The Model of the Text:
Meaningful Action Considered as a Text

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My aim in this paper is to test an hypothesis which I will expound briefly.

I assume that the primary sense of the word “hermeneutics” concerns the rules required for the interpretation of the written documents of our culture. In assuming this starting point I am remaining faithful to the concept of Auslegung as it was stated by Wilhelm Dilthey; whereas Verstehen (understanding, comprehension) relies on the recognition of what a foreign subject means or intends on the basis of all kinds of signs in which psychic life expresses itself (Lebensäußerungen). Auslegung (interpretation, exegesis) implies something more specific: it covers only a limited category of signs, those which are fixed by writing, including all the sorts of documents and monuments which entail a fixation similar to writing.

Now my hypothesis is this: if there are specific problems which are raised by the interpretation of texts because they are texts and not spoken language, and if these problems are the ones which constitute hermeneutics as such, then the human sciences may be said to be hermeneutical (1) inasmuch as their object displays some of the features constitutive of a text as text, and (2) inasmuch as their methodology develops the same kind of procedures as those of Auslegung or text-interpretation.

Hence the two questions to which my paper will be devoted are: (1) To what extent may we consider the notion of text as a good paradigm for the so-called object of the social sciences? (2) To what extent may we use the methodology of text-interpretation as a paradigm for interpretation in general in the field of the human sciences?

In order to justify the distinction between spoken and written language, I want to introduce a preliminary concept, that of discourse. It is as discourse that language is either spoken or written.

Now what is discourse?

We shall not seek the answer from the logicians, not even from the exponents of linguistic analysis, but from the linguists themselves. Discourse is the counterpart of what linguists call language-systems or linguistic codes. Discourse is language-event or linguistic usage. This pair of correlative terms—system/event, code/message—has played a basic role in linguistics since it was introduced by Ferdinand de Saussure and Louis Hjelmslev. The first spoke of language (lange)—speech (parole), the second of schema—usage. We can also add competence—“performance,” in Chomsky’s language. It is necessary to draw all the epistemological consequences of such a duality, namely, that the linguistics of discourse has different rules than does the linguistics of language. It is the French linguist Emile Benveniste who has gone the furthest in distinguishing two linguistics. For him, these two linguistics are not constructed upon the same units. If the sign (phonological or lexical) is the basic unit of language, the sentence is the basic unit of discourse. Therefore it is the linguistics of the sentence which supports the theory of speech as an event. I will retain four traits from this linguistics of the sentence which will help me to elaborate the hermeneutic of the event and of discourse.

First trait: Discourse is always realized temporally and in a present, whereas the language system is virtual and outside of time. Emile Benveniste calls this the “instance of discourse.”

Second trait: Whereas language lacks a subject—in the sense that the question “Who is speaking?” does not apply at its level—discourse refers back to its speaker by means of a complex set of indicators such as the personal pronouns. We will say that the “instance of discourse” is self-referential.

Third trait: Whereas the signs in language only refer to other signs within the same system, and whereas language therefore lacks a world just as it lacks temporality and subjectivity, discourse is always about something. It refers to a world which it claims to describe, to express, or to represent. It is in discourse that the symbolic function of language is actualized.

Fourth trait: Whereas language is only the condition for communication for which it provides the codes, it is in discourse that all messages are exchanged. In this sense, discourse alone has not only a world, but an other, another person, an interlocutor to whom it is addressed.

These four traits taken together constitute speech as an event.

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But when I tell you this with the force of an order and not of a request, this is the illocutionary act. Finally, I can stir up certain effects like fear by the fact that I give you an order. These effects make my discourse act like a stimulus producing certain results. This is the perlocutionary act.

What is the implication of these distinctions for our problem of the intentional exteriorization by which the event surpasses itself in the meaning and lends itself to material fixation? The locutionary act exteriorizes itself in the sentence. The sentence can in effect be identified and re-identified as being the same sentence. A sentence becomes an e-nunciation (Aus-sage) and thus is transferred to others as being such-and-such a sentence with such-and-such a meaning. But the illocutionary act can also be exteriorized through grammatical paradigms (indicative, imperative, and subjunctive modes, and other procedures expressive of the illocutionary force) which permit its identification and re-identification. Certainly, in spoken discourse, the illocutionary force leans upon mimicry and gestural elements and upon the non-articulated aspects of discourse, what we call prosody. In this sense, the illocutionary force is less completely inscribed in grammar than is the propositional meaning. In every case, its inscription in a syntactic articulation is itself gathered up in specific paradigms which in principle make possible fixation by writing. Without a doubt we must concede that the perlocutionary act is the least inscribable aspect of discourse and that by preference it characterizes spoken language. But the perlocutionary action is precisely what is the least discourse in discourse. It is the discourse as stimulus. It acts, not by my interlocutor’s recognition of my intention, but sort of energetically, by direct influence upon the emotions and the affective dispositions. Thus the propositional act, the illocutionary force, and the perlocutionary action are apt, in a decreasing order, for the intentional exteriorization which makes inscription in writing possible.

