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**Hermeneutics and Human Nature
(Abstract)**

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Hermeneutics has for a long time been the central philosophical approach informing the study of the humanities. This has, however, in the eyes of some, isolated the study of humanities from the study of nature. My primary claim is that the commonly perceived divorce between the natural sciences and humanities rests on faulty theories of both scientific methodology and the nature of explanation and interpretation as defended by prior schools of philosophy such as hermeneutics. In this paper I argue that it is time to reconsider the humanities and to base research in the humanities on a philosophical approach that rests its claims on naturalized and pragmatic considerations. Such a naturalistic view reflects not only the practice of this research better than hermeneutics, but brings the aims of scientific study of cultural phenomena in closer contact with the aims we find in the scientific study of natural phenomena.

The article thus gives a naturalized account of the humanities by focusing on the similarities between the scientific practices within the natural sciences and the human sciences. Hence, I take issue with Hans-Georg Gadamer's view that understanding always involves interpretation. I also deny that understanding is associated with linguistic meaning and that all understanding is historically determined. In much recent literature the analysis of interpretation presented by the postmodernist schools has exacerbated this situation with its mistaken doctrine that understanding rests on interpretation in both the natural sciences and the human sciences. In contrast, I hold that understanding is a cognitive organization of information and beliefs. Such a conception opens up for the attribution of understanding to other beings apart from humans. Animals, just as humans, possess instinctive and acquired understanding without being involved in any act of interpretation. I also maintain that even if we isolate reflective understanding to human beings, this still does not give us reason to hold that all understanding is the immediate result of an interpretation. For instance, experiencing the world around us or reading a simple text often does not engage us in an interpretation of what we see or read. This is something we comprehend directly whenever we have acquired the relevant concepts in virtue of which we grasp our daily life.

In contrast to the hermeneutic tradition I present a model of interpretation which, I believe, can bridge the much decried divorce between the disciplines leading to a unified view of the natural sciences and the human sciences. Interpretation, as I understand it, is an active cognitive procedure by which we attempt to solve a representational problem in cases where we don't have any immediate comprehension. We have no such immediate grasp of the matter if what we see or read doesn't fit into our background beliefs and knowledge. The purpose of interpretation is to yield understanding of what something – taken to represent something else – actually is representing, or how something unfamiliar might be represented. Thus an interpretation is the creation of either a hypothesis in virtue of which we explain what something symbolizes, stands for, designates, refers to, etc., or a hypothesis in virtue of which we construct a way of grasping an unknown phenomenon. In both cases the interpreter or the audience, or both, would gain an insight into something that was not understood prior to the interpretation.

The above explication of interpretation and understanding paves the way for a unified approach to both the natural sciences and the humanities. If understanding is nothing but an organism's organization of information and beliefs, then it seems quite evident that the empirical methods for gaining understanding in the natural sciences cannot be different from those we must use to acquire understanding in the humanities. The evolution by natural selection has established in our predecessors a disposition to detect false beliefs and stick to true beliefs. Humans are by nature intentional beings that learn from their cognitive successes and cognitive failures. So the justification of the use of empirical methods in the humanities as well as in the natural sciences is that these methods are grounded in a certain innate cognitive practice of belief acquisition. The capacity of learning is based on the cognitive mechanism of induction, and the modern specification of various types of empirical methods are abstracted and generalized from our mind's reflection upon the cognitive practice that rests on this mechanism.

In opposition to Dilthey and his school, Gadamer claimed that the humanities were not unique in demanding the use of methods different than those used in the natural sciences. However, he argued that objective interpretation of a text was not within the range of literary study. His reason for saying so was that any interpretation is bounded by a historical perspective and that the author's intention has no role to play in an interpreter's interpretation of a literary text. I believe he is wrong. I argue that Gadamer ignored a distinction between the act and the topic of interpretation. All interpreters are situated in a historical context and their interpretive hypotheses may be coloured by the existence of such a context. But if the topic of one's interpretive hypotheses is the author's intentions, which exist independently of hypothesis itself, and if one uses adequate evidence and empirical methods to justify these interpretations, the resulting insight will be as objective as something can be. Therefore, I conclude that a naturalistic stance to the humanities is superior to any hermeneutic stance.

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