Hermeneutics and History
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Summary

According to the contemporary hermeneutical school the distinguishing feature of
the humanities is the capability of the inquirer to communicate with the object of his
inquiry. This idea underlies K.-O. Apel’s model for the humanities adopted from
psycho-analytical therapy. It is argued (1) that there is no sense in which the object of
the historical inquiry can be regarded as a Kommunikationspartner of the historian; and (2)
that when the traditional Verstehen doctrine is re-interpreted counterfactually (e.g.,
“If I were Caesar, then . . .” substantiates my explanations of Caesar’s actions), then the
document has an acceptable application to history and the charge of psychologism is
removed.

The status and methodology of the humanities (or the Geisteswissen-
schaften) are of a perennial philosophical interest. An interesting theory
which has been recently advanced in a series of essays by Karl-Otto Apel1
deserves, so it seems to me, a close examination. This theory claims that the
method of interpretation used in psycho-analysis for therapeutical ends may
serve as a model for the humanities, or at least for an important sub-class of
them, comprising the social sciences and history, which I will call here
“the cultural sciences”. Apel’s theory may be taken as an expression of the
twentieth century hermeneutical school, which should be distinguished
from the hermeneutical movement of the nineteenth century. As we shall
see, Apel incorporates into his theory some of the basic principles of
contemporary hermeneutics. His views about psycho-analysis are shared
to a large extent by Jürgen Habermas.2

One might, of course, ask whether Apel’s characterization of psycho-
analytical methods is correct.3 This question is of great importance for all

1 (a) Karl-Otto Apel, ‘Die Entfaltung der “sprachanalytischen” Philosophie und das
Probleme der “Geisteswissenschaften”’, Philosophsches Jahrbuch 72 (1965) translated into
English (by H. Holstelie) as Analytic Philosophy of Language and the Geisteswissenschaften,
will be to the English translation; (b) ‘Sziwentifk, Hermeneutik, Ideologiele-Kritik: Entwurf
einer Wissenschaftslehre in erkenntnisanthropologischer Sicht’, Man and World, 1 (1968)
37–63; (c) ‘The A Priori of Communication and the Foundation of the Humanities’,
2 Jürgen Habermas, Erkenntnis und Interesse, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main (1968);
English translation (by J. J. Shapiro) as Knowledge and Human Interests, Heinemann,
London, (1972); references will be made to the English translation.
3 This has been questioned by Lauri Rauhala in ‘The Hermeneutic Metascience of
those who are concerned with the methodological features of psycho-
analysis. However, it will not be dealt with here. My discussion is rather
concerned with the conclusions for the cultural sciences which may be
drawn from Apel’s characterization of psycho-analysis.

My special concern will, ultimately, be the status of history. History is
used by Apel (as by many others) as a test case for examining the basic
tenets of Neo-positivism (or the Unified Science Movement as he calls it)
and one of his main reasons for rejecting these tenets is their failure to give
plausible account of the methods used by historians. I will argue that the
application of the psycho-analytical model to history raises unsolvable
difficulties. And in making, thus, history again a test case for the tenability
of the model I will suggest that its adequacy is quite questionable.

The twentieth century hermeneutical approach seems to be a definite
alternative to the much criticized traditional doctrine of Verstehen. My
criticisms of Apel’s thesis will finally be supplemented by a re-interpretation
of the Verstehen conception which avoids, so it seems to me, the discredited
psychologism of the traditional doctrine.

I

In the first place it should be made clear that the thesis discussed here is
suggested by Apel in connection with another, which he calls “The Com-
plementary Thesis”. Apel rejects what he describes as the methodological
solipsism of the neo-positivistic school, and argues that description and
explanation of natural phenomena by scientists presuppose communication
among scientists. Intersubjective communication is, first of all, the actual
use of language by members of the same community. Language must not,
however, be considered in isolation. It reflects its users’ conceptual scheme
and world outlook. Being a member of a linguistic community is thus a
necessary condition for understanding the meanings and intentions as
expressed in the actions, especially the speech acts, of other members of the
community. Scientific research can be undertaken only in a community of
scientists who understand, and are capable of communicating with, one
another. Only within such “Community of Interpretation” is there any sense
in raising questions and asking for explanations. Thus the contrast between
explanation and understanding is only apparent and they are in fact comple-
mentary. The natural sciences presuppose intersubjective understanding
within a community of scientists and one is thus entitled to speak of the
A-priori of Linguistic Communication.

In other words: Apel points out the so-called “pragmatic aspects” of
explanations and he criticizes the Unified Science Movement for disregarding
them for the very reason that they are pragmatic. But it must be noted
that even according to Apel science presupposes communication and under-
standing but does not involve them.

The situation is, however, radically different, when the cultural sciences
are under consideration. Here the scientific research itself involves com-