Therefore it is necessary to understand by the meaning of the speech-act, or by the noema of the saying, not only the sentence, in the narrow sense of the propositional act, but also the illocutionary force and even the perlocutionary action in the measure that these three aspects of the speech-act are codified, gathered into paradigms, and where, consequently, they can be identified and re-identified as having the same meaning. Therefore I am here giving the word “meaning” a very large acceptation which covers all the aspects and levels of the intentional exteriorization that makes the inscription of discourse possible.

The destiny of the other three traits of discourse in passing from discourse to writing will permit us to make more precise the meaning of this elevation of saying to what is said.

2. In discourse, we said—and this was the second differential trait of discourse in relation to language—the sentence designates its speaker by diverse indicators of subjectivity and personality. In spoken discourse, this reference by discourse to the speaking subject presents a character of immedi-

Therefore is significant if, and only if, it makes visible the process of effectuation through which our linguistic competence actualizes itself in performance. But the same apology becomes abusive as soon as this event character is extended from the problematic of effectuation, where it is valid, to another problematic, that of understanding.

In effect, what is it to understand a discourse?

Let us see how differently these four traits are actualized in spoken and written language.

1. Discourse, as we said, only exists as a temporal and present instance of discourse. This first trait is realized differently in living speech and in writing. In living speech, the instance of discourse has the character of a fleeting event. The event appears and disappears. This is why there is a problem of fixation, of inscription. What we want to fix is what disappears. If, by extension, we can say that one fixes language—inscription of the alphabet, lexical inscription, syntactical inscription—it is for the sake of that which alone has to be fixed, discourse. Only discourse is to be fixed, because discourse disappears. The atemporal system neither appears nor disappears; it does not happen. Here is the place to recall the myth in Plato's Phaedo. Writing was given to men to "come to the rescue" of the "weakness of discourse," a weakness which was that of the event. The gift of the grammata—of that "external" thing, of those "external marks," of that materializing alienation—was just that of a remedy brought to our memory. The Egyptian king of Thebes could well respond to the god Theuth that writing was a false remedy in that it replaced true reminiscence by material conservation, and real wisdom by the semblance of knowing. This inscription, in spite of its perils, is discourse’s destination. What in effect does writing fix? Not the event of speaking, but the "said" of speaking, where we understand by the "said" of speaking that intentional exteriorization constitutive of the aim of discourse thanks to which the sagen—the saying—wants to become Aus-sage—the enunciation, the enunciated. In short, what we write, what we inscribe, is the noema of the speaking. It is the meaning of the speech event, not the event as event.

What, in effect, does writing fix? If it is not the speech event, it is speech itself in so far as it is said. But what is said?

Here I would like to propose that hermeneutics has to appeal not only to linguistics (linguistics of discourse versus linguistics of language) as it does above, but also to the theory of the speech-act such as we find it in Austin and Searle. The act of speaking, according to these authors, is constituted by a hierarchy of subordinate acts which are distributed on three levels: (1) the level of the locutionary or propositional act, the act of saying; (2) the level of the illocutionary act or force, that which we do in saying; and (3) the level of the perlocutionary act, that which we do by saying. In the case of an order, when I tell you to close the door, for example, "Close the door!" is the act of speaking.
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world, I will now say without paradox that only man has a world and not just a situation. In the same manner that the text frees its meaning from the tutelage of the mental intention, it frees its reference from the limits of ostensive reference. For us, the world is the ensemble of references opened up by the texts. Thus we speak about the “world” of Greece, not to designate any more what were the situations for those who lived them, but to designate the non-situation of references which outlive the effacement of the first and which henceforth are offered as possible modes of being, as symbolic dimensions of our being-in-the-world. For me, this is the referent of all literature; no longer the Umwelt of the ostensive references of dialogue, but the Welt projected by the non-ostensive references of every text that we have read, understood, and loved. To understand a text is at the same time to light up our own situation, or, if you will, to interpolate among the predicates of our own situation all the significances which make a Welt of our Umwelt. It is this enlarging of the Umwelt into the World which permits us to speak of the references opened up by the text—it would be better to say that the references open up the world. Here again the spirituality of discourse manifests itself through writing, which frees us from the visibility and limitation of situations by opening up a world for us, that is, new dimensions of our being-in-the-world.

