Notes on Anthropological Understanding of the Others

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Abstract

If anthropology is a discipline of understanding the others, then, fieldwork is the bridge between the anthropologist and the others. Nevertheless, fieldwork had long been a tool or a technique for collecting ethnographic data before B. K. Malinowski formulated its epistemological foundation in “Argonauts of the Western Pacific” that was published in 1922. In the “Introduction” of “Argonauts of the Western Pacific”, Malinowski suggested a biological paradigm for the anthropological fieldwork: skeleton, flesh and blood, and spirit. Malinowski also suggested us that the anthropologists had to learn the native’s language in order to get closer to the native’s mind that is the spirit of the others.

Malinowski’s formulation of “native point of view” was then re-oriented in 1966 by C. Geertz. For Geertz, we understand the others because we experience—near to the others if we can interpret the “meaning” that is expressed in the native’s social discourse or social action. Geertz termed the kind of understanding as “empathetic understanding” or “empathy” in short. Geertz’ notion of “experience” and “empathy” in fact comes from W. Dilthey’s theory, the founder of modern hermeneutics. Dilthey’s hermeneutics started with the problem of “how can we understand the others?”

Dilthey’s theory of understanding in fact is an expansion of common mind or familiar acquaintance. Dilthey was not in wonderment about the plurality of human consciousness. He was blinded with the qualitative variations of "self" in different civilizations and sheltered from considering other life-worlds. This misconception of human nature leads to Dilthey’s misformulations of human understanding. In this perspective, Dilthey’s theory needs to be reformulated if it is applied to understand other life-worlds.

In conclusion, I suggest a further understanding, which I term "double consciousness" and "ideal unit", to illuminate the basis of hermeneutical circle or spiral in Dilthey’s theory of understanding. Because relation and structure always have priority in Dilthey’s thinking, a complete picture of his hermeneutics demands a look at how he conceptualizes the relation and the structure of the hermeneutical circle. These two concepts (relation and structure) are actually two faces of one coin. Thus, a re-interpretation of Dilthey’s hermeneutics suggests a double problematic: that of knowing thyself (how we know ourselves) and that of knowing others (how the others know themselves). Therefore, acquiring an understanding of other cultural worlds becomes an important task for the anthropology of experience.

Keywords: anthropological understanding, hermeneutics, the others

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1. Introduction: From Malinowski

If anthropology is a discipline of understanding the others, then, fieldwork is the bridge between the anthropologist and the others. Nevertheless, fieldwork had long been a tool or a technique for collecting ethnographic data before B. K. Malinowski formulated its epistemological foundation in “Argonauts of the Western Pacific” that was published in 1922. Before Malinowski, anthropological fieldwork was like geological fieldwork or geographical fieldwork or botanical fieldwork. The others were just the “object” for collecting or studying. Anthropologists collected ethnographic information according to the “Notes and Queries.” In other words, there was no “subjectivity” at all for the others.

What did Malinowski contribute to our discussion of “subjectivity” of the others? It is because of his famous notion of “from the native point of view.” In the “Introduction” of “Argonauts of the Western Pacific”, Malinowski suggested a biological paradigm for the anthropological fieldwork: skeleton, flesh and blood, and spirit. Skeleton is the analogy for collecting concrete data, that is, the method of statistic documentation by concrete evidence. Flesh and blood is the analogy for the participation in the life world of the others, that is, the imponderabilia of actual life. Finally, Malinowski suggested us that the anthropologists had to learn the native’s language in order to get closer to the native’s mind, that is the spirit of the others. (Malinowski 1922)

In short, Malinowski set up a model of “from the native point of view” as the highlight of anthropological fieldwork. Thus, the “subjectivity” of the others was first to be found in the native terms or language that expressed the native’s thoughts. The dichotomy of the emic approach and the etic approach became unceasing disputes among the anthropologist, such as the cognitive anthropologist’s domain analysis, Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, and etc.

2. Geertz’ Interpretive Anthropology

Malinowski’s formulation of “native point of view” was finally re-oriented in 1966 by C. Geertz’ “On the Nature of Anthropological Understanding” that was first published in the “Journal of American Anthropologist.” (Geertz 1983) After depicting three different connotations of the self in three different societies, Morocco, Java, and Bali, Geertz suggested a model of “experience-near” and “experience-distant” to solve the longstanding arguments between the emic and the etic. The “subjectivity” of the others was then interpreted in terms of “experience.” For Geertz, we understand the others because we experience-near to the others if we can interpret the “meaning” that is expressed in the native’s social discourse or social action. Geertz termed the kind of understanding as “empathetic understanding” or “empathy” in short.

