

Action Theory, Verstehen and Hermeneutics

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Michael Wood

"Nature we explain , mental life we understand" Dilthey

"First of all, phenomenology is a way of viewing ourselves, of viewing others, and of viewing all else that comes in contact with our lives. In this sense, it is a system of interpretation that helps us perceive and conceive ourselves, our contacts and interchanges with others, and everything else within the realm of our experiences." Wagner

"In the case of social collectivities, precisely as distinguished from organisms, we are in a position to go beyond merely demonstrating functional relation-ships and uniformities. We can accomplish something which is never attainable in the natural sciences, name-ly the subjective understanding of the action of the component individuals." Max Weber, Economy and Society

Abstract

What follows offers a brief overview of the concepts behind verstehen and hermeneutics, the two being discussed together and how they connect to Phenomenology and Action Theory. I start with a brief historical overview tracing their development from Kant via Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Rickert, Weber, Talcot Parsons to Weberian action theory. I then discuss Schutz's attempt to integrate phenomenology with Weber's verstehen theory of action.

The aim here is firstly to offer a brief account of explanation at the level of meaning, that is, in terms of culture, objectives, values and so on, rather than in terms of direct physical

causality (for example correlation or regression) or some sort of reductionism . Secondly, to situate Hermeneutics and Verstehen historically and to try and understand how these ideas contribute to the division in the nature of philosophy analysis of social scientific explanation we see today. Quite a lot of this will revolve around the three principle philosophical movements which have driven the development of Hermeneutics and Verstehen (not always in a linear direction!) NeoKantianism, Phenomenology , Analytical philosophy and action theory.

From Dilthey, who is largely responsible for creating the *Naturwissenschaften*, *Geisteswissenschaften*¹ divide which, in various guises, permeates German Neo Kantian thought, one can trace a path to Rickert and Weber who both develop an explicit action theory and who also emphasises the role of Verstehen in the explanation of the social.

In turn, this leads to the development of rational action theory in terms of quantitative social theory (Coleman², Becker) and closely related to areas such as Game theory , Microeconomics and Behavioural Economics.

It was Schutz³ who heavily criticised the philosophical basis of Weber's action theory and attempted to shore it up by incorporating elements of Phenomenology (culled especially from the later Husserl, particularly the concept of the *Lebenswelt* .also influenced by Heidegger) This combination of Schutz and Husserl gives a powerful impetus to sociology at the hands of thinkers like Garfinkle, Gurwitsch, Cicourel, Berger , Luckman) leading to the Sociology of the Everyday and EthnoScience.

It's worth noting that there is a separate "philosophical" stream stemming from Dilthey leading to Phenomenology, Gadamer via Husserl and Heidegger

Also Action Theory has come to the attention of analytical philosophy through the work of Anscomb, Davidson and is now of mainstream interest but this work remains separated from the various sociological variants, although some of Davidson's views on the nature of explanation are somewhat compatible with Schutz's .

Key words: Verstehen, Hermeneutics, Dilthey, Rickert, Weber, Parsons, Schutz Garfinkle,Berger, Luckmann, Gadamer, Habermas

OK, so what are Hermeneutics and Verstehen

¹ Natural sciences vs human sciences.

² Coleman: Foundations of Social Theory, Becker: Human Capital

³ The Phenomenology of the Social World

Put very simply Hermeneutics means interpretation⁴. It's a common notion, we often have our own interpretations of pictures, music, drama. Opera buffs will know that almost any new production of an opera has to offer a "new" interpretation by some famous director and similarly often with plays, think of Baz Luhrman's famous movie "Romeo and Juliet". Hermeneutics is often associated with trying to understand or trying to interpret some distant cultural product, like the Bible, or The Aeneid or some problematic play by Shakespear or Schiller.

Verstehen is an overlapping term often associated with the sociologist Max Weber and denotes "interpretive understanding" meaning, in Weberian terms, that collective behaviours and social processes are explained by the actions, attitudes, and beliefs of participating individuals, and those, in turn, should be understood (verstehen) in a meaningful way. Hermeneutics may be appropriate for this. Both Hermeneutics and Verstehen have been referred to as a theory of understanding

How is this explanation at the level of social meaning possible? In classical times it was assumed that language was the carrier of truth.

