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THE OPERATION CALLED *VERSTEHEN*¹

THEODORE ABEL

ABSTRACT

The postulate of *Verstehen* is the main argument of social theorists who assert the existence of a dichotomy between the physical and the social sciences. An analysis of the operation of *Verstehen* shows that it does not provide new knowledge and that it cannot be used as a means of verification. Lacking the fundamental attributes of scientific method, even though it does perform some auxiliary functions in research, the fact of *Verstehen* cannot be used to validate the assumption of a dichotomy of the sciences.

The advocates of *Verstehen* define it as a singular form of operation which we perform whenever we attempt to explain human behavior. The idea behind this claim is by no means of German origin. Long before Dilthey and Weber, Vico acclaimed mathematics and human history as subjects about which we have a special kind of knowledge. This he attributed to the fact that the abstractions and fictions of mathematics are created by us, while history, too, is "made by men." He claimed that human beings can possess a type of knowledge concerning things they themselves produce which is not obtainable about the phenomena of nature.

Comte, too, implied that a special procedure is involved in the interpretation of human behavior. He held that the methods used in sociology embrace not only observation and experiment but a further process of verification which makes use of what he vaguely referred to as "our knowledge of human nature." According to him, empiri-

cal generalizations about human behavior are not valid unless they are in accord with our knowledge of human nature. Comte was the first to establish what may be termed "the postulate of *Verstehen*" for sociological research, for he asserted that no sociological demonstration is complete until the conclusions of historical and statistical analyses are in harmony with the "laws of human nature."

In the American sociological field Cooley is the outstanding protagonist of the idea that we understand the human and the social in ways different from those in which we understand the material. His theory is that we can understand the behavior of human beings by being able to share their "state of mind." This ability to share other people's minds is a special knowledge, distinct from the kind of perception gleaned from tests and statistics. Statistical knowledge without "emphatic" knowledge is superficial and unintelligent. Between the two, Cooley claims, "there is a difference in kind which it would be fatuous to overlook."²

The notion of *Verstehen* is included in Znaniecki's concept of the "humanistic coefficient" and particularly in the role he ascribes to "vicarious experience" as a source of sociological data. According to Znaniecki, vicarious experience enables the student of human behavior "to gain a specific kind of information which the natural experimenter . . . ignores altogether."³

² H. E. Cooley, *Sociological Theory and Social Research* (New York: Scribner's, 1930), p. 290.

³ Florian Znaniecki, *The Method of Sociology* (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1934), p. 167.

¹ To avoid confusion, we prefer to use the German term instead of its English equivalent, which is "understanding." Understanding is a general term approximating the German *Begreifen* and does not convey the specific meaning intended by the term *Verstehen*, which implies a particular kind of understanding, applicable primarily to human behavior. Understanding is synonymous with comprehension, and Lundberg is perfectly right when he asserts (in *Foundations of Sociology* [New York: Macmillan Co., 1939], p. 51) that "understanding is the end at which all methods aim, rather than a method in itself." In this sense "understanding" is the goal of all sciences. *Verstehen*, on the other hand, is viewed by its proponents as a method by means of which we can explain human behavior. The purpose of this paper is to clarify this point and evaluate its significance.

Similarly, Sorokin stresses the need for *Verstehen* when he insists that the causal-functional method is not applicable to the interpretation of cultural phenomena. He points out that the social sciences must employ the logico-meaningful method which enables us to perceive connections which "are much more intimately comprehensible, more readily perceived, than are causal-functional unities."⁴

MacIver, too, speaks of a special method which must be used whenever we study social causation. He calls this process "imaginative reconstruction." He claims the causal formula of classical mechanics cannot be applied to human behavior. However, the student of human behavior will find this compensated for by "the advantage that some of the factors operative in social causation are understandable as causes; are validated as causal by our own experience."⁵

As these brief references indicate, there is no dearth of tradition and authority behind the idea of *Verstehen*.⁶ It is, therefore, surprising to find that, while many social scientists have eloquently discoursed on the existence of a special method in the study of human behavior, none has taken the trouble to describe the nature of this method. They have given it various names; they have insisted on its use; they have pointed to it as a special kind of operation which has no

counterpart in the physical sciences; and they have extolled its superiority as a process of giving insight unobtainable by any other methods. Yet the advocates of *Verstehen* have continually neglected to specify how this operation of "understanding" is performed—and what is singular about it. What, exactly, do we do when we say we practice *Verstehen*? What significance can we give to results achieved by *Verstehen*? Unless the operation is clearly defined, *Verstehen* is but a vague notion, and, without being dogmatic, we are unable to ascertain how much validity can be attributed to the results achieved by it.

