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"Verstehen" Approach and the Philosophy of Social Science

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INTRODUCTION

Epistemology in the West during the Middle Ages was predominantly influenced by religious perspectives. The major epistemological handicap during the Middle Ages was related to the fact that the religious thinkers tried to understand the natural world from a supernatural point of view. It was a great break-through in the history of Western epistemology when man (Western) decided to understand the natural world from the point of view of Nature. For example, the attempt to understand events such as rain-fall, thunder, lightning, etc., as natural events rather than as teleological events within the Divine scheme, was a history-making event. A mechanistic model of the universe was the first master model which modern science utilized to understand reality. The mechanistic view of the universe was partly an epistemological protest against the religious-mystical-teleological view of man and of the universe propagated during the Middle Ages. The Protestant movement was only a religious version of this general protest.

With the evolution of modern sciences, the epistemological problems became once again key issues in the Western philosophy. In other words, when there were several models for understanding, epistemological problems could no longer be taken for granted. Bacon's intellectual purge by destroying the "idols", Descarte's attempt to put a solid foundation for objective knowledge of self-evident principle by doubting everything except his own existence, Kant's development of basic categories of thought, Locke's conception of mind as a *tabula rasa* etc., were some the philosophical attempts to put the foundation for the new epistemology. Thus epistemology became the major meeting-ground for philosophy and science at a time neither one knew where to meet the other. However, it was Hobbes who put the philosophical foundation for modern

mechanistic epistemology by reducing everything human to stimulus and response.

When sociology was born during the first half of the 19th century, the question whether or not social science needs a special methodology was a live one. In fact, from a methodological point of view, the history of sociology can be viewed as a reaction to the philosophy of natural science. For example, Comte, Durkheim, Pareto, Lundberg, etc., strongly identified their sociology with the approach of natural science, whereas others like Weber, MacIver, Znaniecki, Sorokin, etc., strongly opposed the identification of sociology with natural science. However, it should be noted that there is no pure case of mechanistic or humanistic approach in the history of sociology. For example, Comte the founding father of sociology in spite of his strong positivistic orientations, felt that understanding human behaviour was different from understanding Nature, since we understand human behaviour from a synthetic rather than from an analytical point of view, with the help of what he called "human nature" [1].

"Verstehen" approach is only one of the major oppositions to the natural science approach in social science. The idea of the verstehen is highly prevalent in the history of sociology. Comte's role of our knowledge of fellow human beings in understanding society, Simmel's conception of the synthetic unity in Nature as a function of the observing mind whereas the synthetic unity in society as a function of the relationship between the individuals [2], Cooley's "empathetic understanding", W. I. Thomas' "definition of the situation", Mead's "internal dimension of action," MacIver's "imaginative reconstruction," Znaniecki's "human coefficient," Sorokin's "logico-meaningful method," etc., are some of the examples of verstehen approach in the history of sociology. The controversy between the two schools — one holding that the methods of natural sciences are the only true scientific methods and the other holding that methods of social science are totally different from those of natural science — is still prevalent as Schutz has noted [3].

The central issue in the above-noted controversy is the analytical dehumanization of man in the philosophy of social science. Man is not only objectified by deemphasizing his mind or consciousness but also atomized(i.e. fragmented) for analysis. Objectification and fragmentation are the two sides of the same coin — the analytical dehumanization of man. The analytical dehumanization of man is deplored by Matson (1964) [4], Tiryakian (1962) [5], Peter Berger (1966) [6], Schutz (1970) [7], and Lewis Mumford (1944) to mention a few [8].

In spite of a long line of protests against the dehumanization of man in the history of social science, the mechanistic view has been undoubtedly

the predominant view of man and society in the West. Not only the social scientists were attracted to the prestigeous and successful methods of natural science, but the dehumanization involved in the mechanistic model became a moral justification for the illtreatment man received under cut-throat capitalism. Thus the analytical dehumanization in social science and the moral dehumanization of man in social thought went hand in hand, both enforcing each other. The modern triumph of the mechanistic view of man and society is so great that most people find it difficult to think of any other answer to the epistemological and metaphysical questions as Langermann points out [9].