*"The ancient Greek word for this 'common reason' was Logos, which later Latin writers translated variously as verbum (word or speech) or ratio (reason). These terms are all interrelated because they assume a very basic but very crucial point for interpretation, namely that we need language to think and that our reasoning reflects a reality in which things are meaningfully interconnected. In the ancient world, the universe speaks, in a sense, and human words participate in its universal grammar and are therefore a reliable vehicle for the discovery of universal truths. Philosophy, religion, poetry, the arts, and literature are important because human words (logoi) are shared in cosmic reason (logos)."*⁵

We will see shortly that it was Descartes and the *cogito ergo sum*, the separation from the provable mind and the unknown world, which messed all this up but even after western philosophy became dominated by this Cartesian perspective it has been an article of faith of Anglo American analytical philosophy up until practically the turn of the twenty first century that truth and empiricism were very strongly connected⁶.

⁴ For a very useful and concise introduction see Jens Zimmermann: Hermeneutics a very short introduction. (Oxford). The literature is enormous

⁵ Op cit

⁶ Doctrines proposed by Frege Russell, early Wittgenstein, Carnap, Tarski, the Vienna Circle.

Words and sentences correspond to states of affairs, states of the world and propositions about the world could be empirically tested and their truth (or otherwise) determined. The other stuff, the metaphysics, was not really sayable under this scheme “Whereof we cannot speak thereof we must keep silent”⁷. We will see shortly that this fairly extreme position endorsed by Logical positivism or empiricism and Logical atomism is the culmination of a long tradition in western thought stemming from the enlightenment. However there has also been a strong counter to this, often classified as “Romanticism” which seeks to establish or reinstate the role of history and culture in the explanation of at least the social action⁸. The exploration of this will be a large part of what follows.

Descartes is the conventional start point for modern philosophy and he leaves behind two fundamental philosophical ideas :

- the subject (mind) and the object, the world. “Cogito ergo sum”⁹
- the need to start from simple understood and sound axiomatic propositions.

The first of these has become a mainstay of analytical philosophy up until Heidegger.

Kant works within the Cartesian tradition, reacting to Hume’s analysis of causality, He instantiates the “transcendental view” that humans perceive the world through a kind of legislative framework of categories, the *synthetic a priori*, whereby things out there, “things in themselves” are *perceived as* phenomena organised into concepts which are meaningful only in so far as they conform to the categorial classification. The things in themselves, the noumena, are unknowable but are manifested to perception as phenomena.

Hegel, arguably the most famous, or infamous, idealistic philosopher after Kant is celebrated for his introduction of historical perspective for understanding philosophical progress, together with the idea of Geist (Spirit) and the idea of historical process (Dialectic). Two

⁷ Wittgenstein Tractatus Logico Philosophicus prop 7 Tran Ogden aided by Ramsey.

⁸ A late flowering of this assault is Rorty Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature In philosophical terms the romantic reaction was spearheaded by Herder and Schopenhauer.

⁹ I can doubt anything but I cannot doubt that I am doubting and this underlying certainty established the (doubting) subject

ideas picked up by Schelemacher, who was, by the way, very antagonistic toward Hegel and very much part of the “Romantic” reaction.

Generally regarded as one of the greatest theologians who ever lived, Friedrich Schleiermacher¹⁰ was the founder of Hermeneutics. As a theologian he was interested in deciphering and interpreting ancient biblical texts and it was from there I think that the impetus for Hermeneutics sprang. Schleiermacher always maintained that the same techniques would apply to any ancient script.

Philosophically, Hermeneutics is not just a bunch of techniques (more later) to aid the understanding of old texts, it raises the more fundamental question as to what does it mean? What is meaning? What is understanding? How do I understand anything written by someone else?

The Hermeneutical answer to that is that understanding is the interpretive act (seeing things in a certain way) of *integrating particular things such as words, signs or events into a meaningful whole*. Even Frege, one of the founders of analytical philosophy proposed that meaning is meaning within a context, words within a sentence, sentences within a paragraph and changing the context changes or destroys the meaning.

Useful to emphasise that this meaningful integration is a very practical day to day thing. When we have understood something, or think that we have, we have gone beyond being able to recite it, or bits of it, or hum some of the tunes or admire the carving. The work grips our attention as a complete entity, it speaks to us, it engages us. This process of the engagement leading to the disclosure of meaning is *continuous*. One finds “more in it” the longer the engagement process continues. It is also a process that critics and philosophers contribute to.