I. THE OPERATION ILLUSTRATED

Our first task is to ascertain the formula according to which the operation of *Verstehen* is performed. To do so, we had best examine a few illustrations of behavior analysis. For this purpose we shall use three examples: the first will deal with a single case; the second, with a generalization; and the third, with a statistical regularity.

Case 1.—Last April 15 a freezing spell suddenly set in, causing a temperature drop from 60 to 34 degrees. I saw my neighbor rise from his desk by the window, walk to the woodshed, pick up an ax, and chop some wood. I then observed him carrying the wood into the house and placing it in the fireplace. After he had lighted the wood, he sat down at his desk and resumed his daily task of writing.

From these observations I concluded that, while working, my neighbor began to feel chilly and, in order to get warm, lighted a fire. This conclusion has all the earmarks of an "obvious fact." Yet it is obvious only because I have fitted the action of my neighbor into a sequential pattern by assuming that the stimulus "drop in temperature" induced the response "making a fire." Since I recognize a relevant connection between the response and the stimulus, I state that I understand the behavior of my neighbor. I may even say that I am certain of it ("The case is obvious"), provided I note carefully to what this certainty refers. I

⁴ Pitirim Sorokin, *Social and Cultural Dynamics* (New York: American Book Co., 1937), p. 26.

⁵ R. M. MacIver, *Social Causation* (Boston: Ginn & Co., 1942), p. 263.

⁶ The more important works dealing with *Verstehen* are K. Bühler, *Die Krise der Philosophie* (Jena: Fischer, 1927); W. Dilthey, *Ideen ueber eine beschreibende und zergliedernde Psychologie* (Leipzig: Teubner, 1894); T. Erismann, *Die Eigenart des Geistigen* (Leipzig: Quelle, 1924); P. Häberlin, *Der Geist und die Triebe* (Berlin: Springer, 1924); K. Jaspers, *Allgemeine Psychopathologie* (Berlin: Springer, 1920); H. Rickert, *Die Grenzen der naturwissenschaftlichen Begriffsbildung* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1913); E. Rothacker, *Logik und Systematik der Geisteswissenschaften* (Bonn: Bouvier, 1947); G. Simmel, *Geschichtsphilosophie* (Berlin: Duncan, 1920); E. Spranger, *Lebensformen* (Halle: Niemeyer, 1924); and Max Weber, *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Wissenschaftslehre* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1920).

cannot be certain that this is the *correct* or true explanation of his conduct. To be sure my explanation is correct, I need additional information. I can go over to him and ask him why he lighted the fire. He may confirm my interpretation. However, I cannot stop there. Suppose he has another, hidden, intention? He may be expecting a guest and wish to show off his fireplace. Or suppose he himself is not aware of the "true" motive? Perhaps he was impelled by a subconscious motive of wanting to burn down his house so as to punish the fellow who harasses him about paying off the mortgage. If so, his lighting the fire would have a symbolic function. Of what, then, am I certain? I am certain only that my interpretation *could* be correct.

Hence, *Verstehen* gives me the certainty that a given interpretation of behavior is a possible one. I *know* that it can happen this way, even though I cannot be certain that such was the case in this instance. My interpretation in itself is not a hypothesis; only its application to the stated case is hypothetical.

Whence comes this certainty that I achieve through *Verstehen*? Since the case is simple, the answer is simple: I have enacted it myself. Feeling chilled, I have gathered wood and lighted a fire; therefore, I *know*. The sense of relevance is the result of personal experience; the connection has been established by me before, so I am *certain* of its possibility.