In this sense, Heidegger rightly says—in his analysis of verstehen in Being and Time—that what we understand first in a discourse is not another person, but a project, that is, the outline of a new being-in-the-world. Only writing, in freeing itself, not only from its author, but from the narrowness of the dialogical situation, reveals this destination of discourse as projecting a world.

In thus tying reference to the projection of a world, it is not only Heidegger whom we rediscover, but Wilhelm von Humboldt for whom the great justification of language is to establish the relation of man to the world. If you suppress this referential function, only an absurd game of errant signifiers remains.

4. But it is perhaps with the fourth trait that the accomplishment of discourse in writing is most exemplary. Only discourse, not language, is addressed to someone. This is the foundation of communication. But it is one thing for discourse to be addressed to an interlocutor equally present to the discourse situation, and another to be addressed, as is the case in virtually every piece of writing, to whoever knows how to read. The narrowness of the dialogical relation explodes. Instead of being addressed just to you, the second person, what is written is addressed to the audience that it creates itself. This, again, marks the spirituality of writing, the counterpart of its materiality and of the alienation which it imposes upon discourse. The vis-à-vis of the written is just whoever knows how to read. The co-presence of dialoguing subjects ceases to be the model for every “understanding.” The relation writing—reading ceases to be a particular case of the relation speaking—listening. But at the same time, discourse is revealed as discourse in the universality of its address. In escaping
the momentary character of the event, the bounds lived by the author, and the
narrowness of extensive reference, discourse escapes the limits of being face to
face. It no longer has a visible auditor. An unknown, invisible reader has
become the unprivileged addressee of the discourse.
To what extent may we say that the object of the human sciences conforms to
the paradigm of the text? Max Weber defines this object as *simultanei ori-entiertes
Verhalten*, as meaningfully oriented behavior. To what extent may we replace
the predicate “meaningfully oriented” by what I would like to call *readability-
characters* derived from the preceding theory of the text?
Let us try to apply our four criteria of what a text is to the concept of
meaningful action.

A. The Fixation of Action

Meaningful action is an object for science only under the condition of a kind
of objectification which is equivalent to the fixation of a discourse by writing.
This trait presupposes a simple way to help us at this stage of our analysis. In the
same way that interlocution is overcome in writing, interaction is overcome in
numerous situations in which we treat action as a fixed text. These situations
are overlooked in a theory of action for which the discourse of action is itself a
part of the situation of transaction which flows from one agent to another,
exactly as spoken language is caught in the process of interlocution, or, if we
may use the term, of translocation. This is why the understanding of action at
the prescientific level is only “knowledge without observation,” or as E.
Anscombe says, “practical knowledge” in the sense of “knowing how” as opposed to “knowing that.” But this understanding is not yet an *interpretation*
in the strong sense which deserves to be called scientific interpretation.

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 the fixation which occurs in writing. By this objec-
tification, action is no longer a transaction to which the discourse of action
would still belong. It constitutes a delineated pattern which has to be interpreted
according to its inner connections.

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
dialectic of intentional exteriorization immanent to the speech-act itself, a
similar dialectic within the process of transaction prepares the detachment of
the *meaning* of the action from the *event* of the action.

First an action has the structure of a locutionary act. It has a *propositional*
content which can be identified and re-identified as the same. This “proposi-
tional” structure of the action has been clearly and demonstratively expounded
by Antony Kenny in *Action, Emotion and Will*. 1 The verbs of action constitute
a specific class of predicates which are similar to relations and which, like
relations, are irreducible to all the kinds of predicates which may follow the
copula “is.” The class of action predicates, in its turn, is irreducible to the
relations and constitutes a specific set of predicates. Among other traits, the
verbs of action allow a plurality of “arguments” capable of complementing the
verb, ranging from no argument (Plato taught) to an indeterminate number of
arguments (Brutus killed Caesar in the Curia, on the Ides of March, with a . . .,
with the help of . . .). This variable polydicy of the predicative structure of the action-sentences is typical of the propositional structure of
action. Another trait which is important for the transposition of the concept of
fixation from the sphere of discourse to the sphere of action concerns the
ontological status of the “complements” of the verbs of action. Whereas
relations hold between terms equally existing (or non-existing), certain verbs of
action have a topical subject which is identified as existing and to which the
sentence refers, and complements which do not exist. Such is the case with the
“mental acts” (to believe, to think, to will, to imagine, etc.).

