

# THE PHILOSOPHICAL GENESIS OF IDEAL TYPES

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The conception of ideal types as a method of the synthesis of sociohistorical phenomena was introduced by the German philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey (1883–1911). However, this fact has been largely ignored in the literature. That he was the originator of this notion is, I suppose, of only historical interest. But the philosophical and methodological considerations that generated his contribution are still of substantial and contemporary importance. Before we can focus on this topic, then, it is necessary to make brief reference to the philosophically prior notions of the *Geisteswissenschaften* (the human studies), and the so-called *Verstehen* method of understanding. At this point we can better come to understand the type concept, and one of its derivations—the ideas of rules.

The term *Geisteswissenschaften* came to be used in Germany in the 19th century as a translation of John Stuart Mill's phrase "the moral sciences." But this latter phrase is little used in English, and we might substitute for it the "human studies." However this might be, the term is meant to extend to the study of history, sociology, anthropology, economics, linguistics, law, art and literature. The meaning of the term is rooted in a methodological and philosophic tradition which argued that the *Geisteswissenschaften* have both a unique method and subject matter which distinguish them from the *Naturwissenschaften* (the natural sciences). Contemporary positivists, such as Comte, Mill, and Buckle, on the other hand, insisted that the methods and materials of the natural sciences must be totally incorporated into the human sciences and that the methods and subject matter of the former were in principle inclusive of the latter. For example, the positivists maintained that historical judgments could attain general validity only (1) when they referred to facts of the past to which research had given objective, empirical status; (2) when facts—like bricks—were systematically gathered and arranged into holistic structures which represented objective historical reality (e.g., the construction of the past, to use Ranke's famous phrase, must represent that world "wie es eigentlich gewesen," or as it really was); and (3) when expressed in the form of the "covering laws" of phenomena.

Over against this position was the German school of Historicism (*Historismus*), whose prominent members included Dilthey, Rickert, Troeltsch, and Windelband. They maintained that there exists a radical distinction between the natural and human sciences. Heinrich Rickert, for example, held that the explanation of the social, historical, or humanistic materi-

als—which would come to be termed (by this school) the *geistige Welt*—requires only an individual description of factual materials organized around particular values. On the basis of a distinction between nomothetic (universal) and ideographic (particular) judgments, he argued that there are two ways of grasping reality: individualizing and generalizing. As we have indicated, individualizing thought is appropriate to the *Geisteswissenschaften*, especially history. Instead of trying to apply universal laws to historical phenomena under the nomothetic method, history must establish the particular, essential relationships that connect phenomena to their environment, to the unique stage of historical development, and to the values particular to a given historical situation. To use a more contemporary term, Rickert wanted the human sciences to delimit and comprehend the “regional ontologies” actually presented to us in the phenomena of the human world, and not to try to understand these phenomena by a method appropriate to the ontology of the physical world.

Dilthey expressed a different but related position in this dispute by a rethinking of Hegel, who had distinguished the scientific understanding of the Newtonian world view (*Verstand*) from reason (*Vernunft*). For Hegel, the understanding prevails in the natural sciences and mathematics. The understanding isolates experience into fixed categories and attempts to establish relationships between phenomena in terms of laws. But reason, a faculty of thought which is a constituent of *Geist* or spirit, refers to the self-conscious transformation of the fixed categories of the material or intellectual world by realizing the inherent possibilities of thought, things, and actions. Reason is also an agent in the transformation of the static material world into history and culture. The significance of this latter class of entities is wider than and different from the significance of the material, spatial, and quantifiable properties of material phenomena. “Nature is not history,” said Hegel, and thus he inaugurated a new basis for a dualistic methodology for the natural and human sciences.