Scheleiemacher proposes a reiterative methodology for exploring texts: The hermeneutic circle. This implies some greater context that influences how we understand a particular text or artefact. Reading or analysis requires a continued referring back to a wider context and then a reflection to the text/artefact in hand as one's understanding deepens. Whole and part influence each other. As we better understand particular elements this will

¹⁰ Useful material in: The Cambridge Guide to Schleiermacher (Cambridge)

reshape our grasp of the whole." Schleiermacher takes over from Hegel the idea of Geist or spirit

"Schleiermacher regarded literary or religious texts as the linguistic expression of a mind touched by the World-Spirit. Thus the interpreter's task was to move back through the words to the thoughts of the author, to reconstruct the author's state of mind at the point of writing in order to determine what overall intention determined every other part of the text. Interpretation thus demanded first of all great linguistic sensitivity.¹¹"

Rather than focusing on how a statement conveys truth (epistemology), he enquired more generally into who we are as beings who understand (ontology), and what the conditions for understanding are, anticipating Husserl and Heidegger.

The literary historian and philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey who interestingly was a professor at the University of Basel at about the same time as Burkhardt and Nietzsche, is something of a key figure in the evolution of Hermeneutics. He is significant because he signals a bifurcation in Hermeneutic / Versehen thought, one path leading to Wilhelm Rickert and Max Weber which involves a reconceptualisation of Kantian thought and the other to Phenomenology; Husserl Heidegger and Gadamar and thence via Schutz, to a radical incorporation of phenomenology into social research.

Dilthey departed from Schleiermacher in rejecting any appeal to the Geist or cosmic World-Spirit or any other metaphysical entity. He argued instead that the firm ground for human knowledge is *life experience itself*. Not Schleiermacher's cosmic Spirit, but the human spirit that shapes culture now becomes the foundation of hermeneutics.

Dilthey makes a sharp distinction between the natural and the social or human sciences. between the study of society *Geisteswissenschaften* on the one hand and the natural world *Naturwissenschaften* on the other.

The Natural sciences explain nature, but only the human sciences can *understand* culture. The natural sciences are incapable of capturing how the inner world of human spirit, that is how intentions, emotions, and ambitions shape the material world to produce culture.

¹¹ Zimmerman op cit

It is only through understanding the expression of life, that is, through deciphering (i.e. interpreting) the imprint of the human spirit on the material world that the human world can be penetrated. . This is what Dilthey called 'the sciences of the mind (Geisteswissenschaften) or the human sciences.

He also makes a celebrated distinction between the *nomothetic* (law or lawlike process seeking) and *ideographic* (explaining a particular situation) investigative processes. Human sciences fall under the ideographic process. The dominant social sciences in 19th century Germany before the evolution of sociology were History, Law and Political Economy from an institutional perspective. These were all focused on describing and explaining particular historical events.

Following Dilthey researchers now examined texts and documents from the past to map the social–historical world('objective spirit') of any given cultural period. The idea was to gather from a variety of contemporary documents—such as historical accounts, sermons, official state or church registries, artwork, and literary texts—enough overlapping information to determine a collective social vision of a particular period. Thus there was a degree of objectivity, of repeatability in the methodology the interpreter translates the objectifications of life from documents back into the spiritual life from which they emerge. Thus Dilthey attempted to enter into not merely an individual mind a la Schlegel but rather into the collective or 'objective' cultural spirit of a historical period.

Two final basic points. First, self-understanding is possible only indirectly through the hermeneutic detour of interpreting life expressions from others. We only know what being human means and how to evaluate ourselves by studying other people and cultures. Second, Dilthey's hermeneutics marks the first truly historical turn in our conversation about knowledge. In Schleiermacher, we were connected to others' minds and the past through the World-Spirit. In Dilthey, by contrast, past and present experiences of life are connected through the stream of history in which we all stand.

The South West German Neo Kantian school of philosophy (Windelband, Dilthey and Lask) were famous for their criticism and updating of Kant but were perhaps most famous for its research into the philosophy of science and especially the establishment of the credentials of the human sciences.

Kant elaborates in his *Critique of Pure Reason* a view of science centred around Newtonian mechanics very much emphasising the development of causal laws as the means to understand nature. Historical propositions, on the other hand, lack the necessity and general validity that would qualify them as possible objects of scientific knowledge. Windelband argues that this is the point on which the Kantian theory of knowledge is most in need of revision.