Antony Kenny describes some other traits of the propositional structure of
actions derived from the description of the functioning of the verbs of action.
For example, the distinction between states, activities, and performances can
be stated according to the behavior of the tenses of the verbs of action which fix
some specific temporal traits of the action itself. The distinction between the
formal and the material object of an action (let us say the difference between
the notion of all inflammable things and this letter which I am now burning)
belongs to the logic of action as mirrored in the grammar of the verbs of action.
Such, roughly described, is the propositional content of action which gives a
basis to a dialectic of *event* and *meaning* similar to that of the speech-act. I
should like to speak here of the noematic structure of action. It is this noematic
structure which may be fixed and detached from the process of interaction and
become an object to interpret.

Moreover, this *noema* has not only a propositional content, but also presents
“illocutionary” traits very similar to those of the complete speech-act. The
different classes of performative acts of discourse described by Austin at the
end of *How to Do Things with Words* may be taken as paradigms not only for
the speech-acts themselves, but for the actions which fulfill the corresponding
speech-acts. 2 A typology of action, following the model of illocutionary acts,
is therefore possible. Not only a typology, but a criteriology, inasmuch as each
type implies rules, more precisely “constitutive rules” which, according to
Searle in *Speech Acts*, allow the construction of “ideal models” similar to the
*Idealtypen* of Max Weber. 3 For example, to understand what a promise is, we
have to understand what the “essential condition” is according to which a given
action "counts as" a promise. Searle's "essential condition" is not far from what Husserl called *Sinngehalt*, which covers both the "matter" (propositional content) and the "quality" (the illocutionary force).

We may now say that an action, like a speech-act, may be identified not only according to its propositional content, but also according to its illocutionary force. Both constitute its "sense-content." Like the speech-act, the action-event (if we may coin this analogical expression) develops a similar dialectic between its temporal status as an appearing and disappearing event, and its logical status as having such-and-such identifiable meaning or "sense-content." But if the "sense-content" is what makes possible the "inscription" of the action-event, what makes it real? In other words, what corresponds to writing in the field of action?

Let us return to the paradigm of the speech-act. What is fixed by writing, we said, is the *noema* of the speaking, the saying as *said*. To what extent may we say that what is *done* is inscribed? Certain metaphors may be helpful at this point. We say that such-and-such event left its *mark* on its time. We speak of marking events. Are not there "marks" on time, the kind of thing which calls for a reading, rather than for a hearing? But what is meant by this metaphor of the printed mark?

The three other criteria of the text will help us to make the nature of this fixation more precise.

**B. The Autonomization of Action**

In the same way that a text is detached from its author, an action is detached from its agent and develops consequences of its own. This autonomization of human action constitutes the *social* dimension of action. An action is a social phenomenon not only because it is done by several agents in such a way that the role of each of them cannot be distinguished from the role of the others, but also because our deeds escape us and have effects which we did not intend. One of the meanings of the notion of "inscription" appears here. The kind of distance which we found between the intention of the speaker and the verbal meaning of a text occurs also between the agent and its action. It is this distance which makes the ascription of responsibility a specific problem. We do not ask, who smiled? who raised his hand? The doer is present to his doing in the same way as the speaker is present to his speech. With simple actions like those which require no previous action in order to be done, the meaning (*noema*) and the intention (*noesis*) coincide or overlap. With complex actions some segments are so remote from the initial simple segments, which can be said to express the intention of the doer, that the ascription of these actions or action-segments constitutes a problem as difficult to solve as that of authorship in some cases of literary criticism. The assignation of an author becomes a mediate inference well known to the historian who tries to isolate the role of an historical character in the course of events.

We just used the expression "the course of events." Could we not say that what we call the course of events plays the role of the material thing which "rescues" the vanishing discourse when it is written? As we said in a metaphorical way, some actions are events which imprint their mark on their time. But on what did they imprint their mark? Is it not in something spatial that discourse is inscribed? How could an event be printed on something temporal? Social time, however, is not only something which flees; it is also the place of durable effects, of persistent patterns. An action leaves a "trace," it makes its "mark" when it contributes to the emergence of such patterns which become the *documents* of human action.