Dilthey attempted to redefine Hegel’s metaphysical distinctions between the forms of thought into empirical concepts employed in classifying different types of data, the human and the natural. These two types of data require, he thought, different types of explanation and suggest different subject matters for the *Geisteswissenschaften* and the *Naturwissenschaften*. Also, he used the metaphysical term *Geist* to refer to one class of possible objects of knowledge which would include language, cultural creations, institutions, values, and symbolizations of all kinds. For Dilthey, the other classes of possible objects of knowledge would include (1) physical objects and (2) mental processes. Each of these classes must be understood in a different manner. For example, if we are trying to understand Rembrandt’s picture “The Night Watch,” it can be constituted and explained as

a merely physical object. Here, the emphasis would be on the quantifiable, material dimensions of the painting, such as specific gravity, angstrom units of light, and chemical composition of the materials, etc. As such, it is the proper object of the *Naturwissenschaften*. But if it is to be a subject for the human sciences, it will be constituted quite differently as an object of knowledge by such categories as aesthetic content and form, art history, emotive components, axiological significance, etc.

This matter can be put metaphorically and, hopefully, in not too misleading a manner as follows: human creations, such as Rembrandt's painting, and entities such as human actions, have at least two dimensions, namely (1) an "outer" material side which refers to the spatial-physical aspects of the creation or action and (2) an "inner," "lived" or immediate content which is understood by reference to the special class of meanings, values, ends, volitions, emotions, and cultural connections which compose the creation or action. The so-called "inner" dimension is neither metaphysical nor mysterious, but refers to the delineation of the proper subject matter of the human sciences. The "outer" spatial-material dimension refers to the subject matter of the natural sciences. The meaning of the subject matter of these two dimensions is not only asymmetrical but radically different.

We can note at this point that human creations such as paintings have a certain objective status, i.e., they exist in space and time as objects for generations to interpret. The entity as a cultural object is a material objectification, or what Dilthey calls a "life expression" (*Lebensäußerungen*), an expression of conscious human intent, will, and understanding. The unique method used in comprehending these expressions is called *Verstehen*, a *terminus technicus* signifying the systematic interpretation of life expressions—be they artifacts or actions. This notion is admittedly complicated and now occupies the attention of the contemporary philosophic school of hermeneutics. But simply put, *Verstehen* is a method which intends to clarify what happens when we understand a signal by determining the meaning of the signaler, or when we try to understand a cultural object, such as the to date untranslated Minoan script.

Given this brief statement of an intricate position, we can relate our material to a methodological tool first developed by Dilthey as early as 1883, and later made famous by Max Weber: the ideal type. In Weber's use of this concept in his *Verstehende* sociology, he presupposed but never elaborated the philosophic genesis of his tool, though he was deeply aware of it. The type is an exemplification of *Verstehen* method when the intent is to organize and synthesize the facts of the human sciences. Or, more specifically, it is a heuristic device for the systematic meaning determination of related phenomena; i.e., the type method attempts to derive from a field of

particulars those meanings which are most significant and essential to the field.

For example, an economic historian who studies the bank records, ledgers, government decrees, trade records, and colonial trade documents of 16th century Spain could decide that these materials were meaningfully and justifiably related under the following type: "Early Modern or Mercantile Capitalism." This type is a synthesis of related empirical materials signifying "that system of public European economy developed subsequent to feudalism, the policy of which was to secure a favorable trade balance in gold by the establishment of colonial monopoly." Had our historian studied Columbus he could determine that his actions become most completely understandable and interrelated only under the aegis of this type. The royal support of his voyages, the endless search for gold, the establishment of colonial trade practice, and the search for new routes to India are courses of action that would meaningfully occur if a man like Columbus behaved in the context of the mercantile capitalist system—which he in fact did. On the other hand, a Don Quixote who remained at home in Spain and whose actions involved searching for honor, Dulcinea, and knightly values could not have his actions rendered meaningful in the context of this type. Indeed, other typologies—literary, psychological, and historical—are required to understand him at all.