Windelband and his pupil Rickert strongly reject Dilthey's Nomological Ideographic distinction as a basis for the demarcation of the natural and the human sciences. The sciences should not be demarcated on the basis of subject matter. Windelband argues that the separation should be on methodological grounds rather than substantive ones, thus natural sciences are (or are mostly) nomothetic whereas the human sciences are ideographic (mostly) but, to emphasise both forms of enquiry (natural vs human sciences) can use either methodology.

Windelband holds that the possibility of history as a science rests on three premisses: Firstly an individualistic conception of *value*. That is, objects of scientific interest or social scientific interest must be distinguishable in terms of value. For the natural sciences objects have value in terms of the role they play in scientific laws. For the human sciences Objects must be identifiable *as carriers of historical value* or be relatable to objects which are.

Secondly, nomological or nomothetic conceptions determine the limits of natural science. If science is to give anything like a complete account of the world then it cannot rely solely on the establishment of laws or law-like propositions. If particular events either natural or social are to be explained then scientific methodology must have some sort of idiographic methodology in its repertoire.

Thirdly, this leads to the need for an individualistic or idiographic conception of historical science, where objects identified in terms of their *associated values* play a key role..

The neo Kantians held that the fine grade details of reality were not a possible object of knowledge. Perceptions had to be structured into *concepts* of some kind. and given the need to incorporate the social sciences into the picture, interest focuses on the historical individual. Is it possible to distinguish individuality in such a way that it can be identified as an object of knowledge?

In demarcating historical science or cultural science from natural science, Rickert argues that the object of cultural science is the individuality of reality, or reality in so far as individuality can be ascribed to it. He argues that reality as *anschaulich* - the immediate experience, actuality, or sense data (not a word Rickert uses) - cannot be conceptualised by *any* science, therefore this distinction is indispensable to Rickert's theory of historical knowledge. Because cultural science, like natural science, cannot reproduce the concrete perceptual sense data of reality, it requires what Rickert calls a *principle of selection* such that the essential aspects of reality - those that matter to us in such a way that knowledge of these aspects satisfies our theoretical interests - can be distinguished from the inessential aspects.

Unlike natural science, the theoretical interest of cultural science is anchored *in the value* we ascribe to the individual. This principle of selection must identify some sense in which the individuality of reality can become a possible object of knowledge. It must discriminate or select certain individually defined aspects of reality that qualify as important in relation to our values. The search for this principle is the primary objective of Rickert's philosophy of history which he calls 'the problem of historical concept formation'.

Rickert differentiates two kinds of individuality. (1) Individuals in the most general sense - discrete, independently identifiable phenomena - are all unique. (2) However, we do not regard all such phenomena as irreplaceable. On the contrary, if their uniqueness is of no interest to us, they become objects of knowledge only because they *fall under* some general concept. What picks out these general concepts is because they have or participate in certain values.

Human beings *set certain values*, they act on them, and they attempt to realise them.

However, action is possible only on the basis of an orientation to generalisations or general rules of experience

To quote Weber, who was heavily influenced by Rickert

The transcendental presupposition of every cultural science is not that we find a certain 'culture' (or indeed any 'culture' at all) valuable, but rather that *we are cultural beings*, endowed with the capacity and the will to take a deliberate position towards the world and to ascribe a meaning to it. Regardless of what this meaning may be, it will lead to the fact that in life we will judge certain phenomena of human collective existence on its basis and take a position on them as being (positively or negatively) significant. Regardless of the content of this position, *these phenomena have a cultural significance for us. Their scientific interest rests on this significance alone.*¹²

Human action then is oriented around these value complexes. Harking back to the methodology outlined by Dilthey sketched above, these value complexes are publicly accessible through access to historical cultural materials. The important point is how you do it. It's interesting, in passing, to compare Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905) with Burckhardt's *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (1855). Burckhardt was a contemporary of Dilthey and a friend of Nietzsche. Both books have ostensibly rather similar objectives: Weber in explaining the rise of capitalism and Burckhardt the emergence of the Italian Renaissance. Both also adopt a broadly action theoretic approach, Weber on the value effects of the Protestant Ethic, Burckhardt on the rise of individualism (a value) and forms of social competition.

However there was a fundamental difference in approach

"Burckhardt sought to capture and *define the spirit of the age* in all its main manifestations. For him "Kultur" was the whole picture: politics, manners, religion...the character that animated the particular activities of a people in a given epoch, and of which pictures, buildings, social and political habits, literature, are the concrete expressions"

Much depended on the insight, intuition and the taste of the historian. History is seen as an art or even poetic form.

