

VERSTEHENDE PSYCHOLOGIE

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Primary Disciplinary Field(s): Philosophy, Psychology (Historical, Hermeneutic, and Humanistic branches), Sociology, Hermeneutics

The German phrase **Verstehende Psychologie** translates directly to "understanding psychology" and denotes a critical philosophical and methodological approach within the human sciences. This school of thought, primarily championed by the German philosopher **Wilhelm Dilthey**, rejects the notion that psychological phenomena can be adequately studied using the same explanatory framework applied to the natural world. Instead, it posits that human experience, consciousness, and culture require a distinct, interpretative methodology centered on **comprehension** or *Verstehen*, rather than causal explanation (*Erklären*) derived from natural laws.

1. Core Definition and Etymology

Verstehende Psychologie fundamentally concerns itself with the internal, lived experiences of individuals and the meanings they ascribe to their actions, environments, and historical contexts. It serves as the psychological cornerstone of the broader domain Dilthey termed the *Geisteswissenschaften* (human or cultural sciences). The central objective is not to find universal, nomothetic laws governing behavior--as sought by the natural sciences (*Naturwissenschaften*)--but rather to grasp the unique structure and coherence of individual psychic life and historical reality.

The term *Verstehen* itself is critical. While it simply means "to understand" in common German usage, in the context of this methodology, it signifies a deep, empathic, and systematic process of interpretive understanding. This process involves recreating or reliving the mental state, context, and motivations of the subject being studied. Unlike scientific **explanation** (*Erklären*), which reduces complex phenomena to simple cause-and-effect mechanisms, *Verstehen* seeks to grasp the meaning embedded within human expressions, whether they are actions, artistic works, or historical documents. This distinction establishes **Verstehende Psychologie** as an anti-positivist movement in 19th-century thought.

This approach highlights the irreducible complexity of the human spirit (*Geist*). Dilthey argued that because we are subjects who participate in history and culture, we have direct access to the realm of the mental through intuition and inner perception, an access unavailable when studying inanimate objects. Therefore, human psychological structure is not merely a collection of isolated facts but an interconnected whole, which must be understood holistically, grounding the psychology within the broader philosophical tradition of **historicism** and **hermeneutics**.

2. Historical Context and Intellectual Origins

The emergence of **Verstehende Psychologie** in the late 19th century was a direct response to the

dominant scientific paradigm of the era: **positivism**. Following successes in physics and biology, many scholars, including early experimental psychologists like Wilhelm Wundt, sought to apply rigorous, reductionist scientific methods to the study of the mind. This attempt to naturalize psychology often meant focusing only on observable behaviors, measurable responses, and elemental sensations.

Wilhelm Dilthey, witnessing this intellectual climate, perceived a fundamental error in applying the methodology of the *Naturwissenschaften* to human culture and experience. He contended that the human sciences possess their own intrinsic logic and criteria for validity. His work, particularly "Ideas Concerning a Descriptive and Analytical Psychology" (1894), laid the foundation for differentiating the two types of knowledge. Dilthey sought to provide a rigorous philosophical foundation for psychology that respected its historical and cultural embeddedness, arguing that the life of the mind cannot be isolated from its temporal and social context.

The intellectual roots of this movement are deeply entrenched in German Idealism and Romanticism, particularly the focus on the historical situatedness of human reason (as seen in Herder and Hegel) and the emphasis on the spirit or *Geist*. Dilthey synthesized these historical philosophical currents with a desire to make the human sciences methodologically sound, creating a paradigm shift that influenced not only psychology but also the emerging fields of sociology and cultural anthropology, moving them away from simple determinism toward interpretive understanding.

3. Wilhelm Dilthey: The Primary Proponent

Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911) is universally recognized as the central figure behind the systematic formulation of **Verstehende Psychologie**. His philosophical project was to establish a secure epistemological basis for the human sciences separate from the natural sciences. Dilthey argued that while natural scientists observe phenomena externally and formulate abstract laws, human scientists study products of the mind, which are already manifestations of meaningful expression.

Dilthey proposed a psychological methodology based on **description** and **analysis**, rather than causal experimentation. Descriptive psychology, for Dilthey, involves mapping the structural coherence and interconnection of the elements of psychic life--such as feelings, volitions, and cognitions--as they are immediately given in experience (*Erlebnis*). This descriptive process culminates in *Verstehen*, the comprehension of the whole from its parts and the parts from the whole, often referred to later as the **hermeneutic circle**.

His contribution was pivotal in defining the scope of psychology. By positioning psychology as the crucial nexus between philosophy and the historical sciences, Dilthey ensured that the study of the psyche was inseparable from the study of history, art, and society. He viewed the individual mind as a structural system that mirrors the objective spirit (culture, law, language), making the

understanding of individual experience a prerequisite for understanding historical and cultural forms.

4. The Distinction: *Verstehen* vs. *Erklären*

The methodological distinction between **understanding** (*Verstehen*) and **explanation** (*Erklären*) is the philosophical bedrock of **Verstehende Psychologie**. This dichotomy was famously formalized by philosophers like Heinrich Rickert and further applied by sociologists like Max Weber, though its origin lies with Dilthey's critique of the natural scientific model.

Explanation (*Erklären*) operates by identifying external causes and formulating general laws that link those causes to observed effects. For example, a physicist explains the motion of a projectile by appealing to the laws of gravity and inertia. This method is causal, reductionist, and aims for universal, verifiable prediction. In the psychological sphere, an explanatory approach might seek biological correlates or environmental stimuli that trigger a specific behavior.