Another metaphor may help us to delineate this phenomenon of the social "imprint": the metaphor of the "record" or of the "registration." Joel Feinberg, in *Reason and Responsibility*, introduces this metaphor in another context, that of responsibility, in order to show how an action may be submitted to blame. Only actions, he says, which can be "registered" for further notice, placed as an entry on somebody's "record," can be blamed. And when there are no formal records (such as those which are kept by institutions like employment offices, schools, banks, and the police), there is still an informal analogue of these formal records which we call reputation and which constitutes a basis for blaming. I would like to apply this interesting metaphor of a record and reputation to something other than the quasi-judicial situations of blaming, charging, crediting, or punishing. Could we not say that history is itself the record of human action? History is this quasi:"thing" on which human action leaves a "trace," puts its mark. Hence the possibility of "archives." Before the archives which are intentionally written down by the memorialists, there is this continuous process of "recording" human action which is history itself as the sum of "marks," the fate of which escapes the control of individual actors. Henceforth history may appear as an autonomous entity, as a play with players who do not know the plot. This hypostasis of history may be denounced as a fallacy, but this fallacy is well entrenched in the process by which human action becomes social action when written down in the archives of history. Thanks to this sedimentation in social time, human deeds become "institutions," in the sense that their meaning no longer coincides with the logical intentions of the actors. The meaning may be "depsychologized" to the point where the meaning resides in the work itself. In the words of P. Winch, in *The Idea of a Social Science*, the object of the social sciences is a "rule-governed behavior." But this rule is not superimposed; it is the meaning as articulated from within these sedimented or instituted works.

Such is the kind of "objectivity" which proceeds from the "social fixation" of meaningful behavior.
C. Relevance and Importance

According to our third criterion of what a text is, we could say that a meaningful action is an action the importance of which goes "beyond" its relevance to its initial situation. This new trait is very similar to the way in which a text breaks the ties of discourse to all the ostensive references. As a result of this emancipation from the situational context, discourse can develop non-ostensive references which we called a "world," in the sense in which we speak of the Greek "world," not in the cosmological sense of the word, but as an ontological dimension.

What would correspond in the field of action to the non-ostensive references of a text?

We opposed, in introducing the present analysis, the importance of an action to its relevance as regards the situation to which it wanted to respond. An important action, we could say, develops meanings which can be actualized or fulfilled in situations other than the one in which this action occurred. To say the same thing in different words, the meaning of an important event exceeds, overcomes, transends, the social conditions of its production and may be reenacted in new social contexts. Its importance is its durable relevance and, in some cases, its omnitemporal relevance.

This third trait has important implications as regards the relation between cultural phenomena and their social conditions. Is it not a fundamental trait of the great works of culture to overcome the conditions of their social production, in the same way as a text develops new references and constitutes new "worlds"? It is in this sense that Hegel spoke, in The Philosophy of Right, of the institutions (in the largest sense of the word) which "actualize" freedom as a second nature in accordance with freedom. This "realm of actual freedom" is constituted by the deeds and works capable of receiving relevance in new historical situations. If this is true, this way of overcoming one's own conditions of production is the key to the puzzling problem raised by Marxism concerning the status of the "superstructures." The autonomy of superstructures as regards their relation to their own infrastructures has its paradigm in the non-ostensive references of a text. A work does not only mirror its time, but it opens up a world which it bears within itself.

D. Human Action as an "Open Work"

Finally, according to our fourth criterion of the text as text, the meaning of human action is also something which is addressed to an indefinite range of possible "readers." The judges are not the contemporaries, but, as Hegel said, history itself, Weltgeschichte ist Weltgericht. That means that, like a text, human action is an open work, the meaning of which is "in suspense." It is because it "opens up" new references and receives fresh relevance from them, that human deeds are also waiting for fresh interpretations which decide their meaning. All significant events and deeds are, in this way, opened to this kind of practical interpretation through present praxis. Human action, too, is opened to anybody who can read. In the same way that the meaning of an event is the sense of its forthcoming interpretations, the interpretation by the contemporaries has no particular privilege in this process.

This dialectic between the work and its interpretations will be the topic of the methodology of interpretation that we shall now consider.

A. The Paradigm of Text-Interpretation

I want now to show the fruitfulness of this analogy of the text at the level of methodology.

The main implication of our paradigm, as concerns the methods of the social sciences, is that it offers a fresh approach to the question of the relation between erklären (explanation) and verstehen (understanding, comprehension) in the human sciences. As is well known, Dilthey gave this relation the meaning of a dichotomy. For him, any model of explanation is borrowed from a different region of knowledge, that of the natural sciences with their inductive logic. Thereafter, the autonomy of the so-called Geisteswissenschaften is preserved only by recognizing the irreducible factor of understanding a foreign psychic life on the basis of the signs in which this life is immediately exteriorized. But, if verstehen is separated from erklären by this logical gap, how can the human sciences be scientific at all? Dilthey kept wrestling with this paradox. He discovered more and more clearly, mainly after having read Husserl's Logical Investigations, that the Geisteswissenschaften are sciences inasmuch as the expressions of life undergo a kind of objectification which makes possible a scientific approach somewhat similar to that of the natural sciences, in spite of the logical gap between Natur and Geist, factual knowledge and knowledge by signs. In this way the mediation offered by these objectifications appeared to be more important, for a scientific purpose, than the immediate meaningfulness of the expressions of life for everyday transactions.