Weber a generation later this type of hermeneutical approach is insufficiently rigorous and he famously replaces it with the Ideal type, a systematic idealisation of historical value complexes. An ideal type is an idealisation or a theoretical characterisation much as one might have in any science the theory of gravity for example where the theory is defined in

¹² Max Weber *Methodology of the Social Sciences*

terms of simple abstract objects: mass, velocity acceleration force and so on whereby the complicating details of empirical reality are excluded. A particular Weberian example might be Bureaucracy, management and control through the operation of bureaus. Examples of Bureaucracy (empirical types) are found in many countries historically: Ancient China, India, the Occident, from which one can build a generalised abstraction: Hierarchical Control, Adherence to rules and norms, dispassionate and impartial execution, promotion on merit and so on.

Under the umbrella of the historically located cultural ideal type one can envisage different types of possible action.

Action types

- Rational-purposeful Action: the actors set a goal and use efficient ways or means to achieve it. Moreover, the goal and the means should be rational or justifiable.
- Value-rational Action: goals and means of achieving are determined by values. This is also rational; however, the rationality is justified from beliefs, which may be aesthetic, religious, constitutional, or professional .
- Affective Action: motivated by the emotions,
- Traditional Action: derived from the customs of society

Parsons and Schutz

In the nineteen thirties two books were published on Weber's methodology which engendered a divide in post Weberian thought between action theory within the context of a system view of societies on the one hand and a phenomenological basis for social action¹³. on the other. Both of these relied upon explanation based upon verstehen but divided on the role of phenomenology and hermeneutics. The Parsonian social system model eventually moved to a structural functional theory of societal survival. This differentiation sparked a considerable controversy¹⁴. Parsons book originally received a

¹³ Parsons: The structure of Social Action 1937

Schutz: the Phenomenology of the social world first pub 1932 in German

¹⁴ Grathoff The theory of Social Action, the Parsons Schutz correspondence.

high degree of acceptance but subsequently, in the fifties, was widely criticised¹⁵ I won't go into all of that here but see Butts¹⁶ and Grathoff.

The positivist theory of action, as characterised by Parsons is a subtype of action theory where scientific knowledge is seen as the actor's sole way of looking at his/her situation. Parsons (Chapter 2) discusses a number of subtypes of the theory of action The Utilitarian, the positivistic, the idealistic . He blends each of these into a so-called Voluntaristic theory of action. It involves basic elements- Actors who are individual persons. Actors are viewed as goal seeking. Actors are also in possession of alternative means to achieve their goals.

The basic components of this system of action are as follows:

(a) The act implies an agent, an "actor."

(b) The act must have an "end": a future state of affairs to which the process of action is oriented.

(c) The act must be initiated in a "situation" which in turn is "analyzable" into two elements: "conditions" of action over which the actor has no control, and "means" over which he has control.

(d) The act involves a certain mode of relationship between these elements, a "normative orientation" of action.

Some consequences are that an act is always a process in time, that an act may be subject to error and is always subjective, from the point of view of the actor.

It is very important to differentiate the overall approach of Parsons and Schutz. Parsons was a theorist of the Social System. That is he was focused on system level issues, like social order (The Hobbsian problem of order) or social reproduction, or wealth distribution and went on later in his career to embrace structural functionalism postulating that every society, every social system had to address four underlying functional prerequisites: Adaptation - how is a social system to adapt to its environment, Goal Attainment-how does

¹⁵ Butts : Max Weber's theory of action - an examination of its interpretation and extension by Parsons and Schutz (1981)

¹⁶ Op cit

a social system achieve its objectives, Integration - how is social structure maintained, Latency - the passing on of social values.¹⁷

These action types both in Weber and in Parsons are Types, that is idealisations which could apply to any society: Classical, Feudal, Agrarian, Industrial, Post Industrial and so on. They could be combined with any type of Power or Domination structure (Charismatic, Traditional, Rational) to achieve an explanation of action in terms of verstehen. Weber more clearly than Parsons separates out how the different action types, say traditional or rational, would apply to different types of society, say Feudal or Industrial.

