1. HERMENEUTICS AND SOCIOLOGY

Deepening the Interpretive Perspective

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Human beings live in a world of meanings: signifying to each other their wants and needs; misunderstanding intentions and correcting these misunderstandings; telling stories of good and evil, loss and salvation; using compelling rhetoric to achieve political victories and retain social power; deploying categories that call forth actions and mold collective intentions; the list goes on. The point is that social action is embedded in and molded by the meanings people use to get on with their lives. For this reason, sociology, and the human sciences as a whole, are hermeneutic in that they require the social researcher to interpret meaning if she is to make sense of social life in a new and useful way. In hermeneutic sociology, the investigator uses theory to develop interpretations of social action; by mobilizing theory in this way, she is able to intensively study social processes so that the human subjects under study can be understood, explained, and criticized.

The arguments for a hermeneutic sociology are partially available through the sociological canon, but remain, in their fully articulated form, outside that canon. In classical theory courses, Max Weber’s concern with interpretation is contrasted to the more naturalistic sociological theories of Karl Marx and Emile Durkheim. Likewise, the symbolic interactionists’ interest in concrete processes of meaning-construction is often contrasted to the analytical realism of structural functionalism. And finally, “postmodern” skepticism about the production of sociological knowledge often addresses itself to discourse, and indeed concerns itself with meaning albeit in a different way than the symbolic interactionists did. However, though the project of interpretive sociology is often outlined and debated, the specifically hermeneutic tradition of thought in social theory in the West is less well-known. In this chapter we construct a reading of this line of thinking and, by doing so, outline a specifically hermeneutic understanding of social theory and social research. We conclude with three questions for contemporary hermeneutics, which we view as signposts for what may develop in twenty-first century social theory.

The term “hermeneutics” refers, in a general sense, to the science, art, and
philosophy of interpreting meaning, and in particular, the meaning of texts. Perhaps this is part of why hermeneutics' influence on sociology has always been tendentious: in its origins in the modern West, it is less concerned with people themselves and more concerned with the restoration and interpretation of one of their most celebrated productions, texts. Hermeneutics, as such, can be traced back to Antiquity, but its modern form emerges from disputations during the renaissance about interpreting Homer. Influenced by an emergent modern humanism, scholars began to object to the allegorical readings of Homer that interpreted The Iliad and The Odyssey in Christian terms, and thus hermeneutics was born via disputes over the validity of interpretation. In its modern form, then, hermeneutics developed via the fields of Classical philology and Biblical interpretation; methods of interpretation were tested in the fires of translating Plato and restoring sacred Christian texts. For this reason, hermeneutics has, since the early modern era, retained an association with high culture, religion, and thus also with politically conservative intellectual work. However, as with so many things, so with social theory: the 1960s saw a radical shift in the possibilities and implications of hermeneutics. In some ways, however, the "cultural turn" of the 1960s found a like-minded predecessor in debates about history and knowledge that animated German intellectual life in the latter half of the 19th century. In particular, the work of Wilhelm Dilthey can now be seen as a necessary reference point for any social theory that concerns itself with interpretation.

**Historical Hermeneutics**

Hermeneutic social theory as we now know it has its origins in German romanticism and the Geisteswissenschaften. The latter term was originally a German translation of J. S. Mill's "moral sciences." More literally it refers to the "sciences of the spirit" but it has come to mean "human sciences" or "human studies" in general, conceived in opposition to the methods and objectives of the natural sciences. This now-classic opposition, which influenced Wilhelm Dilthey's work, separates the method of explanation in the natural sciences from the method of understanding in the human sciences. The Geisteswissenschaften was a mixed German response to a British empiricism that was ambitiously applying the scientific rationality of physics and astronomy to the study of human society. On the one hand, Wilhelm Dilthey, Heinrich Rickert, and Max Weber admired the rigor of scientific methods, especially inductive logic, and accepted the goal of producing valid and general knowledge of human history. On the other hand, they rejected the idea of a mechanistic explanation of human action and events. In their work, attempts to "explain away" history without taking into account the mental dimension of human life were carefully and vigorously attacked.

In engaging in this methodenstreit (the "fight over methods"), various German thinkers drew on the work of Friedrich Schleiermacher and his conceptualization of the "hermeneutic circle" (1998). A hermeneutic circle is evident when part of a text can only be understood through a preliminary grasp of the whole text, and when the inverse is also affirmed: understanding a part will increase the understanding of the whole. Schleiermacher thought there were a multitude of hermeneutic circles constituting interpretation, one of them being the relation between the author (part) and his historical context (whole), another between a text (part) and the author's life and work (whole). In each case there is a reciprocal relation between parts and whole that is characteristic of the process of understanding in general. The interpretation of a text itself is the fundamental model however.