The purpose of this paper is to clarify what verstehen is and to indicate its role in the philosophy of social science. Moreover, some of the implications of a verstehen-oriented social science to itself, other disciplines, and society, will be discussed. One way of achieving the above-noted goals is to elaborate on the major assumptions of verstehen approach.

THE MAJOR ASSUMPTIONS OF VERSTEHEN APPROACH

1. Human behaviour is qualitatively different from the animal behavior. In the case of the human behavior, unlike in the case of animal behavior, an "internal dimension" is involved. Znaniecki called it "human coefficient [10]". Verstehen is an act of bringing to the foreground the inner organic sequence, between a stimulus and a response, as Abel has noted [11], or a method of capturing the inner meaning of action as Rudner put it [12]. Under the influence of positivistic behaviorism psychology became defined as the science of behavior rather than as the science of mind (*psyche*) and lower animals became more popular as subjects for study than humans [Maddi and Costa, 13]. By recognizing the uniqueness of our content in social science, we are likely to recognize our affinity with humanities.

The moral implication of mechanistic view of man and society in social science is clear. A sense of dignity and responsibility for man cannot be developed on the conceptualization that man is an object rather than a subject. As Gouldner has made it clear, to the degree the social sciences are modelled on the physical sciences, they entail the dominant assumption that people are "things" which may be treated and controlled in the same way as other sciences control their non-human materials [14].

2. The internal dimension of meaning can and must be inferred "logically" from empirical observations. "Verstehen" approach has been criticized as not being empirical, therefore not worthy to be regarded

as "scientific". The above-noted criticism is a product of a misconception of what is empirical and scientific. Science is not a matter of raw empiricism; even our so-called direct observations are basically inferential in nature. When we see a man, for example, we are making the inference (conclusion) that the object of our perceptions is a human being, a conclusion which is based on our knowledge about man. The logic of inference in the case of imputing meaning is no different from the logic involved in other inferences. The logic of inference in science involves not only a conceptual system, but also a set of assumptions, findings, principles, etc. We do not, for example, infer "shame" from a single blush out of the blue. We need not only repeated observations of the external manifestations which we call blush, but also it must be consistent with what we know of how a person experiencing shame would be acting. Thus a whole set of principles (consistency and coherence, for example) findings, assumptions, postulates, etc., are involved in an inference. To understand the basic inferential, conceptual, and systemic nature of empirical science is to recognize its kinship with logic. However, it must be emphasized that it is from empirical observation that we infer meanings. As Scheler has noted it is in the blush that we perceive shame; "verstehen" approach is not a matter of introspection nor a private matter which can not be reached by experiences of others [15]. Peter Munch's comment is worth quoting in this connection [16]:

> How do we know that we perceive the subjectively intended meaning of an action? [...] The answer is really quite simple. We perceive the meaning of action in the same way as we perceive the meaning of a word or a sentence [...] A whole series of inferences and imputations are involved in this process.

3. Human behavior can be b e t t e r understood from the point of view of the internal dimension of behavior rather than from its external manifestations. It is the inclusion of the internal dimension (fear, anxiety, hope, attitudes, values, expectations, etc., for example) which makes an experience a truly human one. What man alone is capable of experiencing (both positive and negative) could be better understood as human actions rather than as organic reactions or behaviors. In other words, strictly human phenomena such as devotion, agony, commitment, hatred, etc., could not be fully understood apart from a conceptual framework of human-social dimensions. For example, the meeting of a human male and a female could be understood to some extent as a physio-sexual animal behavior; however, a new dimension of understanding is added when we view the meeting in terms of the internal dimensions involved. In other words, when the human animals meet they do not leave their culture behind and meet like animals or as iron and magnet. MacIver is correct in pointing out that there is an essential difference between a paper

flying before wind and a man fleeing from a pursuing crowd, since paper knows no fear and wind no hatred [17].

The introduction of the internal dimension brings unity to a set of observations and depth to the analysis regarding human behavior. For example, the observation of the physiological movements of a group of football players in a field, does not make any sense without the introduction of the internalized norms, goals, standards, etc. In the mechanistic model of man and society, a variable like "social class" is treated merely as an objective phenomenon of the level of income or education, for example; to group individuals of equal units of education or income, is meaningless unless they form a collectivity to some extent in their social life. Only to the extent that individuals of equal income or education do form a social collectivity, are we entitled to predict similar behavior from them on the basis of the similarity of their social class position. Similarly, same religion may have different social meanings for its members under different socio-cultural conditions. For example, a Moslim who is surrounded by hostile Hindus is likely to have a different view of his religion compared to another Moslim who is surrounded by friendly Moslims, though they both are Moslims. The same thing is true about poverty.