They would also play an important role in uniting a Nomothetic / Idiographic type of explanation. For example one might have a set of laws or law-like statements describing and predicting how human actors would behave in a social context. This might be, for example, a micro economic model or a game theoretic model of social behaviour. To explain a given set of micro economic behaviour one might appeal to a Rational Purposeful Action type. One might also want to explore other dimensions such as legal or organisational constraints which the ideal type micro model would not have.

Also useful to note that different action types may be operative at the same time in the same way that different domination types could be in competition in the same society at the same time. Thus it would appear that there are types of action and these like ideal types more generally are historical/social in nature rather than psychological in nature. Thus to appeal to a Rational Purposeful action type and invoke micro economic theory to explain certain sorts of market behaviour would not have been possible before the nineteenth century when the fundamental rules of economic rationality and utilitarian philosophy were being enunciated. It's worth just elaborating on this. All social theory which is based on the assumption of people as rational actors. Typically that rational actors possess some sort of utility function which they wish to maximise, that they can evaluate the outcomes of social

¹⁷ Talcott Parsons The Social System

action in terms of such utility functions and act accordingly and so on. So such enterprises as Utilitarianism, Classical and Austrian and possibly Marxist economics, Game theory, Negotiation Theory could be characterised thus. Weber argues that each of these is an ideal, an abstraction, where typically real world constraints on rational action such as law or organisational inertia are ignored. They are typical nomothetic structures which can lead to the deduction of social "laws" : e.g general equilibrium, nash equilibrium, the minimax theorem but which need to be interpreted in terms of a specific historical situation before social explanation is achieved.

Weber defined the meaning of action in three different ways. The meaning of action

- is the meaning *meant* by the actor as actually given in any specific "historical case."
- is the average or approximate meaning meant in a given "mass of cases." That is, statistical considerations come into play.
- is the construction of a pure type of action.

Schutz insisted that Weber's first category must be sharply distinguished from the other two categories because it is the *only one which can be supported phenomenologically*. The other two options cover situations whereby meaning could be inferred by a third party: a historian, statistician, or sociologist, and Schutz wants to take the underlying problem of meaning and action in Weber in a phenomenological direction

"... taking its point of departure from the questions raised by Max Weber ... It seeks to determine the precise nature of the phenomenon of meaning, and to do this by an analysis of the constituting function. Only after we have a firm grasp of the *concept of meaning* as such will we be able to analyse step by step the *meaning structure of the social world*. By following this procedure we shall be able to *anchor the methodological apparatus of interpretive sociology at a far deeper point than Max Weber was able to do.* "

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Schutz maintained that sociologists, when their investigations require it, can and must get at the meaning *meant by* the actors.

To quote Butts again

¹⁸ Butt op cit

.....Schutz the object of analysis lay in a purely theoretical and therefore philosophical consideration of the nature of the meaning of social action and behaviour, together with their implications for sociological research, whereas, for Parsons' work, his goal fell more strictly within the traditional boundaries of sociological inquiry in which the constituents of social phenomena were largely regarded as unproblematic and attention was concentrated as befitting a general theory of action upon the resultants of their actions of individuals and groups the context of private and institutional life, in short, upon society. Parsons in his later work¹⁹ moves away from an action theory perspective towards a structural functional whereby the "needs" of a society to sustain itself as a functioning system are explored. This is a long way from Weber.

Schutz's analysis draws upon Bergson²⁰, William James²¹ and Husserl's later work²² The focus moves to *interaction* as well as action. Bergson and James both evolved theories about consciousness and meaning centred around "streams" of thought containing elements of retrospection and anticipation as the ego moved through time. Husserl invoked the notion of the life world, *lebenswelt* fairly close to Heidegger's views on *Da sein* and equipment (although of course there had been a major falling out between the two by this time). *Schutz's work posed the lifeworld as the site of subjectively meaningful action; it provided the first step towards a phenomenologically based sociology by explicating the structures of the lifeworld via a phenomenology of the natural attitude* ²³

*Applied phenomenology takes social action and meaning to be occasional, and it looks to actors' concerns, interests, projects and their consequences in lifeworld situations. Such an approach parallels Max Weber's historical-comparative studies, but looks to the vivid present as the basis of its understanding.*²⁴

Schutz's attempt to merge Weberian methodology with phenomenology remains, however, controversial both philosophically (phenomenologically) and empirically, as a tool for sociological analysis.