However, the answer as stated does not give us a clear picture of the operation the act of *Verstehen* involves. It will, therefore, be necessary to schematize the evidence and show the steps taken to perform the operation.

Two sets of observations are given in our example. First, there is a sequence of bodily movement (chopping wood, lighting a fire, etc.); second, there is a thermometer reading of a near-freezing temperature. The act of *Verstehen* links these two facts into the conclusion that the freezing weather was the stimulus which set off the response "making a fire." An elementary examination shows

that three items of information are utilized to reach this conclusion:

1. Low temperature (*A*) reduces the temperature of the body (*B*).
2. Heat is produced (*C*) by making a fire (*D*).
3. A person "feeling cold" (*B'*) will "seek warmth" (*C'*).

Through this interpretation the three items are linked together as follows:

$$\begin{array}{ccc} A - B & & C - D \\ & B' - C' & \end{array}$$

We immediately recognize the third item as the significant element of the interpretation. The two conditions (*A-B*), together with their known consequences (*C-D*), are disparate facts. We link them into a sequence and state that *C-D* is the consequence of *A-B* by "translating" *B* and *C* into feeling-states of a human organism, namely, *B'* and *C'*. Introducing these intervening factors enables us to apply a generalization concerning the function of the organism (behavior maxim), from which we deduce the drop in temperature as a possible "cause" of my neighbor's behavior.

By specifying the steps which are implicit in the interpretation of our case, we have brought out two particulars which are characteristic of the act of *Verstehen*. One is the "internalizing" of observed factors in a given situation; the other is the application of a behavior maxim which makes the connection between these factors relevant. Thus we "understand" a given human action if we can apply to it a generalization based upon personal experience. We can apply such a rule of behavior if we are able to "internalize" the facts of the situation.

These propositions require further elucidation, but, before we attempt this, let us consider two other examples of behavior analysis.

Case 2.—In one of Lundberg's articles we find the following generalization:

Faced by the insecurity of a changing and hostile world, we seek security by creating "eternal verities" in our thoughts. The more inadequate we feel, the more we indulge in this type of wishful thinking. Conversely, as the

clergy has always complained, in times of prosperity and security, man tends to neglect his gods. It has been suggested that the Platonic preference for the changeless may be due to the fact that the Greeks did not have a mathematical technique such as the calculus for dealing with modes and rates of change.⁷

The opening sentence of this quotation asserts a relevant connection between "belief in eternal verities" (verbal response) and "a changing and hostile world" (stimulus). The subsequent sentences hint at a possible statistical basis for the generalization and cite two historical examples as illustrations. Clearly there is insufficient evidence to substantiate the validity of the interpretation as a tendency in some of us toward idealistic philosophy. We can recognize, though, that the connection asserted by the generalization is relevant; that is, we "understand" it, and so consider it possible.

The act of *Verstehen* which is implied here involves the same operation we have observed in the first example. We internalize "change and hostility" (*B*), which we observe to be an attribute of "the world" (*A*), into "feeling of inadequacy" (*B'*). The connotation "changeless" (*C*), which the concept "eternal verities" (*D*) implies, we internalize into "feeling of security" (*C'*). Having thus internalized the situation, we can now apply the behavior maxim that a person who feels inadequate (when facing change) will seek security (in something changeless). This procedure provides the mediating links *B'-C'*, which enable us to "understand," or recognize, the relevancy of the causal connection brought out in the generalization.

Case 3.—Competent statistical research has established a high correlation ($r = .93$) between the annual rate of crop production and the rate of marriage in a given year. There are, of course, statistical methods for proving whether or not this correlation is spurious. In this case, however, we feel that we can forego such tests because the correlation as such does not present a problem to us. We regard the connection as relevant;

in short, we say we "understand" why the rate of marriage in farming districts closely follows the rate of crop production.