Poor people under the ideology of success would feel far more frustrated than they would be under different cultural conditions. Likewise a kiss would have different meanings under different conditions in spite of its behavioral similarities. In other words, we can not take the objective similarity or identity of behavior for granted; we need to establish similarity at the level of meanings experienced by the subjects, a process which is quite similar to what phenomenologists call "bracketing" [Husserl, 18]. Moreover such an approach would involve the explication of implied assumptions in the process of scientific observation, verification and interpretation.

Znaniecki observes that if the human coefficient is withdrawn and the scientist attempts to study a social system as he would study a natural system, then the former system would disappear [19]. The same theme is brought to our attention by Sorokin with his concept of "logico-meaningful integration." The so-called neutral concepts such as "input", "output," "equilibrium," "disequilibrium," "interaction," "exchange," etc., miss the human-social dimension which concepts such as "exploitation," "alienation," "tension," etc., tend to bring to our attention. It is a tradition in sociology to classify occupations into five or six categories such as professional, managerial, white-collar, skilled, semi-skilled, unskilled, and farmers, for example. But in the author's opinion, if we can regroup occupations from the point of view of frustrations, freedom for

communication, opportunity for creativity, etc., experienced by the workers involved, is likely to open up new perspectives and understanding in industrial sociology. Durkheim, a strong positivist, gave the impression that socialization is a mechanical process like recording a tape. He failed, in general, to see the dynamics of the meanings of action for the individuals. For example, a son who obeys his father (a social fact in a traditional society) may not be simply experiencing it as constraining influence from outside, but could do so as a meaningful inner experience of joy. What a psychiatrist does with his patient is an example of a verstehen approach. The psychiatrist not only attributes meanings to the seemingly meaningless actions and reactions of the patient, but also tries to put the meanings into a coherent intelligible system by observing and comparing not only patients but also patients and normal people. We do not need objectified concepts for objective (intersubjectively verifiable) knowledge.

The major problem of the philosophy of social science is how to make objectively valid statements from and with the subjective materials of the socio-cultural world. The verstehen approach does not give any special right or privilege to the observer. He cannot ignore the basic problems of any empirical science such as the problem of inference, verification, measurement, prediction, control, theoretical ideas of unity, simplicity, university, etc., a point made clear by Schutz [20]. Philosophy of social science must be grounded in the general philosophy of science.

Philosophically verstehen approach is mainly concerned about the conceptual framework with which social reality may be comprehended, a concern which is almost identical to Husserl's phenomenology [Natanson, 21]. Understanding involves not only various dimensions but also several phases. Understanding is not a matter of developing empirically testable propositions about social reality and verifying them. Understanding is basically a matter of gaining insight into a phenomenon. New understanding involves not only new perspectives which are probing deeper into the "mysteries", but also brings new connection among findings, which in turn brings new predictions, controls, explanations, and questions.

To understand a phenomenon, first of all, we have to classify it properly so that no longer it stands out as something strange and puzzling within the basic postulates of science. To understand human behavior from a verstehen point of view is to classify it along with other uniquely human experience on the basis of their internal dimensions which are theoretically important. In other words, it is a matter of defining in human terms, a kind of defining which sheds some causal-explanatory light on the problem. For example, when we conceptualize a phenomenon as exploitation from the point of those who experience

it (i.e. when our conceptualizations are consistent with the experiential world of the observed), then the actions and reactions of the subjects involved become more sensible or understandable. The giants in the field of sociology who were poor methodologists from a technical point of view, were able to see better because they (Sumner, Veblen, Sorokin, C. Wright Mills, etc., to mention a few) had human perspectives to look at human behavior. Bierstedt calls it the strange paradox of sociology that the significance of our research in sociology varies inversely with the precision of the methods employed [22]. It is the inclusion of an internal dimension which makes a concept like "reference group" more useful than "membership group" in sociology. Same thing is true about "father figure" compared to "biological father," in psychology.