My own interrogation starts from this last perplexity in Dilthey's thought. And my hypothesis is that the kind of objectification implied in the status of discourse as text provides a better answer to the problem raised by Dilthey. This answer relies on the dialectical character of the relation between erklären and verstehen as it is displayed in reading.
Our task therefore will be to show to what extent the paradigm of reading, which is the counterpart of the paradigm of writing, provides a solution for the methodological paradox of the human sciences.

The dialectic involved in reading expresses the originality of the relation between writing and reading and its irreducibility to the dialogical situation based on the immediate reciprocity between speaking and hearing. There is a dialectic between explaining and comprehending because the writing/reading situation develops a problematic of its own which is not merely an extension of the speaking/hearing situation constitutive of dialogue.

It is here, therefore, that our hermeneutics is most critical as regards the Romanticist tradition in hermeneutics which took the dialogical situation as the standard for the hermeneutical operation applied to the text. My contention is that this operation, on the contrary, which reveals the meaning of what is already hermeneutical in dialogical understanding. Then, if the dialogical relation does not provide us with the paradigm of reading, we have to build it as an original paradigm, as a paradigm of its own.

This paradigm draws its main features from the status of the text itself as characterized by (1) the fixation of the meaning, (2) its dissociation from the mental intention of the author, (3) the display of non-ostensive references, and (4) the universal range of its addresses. These four traits taken together constitute the "objectivity" of the text. From this "objectivity" derives a possibility of explaining which is not derived in any way from another field, that of natural events, but which is congenial to this kind of objectivity. Therefore there is no transfer from one region of reality to another—let us say, from the sphere of facts to the sphere of signs. It is within the same sphere of signs that the process of objectification takes place and gives rise to explanatory procedures. And it is within the same sphere of signs that explanation and comprehension are confronted.

I propose that we consider this dialectic in two different ways: (1) as proceeding from comprehension to explanation, and (2) as proceeding from explanation to comprehension. The exchange and the reciprocity between both procedures will provide us with a good approximation of the dialectical character of the relation.

At the end of each half of this demonstration I shall try to indicate briefly the possible extension of the paradigm of reading to the whole sphere of the human sciences.

A. From Understanding to Explanation

This first dialectic—or rather this first figure of a unique dialectic—may be conveniently introduced by our contention that to understand a text is not to rejoin the author. The disjunction of the meaning and the intention creates an absolutely original situation which engenders the dialectic of erklären and verstehen. If the objective meaning is something other than the subjective intention of the author, it may be construed in various ways. The problem of the right understanding can no longer be solved by a simple return to the alleged intention of the author.

This construction necessarily takes the form of a process. As Hirsch says in his book *Validity in Interpretation*, there are no rules for making good guesses. But there are methods for validating guesses. This dialectic between guessing and validating constitutes one figure of our dialectic between comprehension and explanation.

In this dialectic both terms are decisive. Guessing corresponds to what Schleiermacher called the "divinatory," validation to what he called the "grammatical." My contribution to the theory of this dialectic will be to link it more tightly to the theory of the text and text-reading.

Why do we need an art of guessing? Why do we have to "construct" the meaning?

Not only—as I tried to say a few years ago—because language is metaphorical and because the double meaning of metaphorical language requires an art of deciphering which tends to unfold the several layers of meaning. The case of the metaphor is only a particular case for a general theory of hermeneutics. In more general terms, a text has to be construed because it is not a mere sequence of sentences, all on an equal footing and separately understandable. A text is a whole, a totality. The relation between whole and parts—as in a work of art or in an animal—requires a specific kind of "judgment" for which Kant gave the theory in the Third Critique. Correctly, the whole appears as a hierarchy of topics, or primary and subordinate topics. The reconstruction of the text as a whole necessarily has a circular character, in the sense that the presupposition of a certain kind of whole is implied in the recognition of the parts. And reciprocally, it is in construing the details that we construe the whole. There is no necessity and no evidence concerning what is important and what is unimportant, what is essential and what is unessential. The judgment of importance is a guess.

To put the difficulty in other terms, if a text is a whole, it is once more an individual like an animal or a work of art. As an individual it can only be reached by a process of narrowing the scope of generic concepts concerning the literary genre, the class of text to which this text belongs, the structures of different kinds which intersect in this text. The localization and the individualization of this unique text is still a guess.