Hence in Schleiermacher we find the archetypical image of hermeneutics: the investigator puzzling over the meaning of a text he does not yet understand. Schleiermacher also emphasizes importance of historical contextualization and the need for the investigator to reconstruct the author's cultural and linguistic context when considering a text. However, for all of these contributions, Schleiermacher was ultimately committed to the 19th-century romantic ideal of the "genius" artist — except that for Schleiermacher, the genius of the artist must be matched by the genius of the interpreter. In fact, the interpreter should know the text better than the author — it is from Schleiermacher that we inherit the idea that the goal of hermeneutics is to understand the author better than the author understood or understands herself.

This theory of artistic genius (and of interpretation) betrays a certain individualist bias in Schleiermacher's work. When Schleiermacher focuses on the genius of artistic creation and when he argues that hermeneutics is the inversion of rhetoric (i.e. hermeneutics as the movement from speech to thought), he seems to reduce hermeneutics to the study of authorial intention. Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur would, in the twentieth century, criticize this displacement of meaning as too psychological and argue that the author's biography is not necessarily relevant for understanding the meaningful subject-matter and truth-claims made by the text itself. The early work of Wilhelm Dilthey is also susceptible to the same criticisms.

For example, in his *Introduction to the Human Sciences* (1888 [1883]), Dilthey tried to ground the epistemology of the human sciences on a universal psychology. His early social theory of understanding does not articulate the necessary mediation of understanding through historical texts, language, and so on. Instead, he sometimes claims that meaning is immediately intelligible (a very non-hermeneutical position!). But over the course of his life, Dilthey fully reconstructed his views on this matter and thus developed the first major statement of historical hermeneutics, starting with his 1900 essay, *The Rise of Hermeneutics* (1996), and then in his paradigm-setting work, *The Construction of the Historical World in the Human Sciences* (1910).
In the latter, Dilthey states that the human mind can only understand itself through its objectifications or historical expressions (1976, 172–3, 191). Humans are constantly and meaningfully articulating their inner experiences through externalized expressions such as speech, texts, laws, actions, etc. Dilthey has a rather dualistic vocabulary here for what is actually inseparable: each expression has an “inner” and an “outer” dimension. The inner dimension is the meaningful mental structure emerging from lived experience; the outer is the physical sensuous embodiment of the meaning-system, e.g. written words on a page. Self-understanding or the understanding of others must be based not on introspective reason or un-mediated empathy, but rather on the inter-connections between mind, experience, meaning, and external expressions:

The totality of understanding reveals—in contrast with the subjectivity of experience—the objectifications of life. A realization of the objectivity of life, i.e. of its externalizations in many kinds of structural systems, becomes an additional basis for the human studies.... The great outer reality of the mind always surrounds us. It is a manifestation of the mind in the world of the senses—from a fleeting expression to the century-long rule of a constitution or code of law. Every single expression represents a common feature in the realm of this objective mind.... We live in this atmosphere, it surrounds us constantly. We are immersed in it. We are at home everywhere in this historical and understood world; we understand the sense of meaning of it all; we ourselves are woven into this common sphere [1976, 191; emphasis dropped].

The argument that contextualizes this passage is Dilthey’s claim that the Geisteswissenschaften have a distinctive object of study: mental structures of meaning. To understand human social life and historical events, an account of this subjective order is an absolute necessity. Methodologically, getting at this inner reality requires an interpretive approach dealing with the medium of “objectifications.” Dilthey thus defines understanding as the process of recovering the mental content that was experienced and expressed through any given diversity of objectifications. Like Schleiermacher, understanding is achieved through hermeneutical circles requiring contextualizing historical and linguistic study.

What are these objectifications of mind that Dilthey references? Here the departure of Dilthey from the neo-Kantian philosophies that so influenced Weber becomes apparent.² By developing and secularizing one of Hegel’s terms, Dilthey firmly commits to understanding meaning as a supra-individual structure that is relatively stable and indeed exerts considerable power over any given group or individual. Dilthey writes that the “outer reality of mind” consists of “language, custom, and every form or style of life as well as the family, society, the state and the law,” not to mention all art, religion and philosophy as well (1976, 154). Thus Dilthey affirms the Hegelian idea that social-historical practices and institutions are objectifications of a shared inner reality, that a set of meanings implicitly structure customs, conventions, and behaviors. However, Dilthey does not accept Hegel’s metaphysics of absolute knowledge in which Reason can deduce the teleological progress of meaning-structures throughout history.² Instead, in his later writings, Dilthey proposes a research program for studying meaning-systems through historical hermeneutics. His point is precisely that we cannot know the inner world of this or that set of human beings via metaphysical speculation or a priori introspection. Instead, we must do the hard hermeneutic work of finding our way in the lives of others by familiarizing ourselves with the external manifestations of the meanings that drive their action.