4. The concepts involving social-human dimensions should be derived and related to the empirical world of actual human experience. Mere humanization of concepts is not enough for the verstehen approach; but the humanization of concepts must do justice to the complex world of human experience. The nominalist in sociology tried to conceptualize society away. It was Durkheim who brought society as a reality experienced by the individuals. However, unfortunately, he ended up conceptualizing the individual away.

The concept of the "economic man," or "rational man," used in the Western world during the 17th and the 18th centuries not only implied an idealized view of man, but also implied ontological universalism to rationality. Similarly the positivists of the 19th century took the European intellectual development of the three previous centuries in the West for a universal law of evolution (development), just as Marx took the fundamental importance of wealth in the modern industrial society as equally applicable to all societies, a point noted by Scheler [Staude, 23].

The introduction of the meaning of action in the methodology of social science brings a dynamism into social science for which there is no counterpart in the methodology of natural science, since the meaning of action changes from time to time in history, just as it changes from individual to individual in the same society. It simply means that our conceptual classifications must be on the basis of comparability of meanings rather than on external indications. We can not take the dynamism of our meaning without recognizing our special affinity to the discipline of history. Moreover, the historical meaning of an action is also part of our content of analysis in social science. Thus it is clear that the meaning of action in the verstehen approach does not mean that this approach is limited to the analysis of human behavior of which the individuals are aware of their meanings. In fact the major focus of verstehen approach in social science is the explication of socio-historical

meanings of social actions. Often these meanings have to be imputed to the social behavioral manifestations within the framework of logic of inference by the social scientists. Weber's analysis of capitalism in the West is a classical example of imputing sociohistorical meaning by tying observation and logic together to form a coherent unity [24].

The characteristics of conceptualization are such that one can not only conceptualize attributes in, but also conceptualize them out. A social science modelled after the natural science is particularly prone to the temptation of conceptual parsimony at the expense of the diversity of empirical-experiential reality. A criticism which Sorokin made against some of the modern sociological theories is appropriate here [25]:

> The meshes of abstract nets are so large that practically all the empirical fish slip through, leaving nothing in the hands of the fisherman-researcher.

By trying to make our concepts consistent with the empirical world of reality as it is lived by the people involved, we are likely to reduce the conflict involved between nominalists and the realists. Moreover, to be consistent with the spirit of verstehen approach, we must interpret our findings in terms of human values and sentiments. In other words, the social implications of our objective findings must be translated into subjective meanings, an approach which is likely to reduce the present tragic conflict between radical and conservative sociologists, in the author's judgement.

5. There is a basic similarity or comparability (if not identity) of human experience which can be called the common denominator. This is the epistemological basis for our attempt to develop an understanding of human behavior transcending the socio-cultural boundaries. Peter Munch calls it the "general human experience" [26]. For example, happiness, agony, hatred, love, etc., can be taken as some of the basic human experiences. This is not to deny that the content, intensisty, etc., of the above-noted experiences vary from time to time or from place to place. Postulation of a general human experience is necessary to communicate to others. If a person has never experienced pain, for example, there is no way one could "explain" pain to him, just as we can not explain color to a person who has been blind from birth.

Empathizing is based on the assumption that the behavior of others may not be as "strange" as it first appears. In the first place, if the observer looks hard enough in his culture he can find comparable situations for the so-called strange behavior he noticed in another culture. For example, an average Western observer may not understand how an Asian woman could g l a d l y accept a husband arranged by her family after paying a dowry on her behalf. However, the girl's happiness and

even pride becomes partly understandable when the observer puts the behavior within the meanings and values of the Asian culture. Dowry, for example, implies to her that her father is able and willing to put up a large sum of money on her behalf, rather than as an economic transaction (sale). On the other hand, an average Western observer does not find a Western woman g l a d l y accepting a child born to her (something arranged by Nature) as something strange, for example. Thus is is clear that one can often find comparable situations in his own culture or experience for the so-called strange behaviors in other cultures. In other words, arranged marriage in the Asian world could be considered as a functional equivalent to the childbirth in the West, in terms of their comparability in meanings in spite of their manifest differences. In fact, this is exactly what profound conceptualizations do in a field; they subsume seemingly unrelated phenomena under them in such a way a key dimension or variable is brought to the attention of the scientists for analysis.