The practitioners of *Verstehen* understand by action that type of human behavior to which a meaning is assigned by the actor, and to which a meaning can in principle be assigned by the observer. The type concept relates to this definition of action because it attempts to provide to actions a particular and describable context from which our actions take their meaning. At this point we may also hope that matters are clear enough for us to see that the method involves a claim to intersubjectivity between actor and observer. The attempt is always to re-live (*nacherleben*) the meaning that attended the act or creation of the subject. For Dilthey, this intersubjectively constituted meaning, like all meaning, flows from the stream of life. We might note that the *Verstehen* method does not attain apodeictic certainty, nor does it claim to do so. But the attempt of thinkers to approximate it to general validity is an interesting story—though too involved to be told here.

We can now make brief reference to one methodological tool by which *Verstehen* attempts to account for the regularity of human behavior without resorting to nomothetic explanation: the concept of rules (*Regeln*). Such a concept, incidentally, is one means by which practitioners attempted to establish general validity to the method. Here, the word "rule" is used to refer to regularity of behavior, but regularity in the sense of what can be meaningfully or normally expected to occur in typical circum-

stances. For example, we may say, "As a rule Democrats are pro-labor, given economic recession." We may note, however, that this rule behavior may not obtain at any time. Behavior according to rules is deliberative behavior, for it involves conscious choice between alternatives. But at the same time, the rule notion wants to imply that deliberative behavior, while voluntary, is not random. There are typical expectations which we anticipate and which occur given certain circumstances. We anticipate regularity here not by reference to law, but to rules implied in the game, as it were.

The objective validity of our judgments on whole units of sociohistorical action is founded on the notion that individual and collective action will take place according to the rules implied in the type of situation we are observing. For example, we can claim to understand what American soldiers did or would have done in the recent Korean War because we can posit for this situation a particular type of rule behavior: The war was purportedly a peace-keeping type operation. Aggressive behavior beyond the 38th parallel was not to be expected under the rules operating in the type of conflict we were in. Of course, individuals may decide to act according to other rules. If so, another typology is generated by the actors, and another must be generated by the observer which corresponds to that intended by the actor. From different life assertions—i.e., from empirical evidence—we will then infer different rules.

Finally, the rule is an ideographic device which attempts generalizing interpretations of actions. We have, then, no laws of human behavior, but rules of behavior in the context of typification. If we take the term "law" to mean a situation where in every case an event of a specified kind (C) occurs at a certain place and time, an event of a specified kind (E) will always occur which has a specified relation to the occurrence of the first event. On the other hand, the type notion could be expressed as follows: Given the type (T), an event covered by the type can normally be expected to occur under the conditions of a meaningfully constituted rule. The *Verstehen* method can thus provide a generalized and coherent account of behavior without resorting to methods reserved for the natural sciences. It also retains its own subject matter, i.e., the human sciences; and it opens up, as Ortega y Gasset has claimed, a new philosophic continent.

The themes of this paper no doubt leave many questions. For example, the tendency of the *Verstehen* method to reject nomothetic considerations has been questioned by critics from Weber to Carl Hempel. But I suppose the thrust of what I intended was to suggest that Dilthey was an originaive thinker for many philosophers. For example, the phenomenological movement has criticized the so-called "inner"- "outer" perspective by a rigorous analysis of the life world and the status of material objects. But Hus-

serl's writing in the *Crisis of European Science and Transcendental Phenomenology* still reflects Dilthey's concern about the tendency of European culture to universalize Newtonian methods to all subject matters and to assume the "natural standpoint" as universally valid. Heidegger raised the question whether the being of man as *Dasein* is subject to nomothetic understanding at all. In sociology, Weber, Simmel, Mannheim, Ortega y Gasset, Georg Lukács, and those of the methodological individualism movement have utilized his work extensively. A psychological school stretching from Spranger to Rollo May has acknowledged subjectivity as a domain of unique existence. Finally, the distinction between the natural and human sciences is still exercising philosophers from William Dray to Ramon Aron. I hope this paper provides a small help in determining what it is that concerns them.