By thus proposing that meaningful webs of relationships exceed the individual and “possess an independent existence and development of their own through the content, value and purpose which they realize,” (1976, 181)³ Dilthey asserts that meaning in social life takes on a structure. This has tremendous implications for social science: on the one hand, it implies that social science must of necessity engage in the task interpreting meanings. On the other hand, it suggests that this task can indeed succeed, since meaning is not as evanescent, individualized, or radically subjective as it is sometimes thought to be. Rather, meaning has a structure, and it is this structure to meaning that the social researcher must grasp if she is to explain the social actions she is interested in.

Finally, Dilthey maintained that to interpret the meanings that gave a certain historical era its structure, the investigator had to use general concepts, even if the object of his investigations remained what Weber called a “historical individual,” which is to say, a particular complex of meanings that is not repeated anywhere else in history. Thus, in Dilthey’s work, we find the outline of a dialectic between lived experience and highly generalized theory as the key to producing valid knowledge of history (1976, 187–8). He thus holds steadfastly to the possibility that the investigator can, and should, attain a certain degree of epistemic privilege,² by making a distinction between an everyday understanding and the “higher” understanding that produces knowledge in the human sciences.⁵

Philosophical Hermeneutics

Dilthey wanted to demonstrate how scientific knowledge of history was possible. For him, hermeneutics was primarily a textual methodology that, when transferred to the discipline of history, could deploy general or universal concepts to make historical times and places far removed comprehensible. In the 20th century, however, Martin Heidegger recast hermeneutics as a philosophical approach for interrogating the meaning of Being. Heidegger’s student, Hans-Georg Gadamer, would join his teacher in working through this new, overly philosophical, turn in hermeneutics.

In the Introduction to Being and Time, Heidegger presents his philosophy as a “hermeneutic phenomenology” of “fundamental ontology” (1996, 33). Thus Heidegger distances himself from the particular epistemological concerns of
any one academic discipline and especially from the social sciences. His broader question is: what is the meaning of Being? Since meaning entails interpretation, he describes his philosophy as hermeneutical. However, there is a key difference between Heidegger and Dilthey’s theories of interpretation. For Dilthey, hermeneutics is a systematic rule-based art for obtaining knowledge of something. For Heidegger, hermeneutics involves a much more passive process of letting Being speak for itself — Heidegger’s technical definition of phenomenology is letting the concealed disclose itself through appearance, which Heidegger hopes Being will do for philosophers with the right hermeneutic orientation.

Hermeneutics, then, serves the philosophical function of determining the right posture that would enable Being’s unconcealment. Thus for Heidegger, understanding is a matter of finding the right presuppositions that adequately fit with the “thing-in-itself.” In Heidegger’s view, an existential analysis of the human being will function as the pre-understanding necessary to interrogate the meaning of Being. A sort of ontological hermeneutic circle is at work throughout *Being and Time*; to understand Being we must develop the pre-understanding humans already have of beings (Division I) and then develop the temporality of the human-being as the horizon for Being’s self-disclosure (Division II). This ontologization of the hermeneutic circle leads Heidegger to analyze the practice of pre-understanding in humans, that is, the prepositional structure of all practical understanding, what is also translated as the “fore-structure of understanding.”

Heidegger relates understanding to the situatedness of human beings in the world and their practical projects within the world. This theoretical move — to the practical, perhaps never-quite-articulated way in which human beings know how to hammer a nail or how to throw a baseball — has had a deep effect on twentieth century philosophy and social theory. Thinkers as different as Richard Rorty, Stanley Fish, and Pierre Bourdieu could be said to have Heideggerian strands to their thinking insofar as they find human practices irreducible to the rules they supposedly follow, or the logics that supposedly support them.

But what Heidegger does for the hermeneutic tradition in particular is add the level of situational meaning to an interpretive theoretical framework — an idea anticipated in some of Georg Simmel’s work, but never fully connected, in 19th century hermeneutics, to the kinds of structural “objectifications” of human life that so interested Dilthey. Heidegger leaves Schleiermacher behind: in philosophical hermeneutics the problematic of understanding has shifted from the author’s experience behind a text to the practical tacit intelligence exercised by human beings in situations. He thus shifts from a historical hermeneutics of objectifications to an ontological hermeneutics of practical understanding. Heidegger seeks to show how humans use everyday tools pre-reflectively, i.e. before a conceptual subject-object division ever emerges. Prac-

tical understanding, then, is an ability possessed by human beings and exercised in all situated action.

For the social sciences at least, what Heidegger suggests is a hermeneutics of everyday life, and many contemporary theorists have been influenced by his assertion that humans in the world are always already exercising understanding. This has two implications. Methodologically, it confirms a fundamental difference between social and natural science — by studying humans, social researchers are interpreting interpreters. Analytically, it suggests a helpful distinction in sociological hermeneutics between situational meaning and cultural or systemic meaning. This type of situationally dependent meaning could also be called performative meaning because elements of a situation only acquire meaning through their relation to the social performance of which they are a part (though, as cultural sociology is quick to point out, performances tend to be iterative and call upon wider codes and systemic meanings). Thus we suggest that any hermeneutic sociology needs to take into account at least two types of meaning: not only codes and narratives that make up culture, but also the situational meaning that emerges from practical involvement in the world and social interactions.