6. The behavior of the observed would not be significantly different from the behavior of the observer, given similar conditions. It is because of the above-noted assumption that the observer is encouraged to put himself (herself) in the shoes of the observed for probable clues to understand, but not for final answers.

The analytical deemphasis of man on the one hand and the epistemological glorification of scientific knowledge on the other hand implied that there are two species of human beings—the laymen and the scientists. As Gouldner warns social scientists must surrender the elitist assumption that others believe out o necessity (determinism) whereas they believe because of the dictates of logic and reason [27]. Those who deemphasize Man can not say anything worth listening to, unless they consider themselves as "super human" in some sense.

Objective approach, first of all, in social science, means that the observer had already put h i s life, h i s society, h i s religion, h i s tradition, etc., in the same boat (critical-analytical) as he would put others' life, society, etc. Objective approach does not mean that cultural materials have to be treated as "objects" in the same way natural scientists treat their materials as things. To treat a natural world of objects as if it is having human dimensions is to commit the error of animism, whereas to treat the human world as if it is a world of things or objects is to commit the mechanistic fallacy.

7. The human quality of the observer is a crucial factor in collection, analysis and application of social data. Under positivism we are led to believe that social understanding and engineering have very little to do with the human qualities of the observer. We have failed to see that

collecting and applying social data involves the art of relating to the people involved on a human personal level. The mechanistic model of man and society reduced the human problems as "technical problems". Thus the positivistic model is responsible for the age of technocrats. In the author's opinion, mechanistic thinking is to be blamed for the failure of the so-called "foreign aid programs." These programs have been mostly depending upon the technical experts rather than on people of profound human warmth, depth, and insight. The positivistic belief in the coming of a scientific utopia was based on the mechanistic illusion of ease in collecting and applying social science data. For example, Bacon, Saint-Simon, Comte, etc., strongly believed in the coming of a scientific utopia. To recognize the ability of the observer in relating to people as a key factor is to recognize social science as an art. A foreign expert with a verstehen approach is likely to work with people rather than imposing "superior" know-how on other peoples or cultures. He will have a better understanding of the the fears, anxiety, hopes, aspirations, etc., of the people with whom he works. Definitely he will be less prone to commit the error of ethnocentricism since he is required to look for comparable situations in his own culture or life.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The relative unpopularity of verstehen approach in social science, particularly in the U.S., has been due to a certain misconception regarding the concepts such as verstehen, scientific, empirical, and understanding. Verstehen is not a matter of sentimentalism, on the part of the observer; nor is it a non-empirical technique the claims of which cann not or should not be validated intersubjectively. It is basically a methodological device to get at the meanings of actions and then classify the actions on the basis of meanings in such a way that certain key dimensions (significant meanings) are brought to the forefront for causal-explanatory analysis. Empathizing is not a matter of partisan politics. The observer should learn to empathize not only with the oppressed, but also with the oppressor for example. Thus empathizing is a way of transcending party politics of any society by the social scientists. However, any understanding to be called "scientific" must be consistent with the basic principles and postulates of the philosophy of science. The observer using the verstehen approach can not ignore the fundamental problems associated with the issues of empirical verification, logical inference, cenceptial-theoretical coherence, scientific explanations, etc.

A social science rooted in the verstehen approach is likely to have profound implications to philosophy of social science and society.

Scientific knowledge in social science would not be a matter of finding uniformity with the natural science methodology or in superimposing the so-called supernational or supercultural languages such as statistics, mathematics, etc., but a matter of working one's way up from the particular cultural setting involved through their functional equivalents (in terms of meanings) to a unified set of concepts and propositions regarding social life. The definition of social science itself would change radically with a serious introduction of verstehen approach. Social science will be defined in much broader terms than it has been traditionally done in the past; it is likely to destroy the antagonistic separation between arts and sciences. Moreover, the new breed of social scientists is likely to be "scholars" in the traditional sense of the word, rather than quantitatively oriented methodologists in the narrower sense as it is often the case now, be intuitive and artistic in their orientation, and be in a better position to "understand" and work with foreign cultures. Thus a verstehen oriented social science would be in a position to create a new era of international understanding. Such a social science will be in a better position to fulfill its dual role as an art and a science.

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