Geertz’ notion of “experience” and “empathy” in fact comes from W. Dilthey’s theory, the founder of modern hermeneutics. W. Dilthey’s hermeneutics started with the problem of “how can we understand the others?” Dilthey, as a follower of neo-Kantian, agreed upon that human being is a conscious animal. That is, man knows, or is aware of, his own existence. And through this nature, man can express his inner experience into a kind of understanding that becomes “an” experience. That is, one understands the other by the expression of the other’s inner experience. Thus, expression/experience/understanding becomes a hermeneutical circle that forms the preliminary stage of human understanding. (Dilthey 1976)
Yet, Dilthey's theory of understanding did not stop here. He further proposed a second stage of human understanding, that is, the understanding by category or concepts. Dilthey found that man extracts experience into concepts or category. In other words, man can understand abstract meaning in terms of concepts, a kind of analogical understanding. Thereafter, man is capable of unlimited understanding of the others that brings to the empathy of the others. Here, empathy is the higher stage of human understanding. If it is so, then, "empathy" can be understood as "on (em/en) the way (path) to the other." Can we really reach the mind of the other? Or can we completely understand the mind of the other? From Geertz' notion of "experience-near & experience-distant", it is obvious that we can reach, near or distantly, the mind of the others, but not completely the same as the way the others understand themselves. Then, what is the nature of anthropological understanding of the others? I shall explore further Dilthey's theory in the following.

3. Dilthey's Theory of Understanding the Other

Dilthey's thesis on understanding includes both "ordinary understanding" which refers to a common awareness obtained by familiarity or acquaintance, and "methodical understanding" which involves scientific inquiry within human studies and distinguishes explanations from causal laws. (Ermarth 1978:245) His theory of understanding is also based on the continuity and retroductive relation between these two forms of understanding. The hidden assumption is "the self-sameness of individuals." That is, "a basic experience of what men have in common permeates the whole conception of the mind-constructed world; through it consciousness of a unitary self and similarity with others, identity of human nature and individuality are linked. This is the presupposition for understanding." (Dilthey 1976:186)

Therefore, what men have in common becomes the starting point for further human studies and what we are familiar with becomes the base line for further understanding. Dilthey's theory of understanding in fact is an expansion of common mind or familiar acquaintance. Obviously, Dilthey was not in wonderment about the plurality of human consciousness. He was blinded with the qualitative variations of "self" in different civilizations and sheltered from considering other life-worlds. This misconception of human nature leads to Dilthey's misformulations of human understanding, such as: analogical understanding, empathetical understanding and performative
understanding. In this perspective, Dilthey's theory needs to be reformulated if it is applied to understand other life-worlds. Before any critique, the following discussion will portray Dilthey's theory of human understanding in his own terms.

3-1. Analogical understanding

Dilthey believed that human understanding at first originated from the needs of communicating with others in practical life, i.e. in order to know the needs of others. (Dilthey 1976:220) This type of understanding is rooted in the principle of similarity or familiarity by which the individual understands others based on what he himself is familiar with. Another characteristic of analogical understanding is that it is "mediated by the regular relation which holds between the expression and that which is expressed in it" (Dilthey 1977:125), i.e. understanding the meaning of expressions according to conventional context of reference.

Accordingly, analogical understanding is characterized by self-centeredness and simple-mindedness. Dilthey also argued that man understands himself and the outside world through more complex ways of understanding, and that the latter ways become possible only through the intersections of the common features of individuals. Dilthey maintained that man is qualitatively similar, but, quantitatively different. While the qualitative sameness gives human beings a capacity to understand each other, the quantitative differentiation creates an infinite world of human understanding. The quantitative differentiation is built upon the base of qualitative sameness. Dilthey called this type of apprehension an elementary form of understanding from which all the higher forms of understanding are derived.