Hans-Georg Gadamer (2004 [1960]) takes Heidegger’s meditations on the situatedness of human action, and reappplies them to Schleiermacher’s original problem — the investigator confronted with a text she does not yet fully understand. He thus develops a broad meta-theoretical framework for knowledge and an enduring protest against basing the human sciences on the natural sciences. According to Gadamer, Dilthey was still too seduced by the natural sciences in his concerns with empirical epistemology and inductive methodology. Instead, Gadamer connects the interpretation of texts to a different model of truth: experiencing a work of art. Truth, as experienced in the work of art, is not an object that becomes known through method. Instead, truth is an event that absorbs the subject in its own world-disclosure.

Gadamer defines understanding as the experience of a “fusion of horizons” between the present horizon of the interpreter and the world encountered in the text. To say that both the interpreter and the text have a distinct horizon is another way of saying that they both are situated in a specific context and their meaning — and claim to understanding and truth — is shaped by that context. Gadamer’s notion of horizons leads him to reject the “Enlightenment’s prejudice against prejudice,” which he finds not only in naturalism and positivism, but also in the German historical school and its methodologists (2004, 273). The traditional prejudices that situate the interpreter make up the specific horizon of the present, and Gadamer states, “to try to escape from one’s own concepts in interpretation is not only impossible but manifestly absurd. To interpret means precisely to bring one’s own preconceptions into play so that the text’s meaning can really be made to speak for us” (2004, 398). “Prejudice” could be better translated as “pre-judgments” in the sense of a preliminary con-
ception of the whole needed to understand the parts in a hermeneutic circle. This has radical implications for the interpretation of meaning for Gadamer. If it is not possible to neutrally excavate the original meaning of the text within its own historical horizon — due to the historicity of all understanding — then any interpretation will always be a blending of two different horizons. Thus, for Gadamer, meaning is co-determined by elements of the world of the text and by the historically-conditioned consciousness of the present reader. 13

As Susan Hekman (1984) has argued, Gadamer articulates some very broad meta-theoretical ideas that fit well with a hermeneutic approach to social science. His fundamental idea — that understanding involves a “fusion of horizons” — correctly identifies the deep symmetry of knowledge in the human sciences, in which human subjects create knowledge about other, already knowledgeable, hermeneutic subjects. Hermeneutic sociology thus depends on the development of knowledge in a symmetric relationship between the investigator’s meaningful context and the meaningful context of the humans whose actions she is interpreting (Reed 2010). However, the way Gadamer describes this relationship is ultimately insufficient for social science because he tends to conflate many different kinds of fore-understanding under his category of prejudice. 14 Gadamer packs into “historical prejudices” or “prejudgments” all aspects of the investigator’s meaning-bound life experience. But perhaps the social theories developed in dialogue with colleagues are a different sort of meaning than the reinvented traditions that give religious experience coherence, or the authority of a technical expert who we rely on when using an elevator. 15 Is it not possible that we judge theories based upon their resourcefulness for constructing valid interpretive explanations and how such explanations do or do not render action intelligible by providing adequate interpretation at the level of meaning and the level of cause (Weber 1978, 10–1)?

Gadamer, then, poses the problem of the context of the interpreter, but does not solve it. We think this is because, in the end, Gadamer’s theory of understanding is actually rather one-way: despite a co-determination of meaning, the crux of understanding focuses on how the reader is addressed by the text and how the reader applies the aesthetic truth-events made by the text to her present horizon. Gadamer’s theory of application as essential to understanding is never reversed, say, for the application of carefully crafted theories to the world of the text, a reversal that would open the door to the possibility of social explanation.

The Metaphor of the Text or Cultural Hermeneutics

To summarize, Dilthey took the textual methodologies of hermeneutics and applied them to history and proposed that the human studies are possible precisely because the inner, lived experiences of human subjects are mediated by structures of meaning that span time and space. Heidegger pointed to the way in which meaning was not just encoded into culture, but ontologically present in situations and in the practical, temporal understandings of the human beings who act in them. Gadamer pointed to just how sharp the break must be between natural and social science, because of how the symmetry problem affects the nature of truth in the latter. But, for hermeneutics to really become an epistemic frame for social research, the following problem must be directly addressed: why should these textual methodologies be useful for studying — and explaining — social action? It is to this question that some of the most innovative theoretical work associated with the “cultural turn” is addressed.