Still another way of expressing the same enigma is that as an individual the text may be reached from different sides. Like a cube, or a volume in space, the text presents a "relief." Its different topics are not at the same altitude.
Therefore the reconstruction of the whole has a perspectivist aspect similar to that of perception. It is always possible to relate the same sentence in different ways to this or that sentence considered as the cornerstone of the text. A specific kind of onesidedness is implied in the act of reading. This onesidedness confirms the guess character of interpretation.

For all these reasons there is a problem of interpretation not so much because of the incommunicability of the psychic experience of the author, but because of the very nature of the verbal intention of the text. This intention is something other than the sum of the individual meanings of the individual sentences. A text is more than a linear succession of sentences. It is a cumulative, holistic process. This specific structure of the text cannot be derived from that of the sentence. Therefore the kind of plurivocality which belongs to texts as texts is something other than the polysemy of individual words in ordinary language and the ambiguity of individual sentences. This plurivocality is typical of the text considered as a whole, open to several readings and to several constructions.

As concerns the procedures of validation by which we test our guesses, I agree with Hirsch that they are closer to a logic of probability than to a logic of empirical verification. To show that an interpretation is more probable in the light of what is known is something other than showing that a conclusion is true. In this sense, validation is not verification. Validation is an argumentative discipline comparable to the juridical procedures of legal interpretation. It is a logic of uncertainty and of qualitative probability. In this sense we may give an acceptable sense to the opposition between *Geisteswissenschaften* and *Naturwissenschaften* without conceding anything to the alleged dogma of the ineffability of the individual. The method of conveyance of indices, typical of the logic of subjective probability, gives a firm basis for a science of the individual deserving the name of science. A text is a quasi-individual, and the validation of an interpretation applied to it may be said, with complete legitimacy, to give a scientific knowledge of the text.

Such is the balance between the genius of guessing and the scientific character of validation which constitutes the modern complement of the dialectic between *verstehen* and *erklären*.

At the same time, we are prepared to give an acceptable meaning to the famous concept of a hermeneutical circle. Guess and validation are in a sense circularly related as subjective and objective approaches to the text. But this circle is not a vicious circularity. It would be a cage if we were unable to escape the kind of "self-confirmability" which, according to Hirsch (p. 164ff.), threatens this relation between guess and validation. To the procedures of validation also belong procedures of invalidation similar to the criteria of falsifiability emphasized by Karl Popper in his *Logic of Scientific Discovery*.

The role of falsification is played here by the conflict between competing interpretations. An interpretation must not only be probable, but more probable than another. There are criteria of relative superiority which may easily be derived from the logic of subjective probability.

In conclusion, if it is true that there is always more than one way of construing a text, it is not true that all interpretations are equal and may be assimilated to so-called "rules of thumb." The text is a limited field of possible constructions. The logic of validation allows us to move between the two limits of dogmatism and skepticism. It is always possible to argue for or against an interpretation, to confront interpretations, to arbitrate between them and to seek for an agreement, even if this agreement remains beyond our reach.

To what extent is this dialectic between guessing and validating paradigmatic for the whole field of the human sciences?

That the meaning of human actions, of historical events, and of social phenomena may be *construed* in several different ways is well known by all experts in the human sciences. What is less known and understood is that this methodological perplexity is founded in the nature of the object itself and, moreover, that it does not condemn the scientist to oscillate between dogmatism and skepticism. As the logic of text-interpretation suggests, there is a specific plurivocality belonging to the meaning of human action. Human action, too, is a limited field of possible constructions.

A trait of human action which has not yet been emphasized in the preceding analysis may provide an interesting link between the specific plurivocity of the text and the analogical plurivocity of human action. This trait concerns the relation between the purposive and the motivational dimensions of action. As many philosophers in the new field of Action Theory have shown, the purposive character of an action is fully recognized when the answer to the question "what" is explained in terms of an answer to the question "why." I understand what you intended to do, if you are able to explain to me why you did such-and-such an action. Now, what kinds of answer to the question "why" make sense? Only those answers which afford a motive understood as a reason for ________ and not as a cause. And what is a reason for ________ which is not a cause? It is, in the terms of E. Anscombe and A. I. Meldon, an expression, or a phrase, which allows us to consider the action as this or that. If you tell me that you did this or that because of jealousy or in a spirit of revenge, you are asking me to put your action in the light of this category of feelings or dispositions. By the same token, you claim to make sense with your action. You claim to make it understandable for others and for yourself. This attempt is particularly helpful when applied to what E. Anscombe calls the "desirability-character" of wanting. Wants and beliefs have the character not only of being forces which make people act in such-and-such ways, but of making sense as a result of the apparent good which is the correlate of their desirability-character. I may have to answer the question, as what do you want this? On the basis of these desirability-characters and the apparent good which corresponds to them,
it is possible to argue about the meaning of an action, to argue for or against this or that interpretation. In this way the account of motives already foreshadows a logic of argumentation procedures. Could we not say that what can be (and must be) construed in human action is the motivational basis of this action, i.e., the set of desirability-characters which may explain it? And could we not say that the process of arguing linked to the explanation of action by its motives unfolds a kind of plurivocality which makes action similar to a text?