¹⁹ E.g., Parsons *The Social System*

²⁰ Bergson: *Time and Free Will*

²¹ James: *The Principles of Psychology* (2 vols)

²² Husserl: *The Crises of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*

²³ Schutz Luckman: *The structure of the lifeworld*

²⁴ Hall op cit

Another thinker who starts from Parsons and is also significantly influenced by Schutz is Howard Garfinkle the founder of ethnomethodology²⁵. The main thrust of Garfinkel's research has been in the area of what might be called micro sociology, the sociology of interaction in a specific social context. I noted above that Parsons moved away from an action theoretic to a structural macro view of societies with the functional necessity of solving societal problems like the problem of order. His solution is by emphasising that societies solve the problem of order by the internalisation of social norms, conformance to values. Schutz wants to explore the foundations of Weber's theory of action focussing on social interaction, the coordination of the lebenswelt of different players. Garfinkel was attempting to negotiate a path between these perspectives between the moral norms and the phenomenological realities of social interaction.²⁶

From Dilthey flows another important Hermeneutical development, this one via Heidegger. Apart from revolutionising philosophy by focussing on ontology (Being) rather than and consequence and, if you like the architecture, of being Being, towards which, equipment and so on Heidegger emphasises that man (or woman) is an interpreting animal

For Heidegger, we understand something as something..... Dasein deals with what is ready-to-hand 'circumspectly': 'we "see" it as a table, a door, a carriage, or a bridge'. Seeing as is what is originary: for Heidegger, we never

just see things in the abstract, but always see things as whatever specific thing they are. It is this as that constitutes interpretation for Heidegger. So, the relationship between interpretation and understanding is one of making explicit: 'In interpretation', he says, 'understanding does not become something different. It becomes itself.' It is this understanding that is essential to Dasein: man is the interpreting animal. Everything I encounter is always already interpreted: in seeing-as, my interpretation makes explicit that which I have always already understood. 'The "as" makes up the structure of the explicitness of something that is understood. It constitutes the interpretation' ²⁷

²⁵ Howard Garfinkle Studies in Ethnomethodology see also Heritage:Garfinkle and Ethnomethodology.

²⁶ Heritage op cit

²⁷ Simms K: Hans-George Gadamer pp30

Gadamer who was a pupil of Heidegger's was concerned less with reconstructing philosophy as a revolutionary mode of investigation and more with turning hermeneutics into a practical tool of philosophical analysis

To quote Simms again

From Schleiermacher, Gadamer understands that hermeneutics can be liberated from the interpretation of texts as narrowly construed, and can be extended to the understanding of life itself. Hermeneutics is thereby construed as an overcoming of misunderstanding, (between the reader and the author) and is close to dialogue and conversation as modes of overcoming the alienation one might feel towards others who are different from ourselves.

And from both Luther and Schleiermacher Gadamer takes the notion of projection into the situation, or context, of the author who created the work to be interpreted. From Dilthey Gadamer takes the notion of hermeneutics as constitutive of the human sciences, which at once call for a conception of truth different from that to be found in the natural sciences while still retaining their methodology, and he also recognises in Dilthey a problem of history – that understanding is to some extent bound by the accrual of meanings that have formed around a work up to the present. Moreover, history as such consists of nothing other than a constant ongoing interpretation: past events do not 'exist' in the same way that an object such as a table exists. And from Heidegger, finally, Gadamer gains a deeper understanding of the universality of hermeneutics. Hermeneutics is universal not only in the sense that anything whatever can be interpreted, but also in the sense that all human beings are constitutively hermeneutic. To paraphrase Heidegger man is the interpreting animal. Man ('Dasein') is unique in that for him interpretation is originary, is always-already.

We cannot merely see an object: we cannot help but see it as something; we cannot merely hear a sound: we cannot help but hear it as something. Moreover, language, as the way in which discourse expresses itself, is a universal component of human understanding, is co-present with understanding. Thus any mode of enquiry, including philosophy, because it is conducted through language, must have hermeneutics as a constitutive, originary feature. Thus Gadamer finally arrives

at a hermeneutics which fosters the understanding of texts, fosters the mutual understanding of people, and fosters philosophy's understanding of itself. Such is his radicalisation of Schleiermacher's formula that all understanding is self-understanding.

Habermas was another philosopher influenced by Heidegger and Hermeneutics. He adopts a version of the Heideggerian Husserlian lebenswelt. Interestingly he combines this analysis with a version of action theory derived from analytically linguistic philosophy (speech acts). He also focuses on structural features (money and power) which affect society as a whole²⁸

So where does all this lead us ?