Paul Ricoeur’s work on hermeneutics and the human sciences transitions away from existential concerns, and towards a concern with history, society, and action. 16 In his work, the break between speech and writing is used as leverage to push the study of action into a new phase. Any written text, Ricoeur explains, is defined by its distance or distanciation from spoken dialogue. 17 For instance, in a conversation between speakers, meaning has an immediate character because “the subjective intention of the speaking subject and the meaning of the discourse overlap each other in such a way that it is the same thing to understand what the speaker means and what his discourse means” (1981, 200). If a misunderstanding occurs in a conversation, a round or two of question and answer is usually enough to restore understanding (of course, not always). In the case of written discourse however, the addressee can no longer regulate the transmission of meaning in this way through more interlocution. Not only is the potential audience widely opened through writing’s fixation of discourse, but the inherent polysemy in language — how words and sentences can have multiple meanings — cannot be immediately restricted and the intended meaning can no longer as easily be determined through contextualization (1981, 44). As the context of the reader departs from the context of the author, the intended univocal meaning becomes more equivocal. Pace Gadamer, for textual understanding, the conversational metaphor of dialogue loses its coherence because “with writing, the conditions of direct interpretation through the interplay of question and answer, hence through dialogue, are no longer fulfilled” (1981, 45).

In his well-known essay The Model of the Text, Ricoeur (1981) argues that valid knowledge about social action can be obtained by treating action as a text-analogue and using hermeneutic methods of understanding. Ricoeur accepts Weber’s definition of social action as subjectively meaningful and as the proper object of social scientific knowledge and explanation. The essay is dedicated, then, to strengthening the argument that action can indeed be understood and interpreted like a text. The success of this argument depends, for Ricoeur, on demonstrating the similar constitutive features of both texts and action. 18 Let us take a closer look at this argument.

First, Ricoeur argues that both actions and texts are inherently meaningful
objects of analysis—they come to the analysis with meanings that are already there. The references for this argument are many, but in addition to Max Weber, Ricoeur points to the speech-act theory of J. L. Austin and John Searle to argue that actions are only actions insofar as they communicate some sort of meaning. In addition, action can have unintended effects much like the texts can have meanings not consciously intended by their author. Texts are semantically autonomous, as are actions historically autonomous, from their authors. The meaning of texts and actions can multiply, shift, and change—as well as sediment and become tremendously powerful in ways not intended—as history proceeds. Both texts and actions are plurivocal, but this plurivocality is limited by their reception in specific historical contexts.

Methodologically then, the interpretation of action is not altogether unlike literary criticism or structural linguistics, fields which offer advantageous methods to social science in Ricoeur’s assessment. Ricoeur’s ground for comparison here is how methods for understanding both texts and actions depend upon some detachment of meaning from the event of its instantiation. The written text fixes meaningful discourse (Dilthey’s objectification), that later readers can then encounter. The study of action also relies upon a form of objectification mediating meaning, not between the writer and the reader but between the actor and the social scientist. Within Ricoeur’s argument by analogy, there is an implicit recognition that social scientists are always operating within a context of investigation different from the context of the social action to be explained. The meaningful nature of social action enables theorists to reflect on that meaning in a different context through an interpretive process much like translation.

Ricoeur has high hopes for the metaphor of the text. He writes that “the paradigm of reading, which is the counterpart of the paradigm of writing, provides a solution for the methodological paradox of the human sciences” (1981, 209). The paradox he is referring to is the traditional dichotomy between naturalistic explanation and interpretive understanding in the Geisteswissenschaften. Ricoeur thinks Dilthey conceded too much ground by letting the natural sciences monopolize the definition of causality and explanation (216). Though he is attempting to reconcile understanding and explanation within one sociological hermeneutic, Ricoeur does not wish to retain a classical conception of mechanical causality. Instead, “a new kind of explanatory attitude” emerges from the structuralist movement in literary criticism that can be extended to the task of social explanation. Ricoeur envisions structural analysis as a necessary stage of explanation within a larger hermeneutic project (218). Structuralism abstracts from experiences and processes to classify elements and types within a larger system thanks to general theoretical categories and concepts. But these abstractions are then re-integrated into a concrete interpretive explanation—a return to the specific meanings of a set of social actions that were efficacious at a specific time. Thus Ricoeur’s newly rendered hermeneutic achieves a dialectical synthesis between explanation and understanding in order to produce “depth interpretations” or “critical interpretations” (ibid.). In the terms we are developing here, we could say that interpretive explanation is what results when the situational and systemic meanings of social action are analyzed together.

We can note that one of the most well-known social scientists of the 20th century, Clifford Geertz, put this metaphor of action-as-text directly into practice. In his essay on the Balinese cockfight, Geertz wrote (1973, 448, our emphasis):

If one takes the cockfight, or any other collectively sustained symbolic structure, as a means of “saying something of something” (to invoke a famous Aristotelian tag), then one is faced with a problem not in social mechanics but social semantics. For the anthropologist, whose concern is with formulating sociological principles, not with promoting or appreciating cockfights, the question is, what does one learn about such principles from examining culture as an assemblage of texts?

Geertz’s meditations on the means by which an anthropologist can, and cannot, understand other cultures than his own are deeply connected to his own “readings” of different cultures in Indonesia and Morocco. In so far as Geertz’s research practice exemplifies the philosophical standpoint that Dilthey developed, one can think of Geertz as an anthropological application of Dilthey’s vision for the study of history (for an extended reflection on Geertz’s work and his interpretive perspective, see Reed 2008).