The act of *Verstehen* which this reasoning implies can be shown to involve the same procedure we have observed in the other examples. We use as items of information the fact that failure of crops (*A*) materially lowers the farmer's income (*B*) and the fact that one is making new commitments (*C*) when one marries (*D*). We then internalize *B* into "feeling of anxiety" (*B'*) and *C*—since the behavior in question is "postponement of marriage"—into "fear of new commitments" (*C'*). We are now able to apply the behavior maxim: "People who experience anxiety will fear new commitments" (*B'-C'*). Since we can fit the fact of fewer marriages when crops fail into this rule, we say we "understand" the correlation.

II. THE OPERATION ANALYZED

The examples show that the characteristic feature of the operation of *Verstehen* is the postulation of an intervening process "located" inside the human organism, by means of which we recognize an observed—or assumed—connection as relevant or "meaningful." *Verstehen*, then, consists of the act of bringing to the foreground the inner-organic sequence intervening between a stimulus and a response.

The examples also suggest that there are special conditions which determine the need for making the intervening process explicit. Some connections appear to be obvious; that is, we recognize their relevancy instantaneously and without any awareness of the implicit assumptions upon which the recognition is based. These are usually connections of which we have direct knowledge, because we ourselves established such connections in the past; or they are connections we have previously examined, so that their occurrence is accepted as an expected or familiar happening.

The need for making the intervening process explicit arises whenever behavior is not routine or commonplace. This is clearly

⁷"Thoughtways of Contemporary Sociology," *American Sociological Review*, I (1936), 703.

the case when we are puzzled. For example, when we were confronted with the evidence that in army units in which promotion was easy there was much more griping about "injustice" than in those units in which very few were promoted, we were puzzled. We would expect the contrary. It is only by internalizing the situation—namely, by introducing the intervening factor of "expectation"—that we are able to understand the connection. If we then assume that in units in which promotion is easy there will be greater expectation of promotion, we can apply the behavior maxim: "The higher one's expectations, the greater one's disappointment if those expectations are not fulfilled." This enables us to "understand" the seemingly paradoxical behavior.

Another condition for making the intervening inner-organic sequence explicit arises whenever we are called upon to explain the reason for asserting a connection between occurrences. This is particularly so when no experimental or statistical data are available and recourse is taken to arguments in support of an interpretation. This happens frequently when interpretations of individual historical events are attempted, as, for example, establishing the cause of a war. Here the behavior in question can be related to earlier events solely on the basis that in terms of assumed feeling-states such a relation is a plausible one.

As has been indicated, the operation of *Verstehen* involves three steps: (1) internalizing the stimulus, (2) internalizing the response, and (3) applying behavior maxims. The questions now arise as to how to go about the process of internalizing and where we get our knowledge of behavior maxims.

1. *Internalizing the stimulus.*—To the best of my knowledge, no one has yet specified a technique by which we can objectively attribute certain feeling-states to persons faced by a particular situation or event. The arbitrary procedure we employ to internalize a stimulus consists of *imagining* what emotions may have been aroused by the impact of a given situation or event. Sometimes we are able to employ definite clues which we

have gathered while observing the impact. These may have been gestures, facial expressions, or exclamations or comments. Where there are no such clues, we note the effect produced by an event or situation. Then we imagine how we would have been affected by such an impact. For example, not being a farmer, I never experienced the consequence of crop failure. However, observing that its effect is a curtailment of income, I attribute to the farmer a feeling of anxiety which I recall having felt—or imagine I might feel—under similar circumstances. Thus the internalizing of a stimulus depends largely upon our ability to describe a situation or event by categorizing it and evoking a personal experience which fits into that category.

2. *Internalizing the response.*—Here, too, no specific techniques are known which permit a definite association between feeling-states and observed behavior. All that can again be said is that we use our imagination when we ascribe a motive to a person's behavior—for example, "fear of new commitments" as the reason for postponing marriage; or, in another instance, when we view the behavior as expressive of some emotion—namely, when we infer that the "griping" of soldiers over promotions evokes a feeling of disappointment. We generally infer the motive of an act from the known or observed modification it produces. If we express this consequence of an act in general terms, we can utilize our personal experience with motives or feelings we had when we ourselves acted in order to produce a similar result.