To summarise the main points:

Schleiermacher, a contemporary and opponent of Hegel, following Luther's lead developed a systematic method for interpreting ancient texts (The Hermeneutic Circle). This concept and approach influenced Wilhelm Dilthey, an important historicist philosopher. Dilthey in turn influenced both the Neo Kantian school of German philosophy Windelband, Rickert, Lask and the Sociologist Max Weber and later the Philosopher Heidegger

This is a massively complex area but I suggest five major themes can be extracted:

- The argument: that explanation need not be only causal but also in terms of "meaningful" human action: Naturwissenschaften Geisteswissenschaften (natural sci vrs humanities) sharp contrast to logical empiricism
 -
- The nature of explanation is not just law-like (nomothetic) but may be aimed at explaining particular historical or social events (ideographic) where explanation at the level of meaning may be appropriate
 -
- Max Weber influenced by the NeoKantians in reaction to Dilthey formulates a viable theory of Ideal types and Actions
 -
- Importantly action theory *has an historical context* - action types are seen in the context of historical factors which facilitate ideographic historical explanation. Such actions are **meaningful** (verstehen)
 -

²⁸ Habermas: The theory of communicative action vols 1 and 2.

Weberian action theory was compatible with an important thread of social explanation often characterised by the phrase "Rational Actor"

This perspective emerged from separate developments: English utilitarianism (Mill, Bentham), classical economics (Smith, Ricardo, Malthus etc), Game theory (von Neumann etc), formal political and social theory (Coleman, Becker). Rational Action theory envisages the human actor (here an artificial construct) endowed with utility judgement and maximisation, and rational choice. Weber would claim that these were historically contingent ideal types.

However they do amount to a powerful predictive theory of human action. Interestingly there is a weaker version of game theory: Schelling, Ellsberg, Goffman (Strategic interaction) which retains many of the concepts but without the mathematics. Evolutionary Game theory makes a contribution here. Allows for the exploration of social equilibria This latter is interesting because this kind of approach opens the door to complexity which often depends upon some version of agency. So that even in the biological sciences the idea that explanation is essentially causal starts to break down.

Arising from post war Anglo American analytical philosophy and especially linguistic analytic thought there developed an interest in philosophical Action theory. This spearheaded by a book from G Anscomb (*Intentions*) Davidson etc to develop a theory of action - linguistic analysis of intentional propositions Some of this thinking was absorbed and incorporated into social analysis by Habermas

A separate development from Dilthey is via Heidegger. Heidegger importantly emphasises ontology instead of epistemology and the nature of *being in the world*, Dasein objects and equipment that each has to encounter and cope with. Despite their differences this perspective and the later thinking of Husserl influences Hurserrl (*Lebenswelt*) and later Sartre (*pour soir*) deBeauvoir (situations) and Merleau Ponty.

Heidegger in turn influences Gadamer, Ricouer and Habermas towards a hermeneutically based philosophy of the social sciences. Habermas is particularly interesting as, along with Schutz he is one of the few philosophers to seriously engage with social science. He develops his own version of action theory from the theory of speech acts but additionally develops a theory of pragmatics evolved from the Heideggerian/Husserlian. *Lebenswelt* On top of this he develops a structural theory (based around money and power) as to how societies actually function at the macro level.

There is a confluence of Action Theory and Phenomenology in the work of Alfred Schutz. Schutz tries to incorporate a late phenomenological perspective into Weber's ideal type/action theory which lead to an attempt to develop a phenomenological sociology - a union of action theory (Weber) and phenomenology. Lead to the development of social constructivist theory that is that society or social reality is a social construct. Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (and John Searl) are particularly important here.

An important post Weberian social theorist is Talcott Parsons who was a very early translator and commentator of Weber's work. Parsons, however, was more interested in societies as social systems rather than Action Theory. He entered into a number of debates with Schutz. However one of Parsons' students Garfinkel reacted against Parsons' abstract theorising and founded an important branch of sociology Ethnomethodology very much focussed on micro social interaction.

So to summarise Action theory and especially action theory around the idea of rational action remains important. Heidegger remains an extremely influential philosopher and the Hermeneutics approach in the work of Gadamer remains significant. The legacies of Schutz and Habermas are significant but their approaches remain unreconciled.

²⁹ Hall: Alfred Schutz and his critics.