In contrast, **Understanding** (*Verstehen*) seeks to grasp the meaning, purpose, and intentionality of human action from the internal perspective of the actor. It is an empathetic, reconstructive process that reveals the connection of mental states (e.g., motive, intention, feeling) within the context of the subject's goals and values. When a human scientist uses *Verstehen*, they are not merely observing a reaction but interpreting an expression. For instance, instead of explaining political protest through economic deprivation (a causal link), *Verstehen* attempts to understand the emotional resonance, perceived injustice, and ideological commitment that imbue the act with meaning for the participants.

This critical separation implies that human reality is structured by **meaning**, whereas natural reality is structured by **causality**. By embracing *Verstehen*, **Verstehende Psychologie** insists that the proper objects of psychological inquiry--feelings, values, goals, and history--are accessible through interpretation, not through the laboratory manipulation of variables. This shift elevated the importance of narrative, biography, and cultural artifacts as primary sources of psychological knowledge.

5. Methodology: Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences (*Geisteswissenschaften*)

To achieve the goal of *Verstehen*, Dilthey anchored **Verstehende Psychologie** in the established tradition of **hermeneutics**--the theory of interpretation. Historically applied to sacred texts and legal documents, hermeneutics was expanded by Dilthey to encompass all human expressions, including actions, institutions, and the entire structure of psychic life.

The core mechanism for achieving comprehension is the **hermeneutic circle**. This concept

dictates that the understanding of any individual part (e.g., a specific decision or emotion) depends on the understanding of the whole life structure of the person, and conversely, the whole life structure can only be grasped through the cumulative understanding of its parts. This circular, iterative process prevents reductionism and demands a constant refinement of interpretation as new context is integrated.

Furthermore, *Verstehen* relies on the concept of **Lived Experience** (*Erlebnis*). Dilthey argued that human life is experienced immediately and inwardly as a flowing, temporal unity. Because we share a common human nature and participate in the same cultural world (objective spirit), we can access and re-experience the feelings and motives expressed by others. **Verstehende Psychologie** uses the structured analysis of these expressions--whether autobiographical accounts or cultural artifacts--to reconstruct the intentional framework and overall meaning structure of a life, thereby moving beyond simple empathy to systematic comprehension.

6. Influence and Subsequent Developments

Although **Verstehende Psychologie** did not become the dominant paradigm in mainstream 20th-century psychology (which largely followed the explanatory model of behaviorism and cognitivism), its influence on the broader human sciences was profound and enduring. Its tenets provided the philosophical groundwork for several important movements.

In sociology, **Max Weber** adopted and refined the concept of *Verstehen*, making it central to his interpretive sociology. Weber defined sociology as a science concerned with the interpretive understanding of social action and thereby with a causal explanation of its course and consequences. His use of *Verstehen* sought to understand the subjective meaning that actors attach to their actions, which remains a key methodology in sociological research.

The movement also heavily influenced **phenomenological** and **existential psychology**, including figures like Karl Jaspers, who utilized Dilthey's methods to understand the complex internal worlds of individuals experiencing psychopathology. Later, the core principles of understanding the whole person and their unique subjective world resonated strongly within **humanistic psychology**, spearheaded by figures such as Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow, who prioritized the individual's lived experience over external classification.

The legacy of this approach is most evident in contemporary qualitative research methodologies across psychology, anthropology, and education, where methods like grounded theory, interpretive phenomenology, and discourse analysis prioritize understanding meaning and context over quantitative measurement and causal inference. It continually serves as a crucial counterpoint to purely empirical or neuroscientific approaches to the mind.

7. Criticisms and Debates

Despite its significant contributions to the philosophy of science, **Verstehende Psychologie** faced substantial criticisms, primarily regarding issues of objectivity and scientific rigor. The central debate revolves around whether the methods of interpretation can yield truly verifiable, reliable knowledge.

Critics, particularly those aligned with logical positivism and the hard sciences, argued that *Verstehen* is inherently subjective, relying too heavily on empathy, intuition, and the interpreter's own background. They questioned how one could validate the accuracy of a reconstructed motive or feeling, suggesting that such knowledge could never achieve the intersubjective consensus required of scientific truth. This lack of external, measurable criteria for validation was seen as undermining psychology's claim to scientific status.

Furthermore, there was debate concerning the scope of *Verstehen*. Critics argued that focusing solely on understanding meaning neglects the crucial role of unconscious drives, biological determinants, and environmental conditioning that operate outside the realm of intentional consciousness. While **Verstehende Psychologie** provided rich descriptive depth, it often struggled to provide predictive power or universal generalization, capabilities highly valued in empirical science. Dilthey's work also faced internal challenges regarding how to bridge the gap between individual psychological analysis (the immediate *Erlebnis*) and the vast scale of historical and cultural interpretation (the objective *Geist*).

Nonetheless, proponents counter that the goal of the human sciences is not prediction but profound insight. They argue that the methods of *Verstehen* are not arbitrary but are disciplined by the constraints of context, history, and linguistic expression, making them as rigorous in their own domain as empirical methods are in theirs. The debate over *Verstehen* vs. *Erklären* remains central to the philosophy of psychology today.

8. Further Reading

[Wilhelm Dilthey \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Verstehen \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Geisteswissenschaft \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Hermeneutics \(Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy\)](#)

[Max Weber \(Wikipedia\)](#)