3-2. Empathetical understanding

The task of human understanding also involves a dialectical process of synthesis and anti-synthesis between the self and the others, the parts and the whole, and the known and the unknown. The transformation from one state to another state or the transposition from one's own self to others' selves is a fluid, ever changing event. Thus the possibility of transformation and transposition can be realized through the objectifications of mind or expressions of life. These objectifications or expressions are related to the individual's experience and the associated historical-cultural context. As these objectifications or expressions are structurally inter-related and inter-connected to one another, the possibility of transformation and transposition also demands the individual's inner experience to grasp these structural connections and to unfold the latter. The state of mind involved in this higher form of understanding is what is called "empathy" (actually this is a "false empathy"). In Dilthey's words:

The approach of higher understanding to its object is determined by its task of discovering a vital connection in what is given. This is only possible if the context which exists in one's own experience . . . This state of mind involved in the task of understanding, we call empathy, be it with a man or a work. (Dilthey 1976:226)

The process of empathetical understanding entails three necessary conditions: (1) a set of structured objectifications within a socio-historical-cultural context; (2) transformation and transposition of the self to other selves according to the previous understanding, i.e. the presupposed understanding (i.e. the wrongly misconceptualized analogical understanding); and (3) the presupposed experience before understanding, i.e. the accumulated experiences necessary for
gaining insight into the structural relations inherent in the expression. The processes among experience, expression, and understanding develop into the hermeneutical circle in Dilthey's theory of human studies.

3-3. Performative understanding

However, Dilthey's concept of hermeneutics did not stop at empathetical understanding. Dilthey proposed another level of understanding which Dilthey termed "the highest form of understanding in which the totality of mental life is active --- re-creating or re-living." (Dilthey 1976:226) This highest form of understanding reveals the deeper level of the hermeneutical circle which transforms the totality of life, i.e. the meaning of life, from the empathetical level to the performative level through re-experiencing or re-living through. I'll term this understanding on performative level as "performative understanding" at this moment.

"Re-experience" (Nacherleben), an unfinished concept developed by Dilthey, is the key to apprehend performative understanding. Although Dilthey did not use the term of "performance" or "performative," he was apparently interested in the artistic expression of drama, poetry, literary works or other works of art. It can be debated which class of expressions in human studies Dilthey deemed most crucially related to Nacherleben. Yet, most scholars agree that Dilthey did not intend to put human studies into any single class. During his lifetime Dilthey did not come up with a word to include all three classes into a single whole. "Performance," as I believe and agree with V. Turner, is the best word to depict Dilthey's idea of action which, conditioned by feelings and thoughts, aims at self-realization and self-overcoming. (Turner 1979 & 1986)

As Dilthey pointed out, moving from analogical understanding to the higher types depends on the fact that "the understanding departs from the normal connection of the expression of life and spiritual meaning which is expressed in it." (Dilthey 1977:128) A full understanding essentially rests on how we follow the order of the events and the meaning of the content, i.e. "re-create and re-live what is alien and past." (Dilthey 1976:226-228) Dilthey's problem of distance is related to Ricoeur's and Gadamer's discussions on "alienating distanciation" (i.e. historical alienation and cultural distance). (Gadamer 1975; Ricoeur 1982[1981]) While Ricoeur conceptualizes his solution in terms of appropriation, Dilthey proposed the idea of "re-living through" or "re-experiencing."

For Dilthey, re-experiencing evokes personal aspirations of wishes, desires, feelings, perceptions, images, imaginations, etc., leading to "innumerable paths open into the past and into the dreams of the future; innumerable trains of thought proceed from the words that are read." (Dilthey 1977:132) Re-experiencing opens up a world of all possibilities to be explored and understood. And re-experiencing requires actions that allow us to "re-live through" what is alien and in the past, directed at actualizing the meaning of life. The actions of re-experiencing are eventually performances; thus, the understanding that results from these actions is performative in nature.

In summary, Dilthey's hermeneutics begins at the analogical level of familiar acquaintance, develops into empathetical level of experience, expression and understanding, and transcends both at performative level of re-experiencing. Furthermore, there exists another hermeneutical circle between analogy, empathy, and re-experience.

The analogical level of hermeneutics is based on a principle of similarity or familiarity from the standpoint of one's own self. The empathetical level of hermeneutical circle strives for "a rediscovery of the I through the Thou", and is characterized by a dialectical process of experience,
expression and understanding. At the performative level, the hermeneutical circle transforms understanding (the theory) into action (practice). It aims at a total understanding of humanity and embraces the human being as a whole. What was outlined in theory can now be fulfilled in practice. This process goes beyond the present human reality or humanity through performative understanding, or re-experiencing.