Thus in following Ricoeur we can say that the metaphor of the text is useful for social research because of the way in which it captures the structured, meaningful wholes in which persons, and their various social actions, are immersed. It is also useful because it suggests a link between the idea of a hermeneutic sociology and the practice of translation. Translations produce interpretations that can more or less preserve the spirit of a text; roughly the same meaning-system can be comprehended within a different language. The structure of translation as the go-between that connects two linguistic contexts not only offers suggestive parallels for interpretive social research, but also provides a definitive premise of hermeneutics: key elements of meaning can be transferred from one context to another even though translated meaning is never completely identical to original meaning.

Three Questions for Contemporary Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics, thus, articulates a set of precepts for social research and the use of theory in that research. The hermeneutic social investigator should, via the interpretation of meaning, become highly sensitive to historical and cultural difference, but in so doing she increases, rather than decreases, her
epistemic privilege and explanatory power. Her ability to do this is premised upon the way in which social meaning relies upon the inner, subjective lives of individuals but is not reducible to them. Rather, meaning has a structure, and creates a landscape upon which individuals must move, if they want to act. Construed so, hermeneutic social theory is poised to re-emerge as an influential frame for the human sciences. What needs to be done for this to be so? We pose three questions for hermeneutics.

1. What kind of meaning system is social theory?

Above, we criticized Gadamer’s hermeneutics for failing to differentiate between communally crafted concepts for social-scientific inquiry and the inevitable, particularistic biases affecting an individual’s pre-understanding. This raises the question of what exactly social theory is and how it works to further the goals of interpreting, explaining, and criticizing the social world. If theory is its own language game, what differentiates it from other language games? We think that the answer lies in considering how the abstractions and generalities of social theory can, when repeatedly confirmed as epistemologically useful, grant a certain amount of epistemic privilege to the investigator. Theory can help to create a distinctive fore-structure, which, when fused with the structures of meaning in the context of social action, makes knowledge deep, effective and explanatory.

A hermeneutic sociology will develop the idea that while there is no absolute ground from which to evaluate the “objectivity” of a social explanation, there are nonetheless better and worse explanations, much as there are better and worse translations of a text (but no perfect translation). A literal translation misses the point in a way a thin, anti-theoretical description does. Thus, hermeneutic sociology needs to develop an account of the vast pluralism of social theory wherein seemingly incommensurable pictures of social life are built up and used in different ways at different times by different investigators to deepen their understanding of this or that set of social actions. Perhaps this pluralistic promotion of multiple social theories is, in fact, a necessary prerequisite to good social research rather than a sad indication that sociology has not yet entered the time of "normal science" (Kuhn 1996).

2. What is the relationship between hermeneutics and critical theory?

As suggested earlier, recent developments in social and political theory indicate that hermeneutics can and has shed its conservative label. In one line of thought, Habermas has developed Gadamer’s notion of horizontal fusions into his own theory of rational dialogue. Within the inter-subjective practice of dialogue, several ethical assumptions are constantly being made that ensure the felicitous transfer of meaning (unless the situation is affected by systematic distortions). Habermas wants to build a more robust normative-critical theory from these foundations in the universal nature of communication. This has been taken further by some of Habermas’s best interpreters, especially by the philosopher and feminist theorist Maeve Cooke (1994). However, contemporary hermeneutics has also developed an alternative framework to both Habermas’s universal discourse ethics and his well-known post-structuralist critics.21

In another line of thought, Georgia Warnke (1993a) finds an ally in hermeneutics for overcoming the false universalism of Habermas and others who also aspire to such foundationalist thought. Warnke develops a hermeneutic feminism (1993a, 92–7) that makes a hermeneutic justification for pluralism of valid interpretations. She defends a loose conception of tradition that is not static but itself constituted by pluralistic, moral arguments (that is, as opposed to tradition being defined by agreement and deference to authority). Hermeneutic feminism more than tolerates legitimate interpretive differences; it sees them as mutually productive and morally edifying. Warnke describes how a hermeneutic political philosophy promotes inclusive, multidimensional understanding and democratic deliberation.22 Michael Walzer (1987), another hermeneutic political theorist, likewise finds a democratic ethics in the pluralistic dimension of hermeneutics. He appropriates hermeneutics for the interpretive element in social criticism. Like Geertz, Walzer expands a “thick” and “thin” distinction to describe possible attitudes toward culture including moral judgments. Thin criticism, including all types of philosophical ethics, is unnecessarily detached and minimalist towards morality. In contrast, thick social criticism requires a hermeneutics that can extract ideas and principles already embedded in the local thicket of moral culture. Hence Walzer calls this local meaning-centered criticism immanent—it starts from and stays within a culture’s moral frameworks of belief.