In cases where both stimulus and response are stated, imagination is facilitated by the fact that both can be viewed as part of a complete situation. This enables us to relate to each other whatever inferences we make about the stimulus and the response. We then select the inferences which "fit" one another in such a way that the given behavior can be recognized as the "solution" (release of tension) of the "problem" (tension experience) created by the impact of the stated event.

3. *Behavior maxims.*—The generalizations which we call “behavior maxims” link two feeling-states together in a uniform sequence and imply a functional dependence between them. In the cases cited it can be seen that the functional dependence consists of the fact that the feeling-state we ascribe to a given human action is *directed* by the feeling-state we presume is evoked by an impinging situation or event. Anxiety directs caution; a feeling of cold, the seeking of warmth; a feeling of insecurity, a desire for something that will provide reassurance.

Behavior maxims are not recorded in any textbooks on human behavior. In fact, they can be constructed *ad hoc* and be acceptable to us as propositions even though they have not been established experimentally. The relation asserted appears to us as self-evident.

This peculiarity of behavior maxims can be accounted for only by the assumption that they are generalizations of direct personal experience derived from introspection and self-observation. Such personal experiences appear originally in the form of what Alexander has called “emotional syllogisms.” He has this to say about them:

Our understanding of psychological connections is based on the tacit recognition of certain causal relationships which we know from everyday experience and the validity of which we accept as self-evident. We understand anger and aggressive behavior as a reaction to an attack; fear and guilt as results of aggressiveness; envy as an outgrowth of the feeling of weakness and inadequacy. Such self-evident connections as “I hate him because he attacks me” I shall call emotional syllogisms. The feeling of the self-evident validity of these emotional connections is derived from daily introspective experience as we witness the emotional sequences in ourselves. . . . Just as the logic of intellectual thinking is based on repeated and accumulated experiences of relations in the external world, the logic of emotions is based on the accumulated experiences of our own emotional reactions.⁸

⁸ Franz Alexander, “The Logic of Emotions and Its Dynamic Background,” *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, XVI (October, 1935), 399.

Emotional syllogisms when stated in the form of general propositions are behavior maxims. This explains their familiar ring and accounts for the facility with which they can be formulated. In generalizing emotional syllogisms we proceed on the assumption that the emotions of others function similarly to our own.

We find, then, that in all its essential features the operation of *Verstehen* is based upon the application of personal experience to observed behavior. We “understand” an observed or assumed connection if we are able to parallel either one with something we know though self-observation does happen. Furthermore, since the operation consists of the application of knowledge we already possess, it cannot serve as a means of discovery. At best it can only confirm what we already know.

III. THE OPERATION EVALUATED

From the foregoing description of the operation of *Verstehen* we can draw several inferences as to its limitations and possibilities. The most obvious limitation of the operation is its dependence upon knowledge derived from personal experience. The ability to define behavior will vary with the amount and quality of the personal experience and the introspective capacity of the interpreter. It will also depend upon his ability to generalize his experiences. In some cases it may be possible to secure objective data on the basis of which the verification of an interpretation can be approximated. However, owing to the relative inaccessibility of emotional experiences, most interpretations will remain mere expressions of opinion, subject only to the “test” of plausibility.

Regardless of the relative ability of people to use it, a second limitation to the use of the operation itself lies in the fact that it is *not a method of verification*. This means that what in the realm of scientific research we consider a quality of crucial importance is not an attribute of the operation of *Verstehen*.

When we say we “understand” a connec-

tion, we imply nothing more than recognizing it as a possible one. We simply affirm that we have at least once in direct experience observed and established the connection or its equivalent. But from the affirmation of a possible connection we cannot conclude that it is also probable. From the point of view of *Verstehen* alone, any connection that is possible is *equally* certain. In any given case the test of the actual probability calls for the application of objective methods of observation; e.g., experiments, comparative studies, statistical operations of mass data, etc. We do not accept the fact that farmers postpone intended marriages when faced with crop failure because we can "understand" the connection. It is acceptable to us because we have found through reliable statistical operations that the correlation between the rate of marriage and the rate of crop production is extremely high. We would continue to accept the fact even if we could not "understand" it. In this instance the operation of *Verstehen* does no more than relieve us of a sense of apprehension which would undoubtedly haunt us if we were unable to understand the connection.