For Dilthey, the desire to understand never ceases. Understanding becomes itself understood and turns into analogy for further understanding. Once again analogy forms the base of empathy; the latter directs towards re-experience. Analogy, empathy and re-experience are linked; the hermeneutical circle thus expands our understanding and might be more properly called a hermeneutical spiral.

Apparently, Dilthey's theory of understanding aims at transcending human understanding at a theoretical level and transforming it on an actional level. Unfortunately, Dilthey was not sensitive to the qualitative variation of human nature and not aware of what we now call insider's point of view (emic) and outsider's point of view (etic). The analogical understanding is eventually self-centered or ethnocentric. The empathetical understanding, which is based on the analogical understanding, is a "false empathy." "The rediscovery of I through the Thou" is in fact an illusion in Dilthey's hermeneutics. Another difficulty is that we can not put ourselves in the same cultural and historical context of the people under study. In other words, we can not actually "re-experience" what have been lived through (our own experiences and those of other worlds) because the experience doesn't repeat itself and is bounded with the qualitative variation of human nature and the particularity of historical-cultural context.

4. Conclusion: Double Consciousness and Ideal Unit

The above exploration of Erlebnis, Ausdruck and Verstehen illuminates the basis of hermeneutical circle or spiral in Dilthey's theory of understanding. (Yet, it needs to be understood at not embracing the problem of plurality or other worlds.) Because relation and structure always have priority in Dilthey's thinking, a complete picture of his hermeneutics demands a look at how he conceptualizes the relation and the structure of the hermeneutical circle. These two concepts (relation and structure) are actually two faces of one coin. My interpretation of Dilthey's theory suggests a still further understanding, which I term "double consciousness" and "ideal unit."

4-1. Double consciousness

As discussed earlier, Dilthey constantly talked about "double relation" in experience, expression, and understanding. In experience the double relation is the unitary relationship between "I am" and "I have", which unites into a "being which possesses itself." In expression the double relation exists between the expression (the act) and what is expressed (the content), which is unified by the volitional act that is composed of inner and outer parts. Finally, the double relation in understanding expresses a mutual dependence between experience and understanding, i.e., "understanding presupposes experience and experience only becomes knowledge of life if understanding leads us from the narrowness and subjectivity of experience to the whole and the general." (Dilthey 1976:187-188)

In short, Dilthey suggested that experience and experiencing are not separate. Neither are expression and expressing, knowledge and knowing. Therefore, there is a double relation between knowledge and action, knowing and acting. We are knowing and acting at the same time.
According to Dilthey, we start with our inner experience and search for possible understanding of the outside world external to our consciousness; the representations and interpretations of the external world are colored by state of consciousness, which entails an awareness of the relations of the "I" and the "Thou", the parts and the whole, the inner and the outside. This kind of consciousness or awareness is essential in the process of hermeneutical circle and may be termed "double consciousness" --- that is, we are constantly aware of a forward and backward relationship, or a dual direction, in the movement of our consciousness.

4-2. Ideal Unit

According to Dilthey, the way we understand ourselves and the world around us depends on the way we perceive the structured relations between our "natural attitudes" or "standpoints of life." And "values" are nothing but shaped abstractions of these attitudes and standpoints of life. As Dilthey said: "value is the abstract expression for the attitude described." (Dilthey 1976:242)

In addition, our conscious knowledge of experience involves a "total conception" involving a series of images (i.e. the cognitions of objects) in terms of thoughts or concepts. These images link together into a system of inner relations and form the hub of our conscious experience. Combining cognition of object (thought) and standpoint of life (value, attitude), our awareness of experience becomes a meaningful whole for us to apprehend and abstract relevant structural relations. The apprehension and abstraction of these structural experiential relations gives rise to the so-called "idea." Thus, the idea consists of concept and value-laden attitude; it is a value-laden abstraction of the structural relations of life.