What seems to legitimate this extension from guessing the meaning of a text to guessing the meaning of an action is that in arguing about the meaning of an action I put my wants and my beliefs at a distance and submit them to a concrete dialectic of confrontation with opposite points of view. This way of putting my action at a distance in order to make sense of my own motives paves the way for the kind of distanciation which occurs with what we called the social inscription of human action and to which we applied the metaphor of the “record.” The same actions which may be put into “records” and henceforth “recorded” may also be explained in different ways according to the multivocality of the arguments applied to their motivational background.

If we are correct in extending to action the concept of “guess” which we took as a synonym for verstehen, we may also extend to the field of action the concept of “validation” in which we saw an equivalent of erklären.

Here, too, the modern theory of action provides us with an intermediary link between the procedures of literary criticism and those of the social sciences. Some thinkers have tried to elucidate the way in which we impute actions to agents in the light of the juridical procedures by which a judge or a tribunal validates a decision concerning a contract or a crime. In a famous article, “The Ascription of Responsibility and Rights,” H. L. A. Hart shows in a very convincing way that juridical reasoning does not at all consist in applying general laws to particular cases, but each time in construing uniquely referring decisions. These decisions terminate a careful refutation of the excuses and defenses which could “defeat” the claim or the accusation. In saying that human actions are fundamentally “defeatable” and that juridical reasoning is an argumentative process which comes to grips with the different ways of “defeating” a claim or an accusation, Hart has paved the way for a general theory of validation in which juridical reasoning would be the fundamental link between validation in literary criticism and validation in the social sciences. The intermediary function of juridical reasoning clearly shows that the procedures of validation have a polemical character. In front of the court, the plurivocicity common to texts and to actions is exhibited in the form of a conflict of interpretations, and the final interpretation appears as a verdict to which it is possible to make appeal. Like legal utterances, all interpretations in the field of literary criticism and in the social sciences may be challenged, and the question “what can defeat a claim” is common to all argumentative situations. Only in

The tribunal is there a moment when the procedures of appeal are exhausted. But it is because the decision of the judge is implemented by the force of public power. Neither in literary criticism, nor in the social sciences, is there such a last word. Or, if there is any, we call that violence.

B. From Explanation to Understanding

The same dialectic between comprehension and understanding may receive a new meaning if taken in the reverse way, from explanation to understanding. This new Gestalt of the dialectic proceeds from the nature of the referential function of the text. This referential function, as we said, exceeds the mere ostensive designation of the situation common to both speaker and hearer in the dialogical situation. This abstraction from the surrounding world gives rise to two opposite attitudes. As readers, we may either remain in a kind of state of suspense as regards any kind of referred-to world, or we may actualize the potential non-ostensive references of the text in a new situation, that of the reader. In the first case, we treat the text as a worldless entity; in the second, we create a new ostensive reference through the kind of “execution” which the art of reading implies. These two possibilities are equally entailed by the act of reading, conceived as their dialectical interplay.

The first way of reading is exemplified today by the different structural schools of literary criticism. Their approach is not only possible, but legitimate. It proceeds from the suspension, the époche, of the ostensive reference. To read, in this way, means to prolong this suspension of the ostensive reference to the world and to transfer oneself into the “place” where the text stands, within the “enclosure” of this worldless place. According to this choice, the text no longer has an outside, it has only an inside. Once more, the very constitution of the text as text and of the system of texts as literature justifies this conversion of the literary thing into a closed system of signs, analogous to the kind of closed system which phonology discovered at the root of all discourse, and which de Saussure called “la langue.” Literature, according to this working hypothesis, becomes an analogon of “la langue.”

On the basis of this abstraction, a new kind of explanatory attitude may be extended to the literary object, which, contrary to the expectation of Dilthey, is no longer borrowed from the natural sciences, i.e., from an area of knowledge alien to language itself. The opposition between Natur and Geist is no longer operative here. If some model is borrowed, it comes from the same field, from the semiological field. It is henceforth possible to treat texts according to the elementary rules which linguistics successfully applied to the elementary systems of signs that underlie the use of language. We have learned from the Geneva school, the Prague school, and the Danish school, that it is always