3. Can a validity-seeking, historicist hermeneutics develop an analytics of social power?

This, in the end, will be the crucial question for hermeneutics, for so much of the most innovative theoretical development in the human sciences of the last fifty years has developed, to quote Susan Sontag, “against interpretation” (1961). Another way of saying this is that many contemporary readings of social theory would draw a bright line between the focus on “deep meaning” and the focus on “social power” (e.g. Asad 1993). There may be a variety of reasons for this, but one of them surely is the way Clifford Geertz and Michel Foucault are read as thinkers whose intellectual projects were radically different, even perhaps directly opposed, to each other. Though the differences in focus and concern of Foucault and Geertz are palpable, we dissent from the way in which these two thinkers have become iconic figures in post-positivist theory,
the one standing for critical theory, and the other for the ethnographic imagination.

In his descriptions of his archaeological and genealogical method, Foucault claimed to leave interpretation behind and insisted in a variety of ways that he was merely describing or setting out the workings of discourse and the intersections of truth and power (Foucault 1972, 135–211). Foucault has also criticized several tendencies of modern hermeneutics found especially in Freud and Heidegger. Foucault exposed Freud's hermeneutics of unconscious desire as a ruse of bio-power and an artifact of confessional technology (Foucault 1978). Foucault has also sought to historicize the primordial universalist ontology in Heidegger's philosophical hermeneutics (as well as Claude Levi-Strauss's universalist anthropology).

We understand these critiques to be sharp indictments of philosophical hermeneutics, but not as destructive of historical hermeneutics. We believe that close examination of Foucault's own empirical work reveals a deep hermeneutic sensitivity and an ability to ferret out the meanings of various actions, institutions, and practices. Thus we think that hermeneutics, as a program for social theory in the twenty-first century, is quite commensurate with the study of discourse, power and practice, properly understood. Another way of saying this is to suggest that the next step for social theories of power, will involve a re-engagement with and re-invention of the questions surrounding interpretation, explanation and the use of abstract theory. We can see the dawning of a new era of theory, which will leave the problematic of postmodernism behind. We hope that pluralistic hermeneutic sociology will lead the way in this renaissance.

Notes

1. Daniel Suler (2010) explains why this distinction does not make Dilthey a dualist contra Ricker: and others.

2. The neo-Kantian movement in 19th century German philosophy re-invigorated the subjective turn in epistemology by transposing Kant's focus on the universal-rational structures internal to the human mind into a method for examining value, historical particularity, and other concerns of the emerging human sciences. As a result of the influence of the philosophical language of the neo-Kantians, many early non-Marxist sociologists in Germany displayed a tendency towards what we would now call methodological individualism. Though it is by no means clear that Weber was himself a methodological individualist. Dilthey's defense of the more Hegelian notion of subjectivity or spirit anticipates the structuralist and post-structuralist theoretical influences on cultural sociology—in particular, the idea that the realm of value has a structural order of its own, being collective or cultural. See, for example, Charles Taylor's (1985) critique of modern positivism and behavioralism for a similar argument about the inter-subjective nature of meanings.

3. Arguing explicitly against Hegel, Dilthey writes, "But, today, the task is the reverse [of Hegel's]—to recognize the actual historical expressions as the true foundation of historical knowledge and to find a method of answering the question how universally valid knowledge of the historical world can be based on what is thus given" (1976, 195).

4. Exhibiting several intellectual tendencies shared with other more well-known classical sociologists, this quote fruitfully compares with later Durkheim on the autonomy of collective representations—a motif celebrated as the "autonomy of culture" by contemporary cultural sociology—and Weber's notion of the "spirit" of capitalism as a complex historical set of intelligible elements.

5. In the course of this chapter, we use the term "epistemic privilege" to describe the way in which, in our view, the hermeneutic investigator seeks to secure a sort of knowledge that is superior in its insight and rigor to everyday opinion. In particular, we expect hermeneutic investigation to produce knowledge that is empirically responsible and that can also access "deeper" explanatory truths about the social actions under study. In doing so, we believe we are hewing to Dilthey's original vision, but articulating it through concepts that were unavailable to him. More generally, the debates over epistemic privilege can be seen as having three main forms: one, that epistemic privilege is granted by the investigator following specific rules of inference from data; standpoint—where epistemic privilege is made possible, if not guaranteed, by the social position of the knower (e.g. the "standpoint of the proletariat" or "feminist standpoint"); and postmodernism—in which the very possibility of epistemic privilege is effaced in favor of a more contingent, intersectional, and playful understanding of the identities of knowing human beings and their claims (for this distinction between the three epistemologies, see Harding 1986).

Hermeneutics, in our view, shares with empiricism and standpoint theory the demand for empirical responsibility and, with recent renditions of standpoint theory (e.g. Wylie 2003), a non-reductive vision of the way in which the inclusion of various located perspectives on social life can enhance the range of proposed interpretations of a given phenomenon that an investigator considers. Ultimately, our view is that theory can indeed do a lot for epistemic privilege, but only if used in a way not consistent with naturalist or realist models that assimilate social knowledge into natural science.