This value-laden abstraction becomes purpose when we realize our value of life through a series of volitional acts. The realization of an idea, through evaluation and action, embodies the meaning of life and becomes an ideal for our life. That is why Dilthey regarded the ideal as the highest level of consciousness and as the basis of life. (Dilthey 1976:138-139, 180-181) As the highest level of consciousness, ideals become basic units of understanding with a singular character which "is based on the structural system in which cognition of objects, values and purposes are related to each other." (Dilthey 1976:201) As the core of life, these ideals become the basic units of experience, i.e. an experience, with a unitary character aiming at "an independent existence and development of their own through the content, value and purpose which they realize." (Dilthey 1976:181) Thus, the basic unit for understanding is characterized by the double consciousness and consequently is an ideal unit consisting of ideas and acts.

Moreover, our ideals of life, through continuous selection or evaluation in terms of judging (pleasure or displeasure), enjoying (like or dislike) and approving (approval or disapproval), become typical expressions or objectifications of life which represent "an intensification of what is experienced" and are called "types" by Dilthey. (Dilthey 1976:138; 1985:116) Accordingly, these types will develop into a second level of the lived experience, called by Dilthey, "more general structural relationships." Through types we reach the last level of lived experience --- "schematism," which is "a context located in the course of a psychological development that shapes the unity of the life-unit." (Dilthey 1985:229)

In conclusion, Dilthey's hermeneutics aims at fulfilling human potentialities by knowing himself in order to reach the level of "normative freedom" or "ideal moral freedom" which, according to Bidney, "may be defined as action in accordance with a rational ideal of the good for man in society." (Bidney 1970 [1953]:11) In order to do so, Dilthey emphasizes the affective significance of life, or "a life of feeling" in Langer's terms (Langer 1953:372), because man in
concerned with inner well-being rather than with pure sensations or simple logic inferences. As both Langer and Geertz repeatedly stress, what we are fearful of and longing for is intermingled with what we have remembered and anticipated. (Langer 1953; Geertz 1973) It is the affective significance of life molded by fear and hope, memory and imagination that gives us a sense of the outside world around us.

Moreover, Dilthey frequently shows his concern about the unity, i.e. the totality, of life through his conceptualization of Erlebnis and Weltanschauung. An experience (Erlebnis) arises from our affective significance of life and becomes part of Weltanschauung of our understanding through providing us a meaningful framework to channel our life of feeling into natural attitudes with unique qualities. In this sense, Dilthey's hermeneutics deals with the intentionality of intentionality. We not only have knowledge of life, but we also acquire knowledge in life. We speak through something as we speak for something.

Yet, while Dilthey's framework opens up a new dimension of human studies, it also conceals our understanding with a false assumption, namely the common-mind assumption. There are two theses underlying this assumption. First, Dilthey perceives man as quantitatively different, but qualitatively the same being. Second, Dilthey suggests that all human understanding comes from the ordinary mind, i.e. inner reflexiveness of life-experience. I question the first implication but agree to the second one.

The thesis that man has the same human nature obscures our understanding of the plurality or the diversity of human constructed realities, i.e. other cultural worlds. This thesis is based on the uniformitarian viewpoint influenced by both the Enlightenment and the Romantic Age. It is understandable that the common mind can lead into a conclusion of analogical understanding. Unfortunately, the kind of empathetical understanding, which is built upon analogy, is a "false empathy" because it is egocentric or sociocentric or ethnocentric that we undermine the value of other cultural worlds. Because of its false empathy, it further puts us into a difficult position when we intend to "re-experience" the experiences of others.

However, we should not ignore the potential implied in the notions of empathy and re-experience. Dilthey's second thesis of common-mind assumption affirms the role of ordinary mind played in human understanding. This ordinary mind is bestowed with a capacity of self-reflexiveness that all men posses. It also has something to do with the notion of natural attitude or standpoint of life suggested in Erlebnis (an experience). Because of the accumulated or learned Erlebnisse, we form our natural attitudes and the latter become the basis of our ordinary mind. The accumulated experiences inevitably include learning from the others. Then, the problem of "know thyself" should expand to how do others know. As I have argued earlier, we know ourselves through knowing others and we know others through improving our self-knowledge. It is a problem of double consciousness. Yet, in order to learn from the others we need to "see" how the others know. The latter proposes another problematic, which is also of double consciousness, of how the others know themselves and the others.

In short, a re-interpretation of Dilthey's hermeneutics suggests a double problematic: that of knowing thyself (how we know ourselves) and that of knowing others (how the others know themselves). Therefore, acquiring an understanding of other cultural worlds becomes an important task for the anthropology of experience.
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