The postulate of *Verstehen* can now be viewed from a proper perspective. It cannot be made to imply that if we do not "understand" a connection it surely, or most probably, is false. It does, however, imply that our curiosity concerning human behavior does not rest until we have in some way been able to relate it to our personal experience. The satisfaction of curiosity produces subjective increment but adds nothing to the objective validity of a proposition. Thus, all assertions based solely on the evidence of "understandability" can be viewed as cases of "misplaced familiarity."

These limitations virtually preclude the use of the operation of *Verstehen* as a scientific tool of analysis. Still there is one positive function which the operation can perform in scientific investigations: It can serve as an aid in preliminary explorations of a subject. Furthermore, the operation can be particularly helpful in setting up hy-

potheses, even though it cannot be used to test them.

In dealing with human behavior, we create hypotheses whenever we ask for the "stimulus" which produced a given response, or when we attempt to predict what "response" will follow from a given occurrence. It is an accepted fact that, in formulating hypotheses, we start with some "hunch" or "intuition." Now it appears highly probable that the hunches which lead us to certain hypotheses concerning human behavior originate from the application of the operation of *Verstehen*. This follows from the fact that the operation—in addition to using the stated stimulus or response—allows the use of another item of knowledge (a behavior maxim), which permits us to "reach out" from a given observation to its unknown counterpart. The diagram representing the reasoning about the neighbor seen chopping wood clearly indicates how behavior maxims can serve as a source of "hunches." Suppose $C-D$ were given as an item of observation. By internalizing C , we obtain C' , to which we can then apply a behavior maxim, which gives us B' . B' , in turn, provides a clue to the nature of the situation or event which may be the possible stimulus ($A-B$) to the behavior in question. Lundberg's generalization (Case 2) is an example of a hypothesis derived in this fashion. By postulating that people who assert "eternal verities" are seeking security, he inferred a strong feeling of anxiety as the counterpart to this motive. He then surmised that the "changing and hostile world" might be the anxiety-producing condition. A "hunch" similarly reached was used by Durkheim in his study of suicide. When he found the rate of suicide varying in different groups, he was confronted by the problem of selecting the most likely determinant from a multitude of attributes of group life. From Merton's statement of the "paradigm of Durkheim's theoretic analysis," we can infer that Durkheim first internalized rates of suicide as "functions of unrelieved anxieties and stresses to which persons are sub-

jected.”⁹ He then viewed such emotional states as the result of a lack of “psychic support,” such as is provided by intimate associations with others. This suggested the possibility of social cohesion being the crucial factor which determines the characteristic rate of suicide in a group. Subsequent investigations established a high degree of probability for this inference because Durkheim was able to show that the rate of suicide varies consistently in inverse ratio with the degree of group coherence.

By reversing the procedure, we arrive at hunches about possible responses to given or expected occurrences. That is, we internalize the situation by projecting it as a problem experience and then, by means of a behavior maxim, infer the problem-solving response (intention). However, to guess the particular form the response will take requires information which the operation of *Verstehen* does not provide. It would not, for example, be of use in trying to conjecture specific ways and means of aggression which may be employed by a group in response to

a provocation by another group. The operation gives us “hunches,” and it points out the general character of possible factors, but it does not enable us to evaluate probabilities.

The findings with regard to the operation of *Verstehen* may be summarized in the following propositions:

The operation of *Verstehen* is performed by analyzing a behavior situation in such a way—usually in terms of general “feeling-states”—that it parallels some personal experience of the interpreter.

Primarily the operation of *Verstehen* does two things: It relieves us of a sense of apprehension in connection with behavior that is unfamiliar or unexpected and it is a source of “hunches,” which help us in the formulation of hypotheses.

The operation of *Verstehen* does not, however, add to our store of knowledge, because it consists of the application of knowledge already validated by personal experience; nor does it serve as a means of verification. The probability of a connection can be ascertained only by means of objective, experimental, and statistical tests.

⁹ R. K. Merton, “Sociological Theory,” *American Journal of Sociology*, L (May, 1945), 470.