6. Due to Dilthey's philosophy of life, the latter higher understanding always emerges from everyday understanding according to Dilthey. While a distinction between different types of understanding may be useful when analyzing the nature of social theory itself as a meaning-system (see our conclusion), Dilthey's positing of a universal second-order kind of relationship is in many cases doubtful, as when inheriting concepts from the social-scientific tradition.

7. While epistemology refers to how valid knowledge is obtained, ontology is the philosophical practice of making truth-claims about the generic being of things, humans and human nature, social facts, etc.

8. Thus, Heidegger is also distancing himself from Kant who thought that the "thing-in-itself," i.e. mind-independent reality, is inaccessible to human scientific reason. Heidegger is trying to move beyond all such subject-object dualisms in the history of metaphysics. By considering his hermeneutics to be a project in "fundamental ontology," Heidegger signals his desire to think through Being itself in a more original way than has ever been done. For Heidegger, this involves examining the temporal, practical and yet poetic nature of Being.

9. In addition to Simmel's well-known work on dyads and triads, see Simmel (1977).

10. Ricoeur summarizes this as a "shift in philosophical locus" in the history of hermeneutics, and that Heidegger "de-psychologizes" hermeneutics by recognizing the primacy of being before knowledge (1981, 56). While most social theorists no longer doubt this "primacy," the epistemological implications of Heidegger's criticisms are debatable.

11. See also Eliassoph and Lichterman (2003) for another rendering of this distinction.

12. Gadamer associates an overly objectivistic "historical consciousness" with Dilthey. Gadamer reads Dilthey as denying the historicality of all understanding, and in particular the historically-located investigator himself. However, recent commentators have criticized Dilthey by demonstrating that he was indeed aware of a sort of value-relevance of the historian. See especially Harrington (2001) for a critique of Gadamer's argument and the resultant misreading of Dilthey.

13. "The real meaning of a text, as it speaks to the interpreter, does not depend on the contingencies of the author and his original audience. It certainly is not identical with them, for it is always co-determined also by the historical situation of the interpreter" (Gadamer 2004, 296).
14. Habermas criticizes Gadamer for not considering the distinctive “fusion of horizons” between a natural language and a theoretical language in The Hermeneutic Claim to Universality (1990). This leads us to question the nature of social theory as a distinctive sort of meaning-system (see concluding section to this chapter).

15. The notion of authority and Gadamer’s normative safeguarding of it inevitably provoke concern about the relation between philosophical hermeneutics and politics. The debate, in so far as it does not revolve around specific biographical details of Gadamer’s academic trajectory, concerns whether the meaning of the terms authority and tradition in Gadamer’s work were close to their common usage, or in fact quite different. For us, even if Gadamer’s terms are interpreted liberally and granted their own Gadamerian usage, there is still the problem of differentiating theory as a different and perhaps unique element of the investigator’s meaningful context, a theoretical criticism somewhat autonomous from the political debate. See Warnek (2002) for a generous consideration of the implications of Gadamer’s ideas for ethics and politics.

16. On the other hand, a more recent attempt to bring philosophical hermeneutics back to social sciences is Anthony King’s The Structure of Social Theory (2004). King uses the ontologies of meaningful experience and shared understanding present in Gadamer and Heidegger as an antidote to the dualistic, structure v. action dichotomy that governs so much contemporary social theory.

17. Both speech and written texts though are forms of discourse for Ricoeur. Discourse here is simply meaningful language.

18. Ricoeur sets up the analogy between texts and actions as follows: “My claim is that action itself, action as meaningful, may become an object of science, without losing its character of meaningfulness, through a kind of objectification similar to fixation which occurs in writing.... This objectification is made possible by some inner traits of the action which are similar to the structure of the speech-act and which make doing a kind of utterance. In the same way as the fixation by writing is made possible by a dialectical of intentional exteriorisation immanent to the speech-act itself, a similar dialectic within the process of transformation prepares the detachment of meaning of the action from the event of the action” (1981, 203–4).

19. Semantics is term from linguistics that designates the meaning dimension of language and not its form (the latter is studied as syntax).

20. On the reconciliation between understanding and explanation in the social sciences, also see Apel (1987).

21. In On the Logic of the Social Sciences, Jürgen Habermas (1988, 143–51) also connects hermeneutics to the experience of translation. Habermas uses this analogy in a polemic against the grammatical closure logically entailed by Wittgenstein’s philosophy of “forms of life.”

22. For a more developed account of how hermeneutic sociology can connect with and reorient critical theory, see Reed (2007).

23. See Warnek (1993b) on how this hermeneutic political philosophy engages other political theorists including Habermas, Rawls, and Taylor.

24. This was a point taken up in much detail and to great effect in that keystone of Foucault’s comment, Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics by Dreyfus and Rabinow (1983).

References


