey, Wilhelm, 1974, "On the Special Character of the Human Sciences' in Marcello Truzzi (Ed.), *Verstehen: Subjective Understanding in the Social Sciences*, Massachusetts, Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, p.12.
3. Seebohm, Thomas M., 1985, "Boeckh and Dilthey: The Development of Methodical Hermeneutics' in J.N. Mohanty (Ed.), *Phenomenology and the Human Sciences*, Dordrecht, Martinus Nijhoff, p. 96.
4. Cf. Dilthey, Wilhelm, Op.cit, p. 14.
5. Collin, Finn, 1997, *Social Reality*, London, Routledge, p. 103.
6. Collin, Finn, 1985, *Theory and Understanding: A Critique of Interpretive Social Science*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, p. 148.
7. Schutz, Alfred, 1963, "Common-sense and Scientific Interpretation of Human Action' in Maurice Natanson (Ed.), *Philosophy of the Social Sciences: A Reader*, New York, Random House, p. 343.
8. Nagel misconstrues the nature of subjective interpretation as one that unsuccessfully attempts to capture the "inner springs' of action. See in this regard "Problems of Concept and Theory Formation in the Social Sciences' in Maurice Natanson (Ed.), *Philosophy of the Social Sciences: A Reader*, p. 206.
9. Seebohm, Thomas M., op. cit., p. 98.

10. Heidegger, Martin, 1962, *Being and Time*, tr. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, New York, Harper and Row, p. 182.
11. Biemel, Walter, 1977, *Martin Heidegger: An Illustrated Study*, tr. J.L. Mehta, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, p. 49.
12. Heidegger, Martin, Op.cit, p.187.
13. Ibid., pp. 188–189.
14. Ibid., pp. 191–192.
15. Dreyfus, Hubert L., 1980, “Holism and Hermeneutics’ in *Review of Metaphysics*, vol. 34, September , p. 13.
16. Ibid., p. 14.
17. Gadamerian notion of “fusion of horizons’ should not be construed in a simplistic manner where two perspectives coalesce into a single unifying perspective. Gadamer makes this point many times in various ways. Thus he says in one of his writings, recently translated into English, that a “perspective that sees everything would abolish the very meaning of perspective.” (Gadamer, H.G., 2000, “Subjectivity and Intersubjectivity, Subject and Person’, *Continental Philosophy Review*, Vol. 33, p. 281.) As Kathleen Wright points out the “fusion’ has two phases: the first phase is the one that results from “the projection of difference between two horizons’ by projecting a horizon against the background of one’s own horizon. Charles Taylor emphasizes this aspect of “fusion’ when he reads it as a “Language of Contrast”. However, the second phase sets aside this difference by calling into question one’s own horizon through the projected horizon. (Wright, Kathleen, 2000, “The Fusion of Horizons: Hans-Georg Gadamer and Wang Fu-Chih’, *Continental Philosophy Review*, Vol. 33, p. 345). It is in this sense that Gadamer talks of knowing the other as knowing oneself. I am thankful to Professor Amitabha Das Gupta for pointing out to me Taylor’s reading of “fusion of horizons’, which helped me to elaborate on Gadamer’s notion of the same.
18. Outhwaite, William, 1985, “Hans-Georg Gadamer’ in Quentin Skinner (Ed.), *The Return of the Grand Theories in the Human Sciences*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, p. 25.
19. Roy, Krishna, 1989, “Hermeneutics and Ethnomethodology’ in Krishna Roy and Chhanda Gupta (Eds.), *Essays in Social and Political Philosophy*, New Delhi, ICPR and Allied Publishers, p. 63.
20. Gadamer, Hans-Georg, 1975, “Hermeneutics and Social Science’ in *Cultural Hermeneutics*, Vol.2, No. 4, p. 311.
21. Ibid., pp. 312–313.
22. Cf. Bernstein, R.J., 1983, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, p. 141.
23. Gadmer, Hans-Georg, 1977, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, tr. David E.Linge, Berkeley, University of California Press, p. 66.

24. Gadamer, Hans-Georg, 1975, *Truth and Method*, (tr.) Garret Barden and John Cumming, New York, Seabury Press, p. 94.
25. Gadamer, Hans-Georg, 1985, "The Hermeneutics of Suspicion' in J.N.Mohanty (Ed.), *Phenomenology and the Human Sciences*, p. 82.
26. Charles Taylor argues that though Natural Sciences too have hermeneutical dimension, the nature of interpretation that characterizes human sciences is different from the former and as such the claim regarding a "new unity of method" is not legitimate. See in this regard, Taylor, Charles, 1980, "Understanding in Human Science', *Review of Metaphysics*, Vol. 34 and Taylor, Charles, 1971, "Interpretation and the Sciences of Man', *Review of Metaphysics*, Vol. 25. However, Kuhn questions Taylor's characterization of Natural Sciences as one that meets the "requirement of absoluteness", independent of human interpretation (Kuhn, Thomas: 1991, "The Natural and the Human Sciences' in David R. Hiley et al. (Ed.), *The Interpretive Turn: Philosophy, Science, Culture*, Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press). I am thankful to Professor S.G. Kulkarni for bringing to my notice Thomas Kuhn's position regarding the role of interpretation in sciences.
27. Thompson, J.B., 1981, *Critical Hermeneutics*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, p. 54.
28. Ibid., pp. 60–64.
29. Ibid., p. 62.
30. Ricoeur, Paul, 1979, "The Model of the Text: Meaningful Action Considered as a Text.' In Paul Rabinow and William M.Sullivan (Eds.), *Interpretive Social Science: A Reader*, Berkeley, University of California Press, p. 73.
31. Ibid., p. 76.
32. Ibid., p. 78.
33. Ibid., p. 79.
34. Ibid., p. 81.
35. Ibid., p. 83
36. Ibid., p. 86.
37. Ibid., p. 88.
38. Ricoeur, Paul, 1992, *Oneself as Another* (tr.) Kathleen Blamey, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, p. 18.
39. Ibid., p. 21.