

What does it mean to understand a Writer better than He understood Himself* **

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THE PROBLEM

In the interpretation of philosophical texts and literary works we often encounter the saying that it is important to understand the writer better than he understood himself. At first this saying appears presumptuous. If to understand another means to duplicate his experience, then only the one who had the experience can best know what he means by what he says; and perfect understanding would be the exact duplication and reproduction of what was immediately present in the one who had the experience. We can see how far we fall short of such perfection when we consider how weak the spoken word is as an image of actual life, and how much weaker still is the written word, which lacks the support of physical gesture or facial expression. Thus the claim to understand a writer better than he understood himself seems frivolous and presumptuous.

And yet this maxim recurs unavoidably in the concrete work of textual interpretation. It is, perhaps, not taken quite seriously; it carries a faint undertone of self-irony — but it genuinely expresses a recurring situation in textual interpretation. We must ask: does this saying, which at first appears presumptuous, actually express a legitimate aim of textual interpretation?

It is difficult to answer this question; usually one is content to maintain that there is "something correct" about this maxim, thereby indicating that, although it cannot be asserted with complete seriousness, it does nevertheless point — with a certain playful turn of phrase — to a significant and important problem.

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But here we must inject a word of caution. The view that this proposition is a half truth, that there is something correct about it, can be dangerous; such reassurance can put an end to further questioning, and thus conceal the deeper situation which had been coming into view in all its uncanniness. We must penetrate more deeply and understand the half truth in the light of the whole truth which it reflects. The understanding to be gained in this process will justify even the self-evident statements which may make the first part of our path appear tedious and fruitless.

When we investigate the conditions of being able to understand a product of the human spirit better than it is understood by its own creator, it is important to develop the broader context in which this apparent paradox can reveal its true meaning. We must distinguish between the realm in which such better understanding is meaningfully possible, and the realm in which it is meaningless.

HISTORY OF THE FORMULA

Before beginning the thematic discussion it seems appropriate to take up briefly the history of the formula "understand a writer better than he understood himself." This expression or related expressions in contemporary methodological discussions show the influence of Dilthey. In the manuscript notes to his *Entstehung der Hermeneutik* (*Origin of Hermeneutics*) Dilthey speaks of the "Rule: understand better than the author understood himself."¹ His labeling of this phrase as a "rule" would indicate that it was familiar to him from the tradition of philosophical methodology. What was Dilthey's source for this thought?

Like many of Dilthey's ideas about procedures in the humanities, especially the "hermeneutic circle," this one can be traced back to Schleiermacher; it occurs explicitly in his *Hermeneutik*. But even Schleiermacher treats this idea as something familiar, stating only that "in general, there is some truth in the formula that the highest perfection of interpretation consists in understanding an author better than he could account for himself."²

Boeckh adopted this idea from Schleiermacher, developing it further in his *Encyclopädie und Methodologie der Philologischen Wissenschaften* (*Encyclopedia and Methodology of the Philological Sciences*). He too states that "the interpreter must understand the author not only as well as, but even better than he understands himself."³

But if even Schleiermacher calls this phrase a "formula" which has "some truth" about it, he too would seem to be referring to something familiar — to something, indeed, which was so well-known that he could spare himself explicit citation of the source of the phrase. What is the source prior to Schleiermacher? I have not been able to trace it back further in the literature of hermeneutics. It does not occur, for instance, in Friedrich August Wolf, where it might be expected. It does, however, occur at some important points in the history of philosophy.

The most important of these is the well-known passage at the beginning of the *Transcendental Dialectic* in which Kant refers to Plato when introducing his doctrine of ideas. In order to justify his own view, which differs from Plato's, Kant remarks that "it is by no means unusual, upon comparing the [11/12] thoughts which an author has expressed in regard to his subject, whether in private conversation or in writing, to find that we understand him even better than he understood himself. As he has not sufficiently determined his concept, he has sometimes spoken, or even thought, in opposition to his own intention."⁴

¹ Wilhelm Dilthey, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. V, p. 335.

² Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Werke*, part 3, Vol. III, p. 362; cf. also Vol. V, p. 437.

³ August Boeckh, *Encyclopädie und Methodologie der philologischen Wissenschaften*, p. 87.

⁴ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, B 370.

The phrase occurs also in Fichte, who was no doubt familiar with the Kantian text, in the last of his *Vorlesungen über die Bestimmung des Gelehrten (Lectures on the Vocation of the Learned)* in which he disputed the doctrines of Rousseau by first demonstrating and then resolving their contradictions. Fichte says here, "We will resolve the contradiction; we will understand Rousseau better than he understood himself, and we will then find that he is in complete agreement with himself and with us."⁵ Clearly expressed here is the justification for this procedure, as well as its unavoidable violence. In the same vein, although in a more specific context, Fichte states in his *Reden an die deutsche Nation (Addresses to the German Nation)* that a German "can understand" a foreigner "completely, even better than he can understand himself."⁶

Not many years later Herbert defended his own work against the arbitrary use of this procedure: "what is expressed here ... is, I hope, neither new enough nor old enough to excite anyone's desire to make it conform to strange theories, and to want to understand it better than the author."⁷

The expression, or a similar one, occurs in other passages in the literature of the 19th and 20th centuries, but it is not our task here to provide a complete list of examples. Our intention is only to indicate some of the earliest. It is doubtful that the formula originated with Kant. I have not been able to trace it back farther, but the linguistic style of the expression seems to me to preclude an origin with Kant; its mildly witty style deviates too sharply from the labored seriousness which characterizes the rest of the language of the critique of reason. The expression, which sounds like a sort of jargon and hints at disrespect, suggests a formula which evolved among the philologists and quickly became widespread because it forcefully expressed a critically fundamental problem in their work. It may have been in use for a long time before it entered the world of printed literature, where sources are verifiable — just as even today the expression is much more widespread than its use in print would indicate.

BOECKH'S AND DILTHEY'S INTERPRETATION OF THE FORMULA

Before attempting a systematic investigation of the formula it will be helpful to examine the passages just cited, in order to learn from the way the phrase is used something more about what it implies. The passage from Kant is clear. In Schleiermacher no further explanation is provided. In Boeckh, however, the formula is the occasion for a thorough discussion of the essence of scientific interpretation:

"The writer is for the most part unconscious of the laws of grammar and style which he follows as he composes. The interpreter, on the other hand, cannot interpret thoroughly without becoming explicitly aware of those laws, for the interpreter must reflect; the author produces, but he reflects upon his work only if he himself stands above it as an interpreter. It follows that the interpreter must understand the author not only as well as but even better than he understands himself. For the interpreter must bring to full consciousness what the author created unconsciously, and in this process much will be disclosed to him which was unknown to the author himself."⁸

Decisive is the relation between "producing" and "reflecting". The former occurs unconsciously — while this may not be true of content, it is true of form, of "the laws of grammar

⁵ Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *Werke*, F. Medicus, ed., Vol. I., p. 265.

⁶ Fichte, *Werke*, Vol. V, p. 437.

⁷ Johann Friedrich Herbart, *Über die ästhetische Darstellung der Welt als das Hauptgeschäft der Erziehung*, § 48.

⁸ Boeckh, *loc. cit.*

and style" — but the activity of the interpreter occurs in full consciousness. It must objectify what remained hidden to the writer himself. Consequently it can see things, "disclose much," which had remained hidden to the author himself.

The idea has exactly the same tendency in Dilthey:

"The rule: understand better than the author understood himself, also solves the problem of the idea of a literary work. It is present not as an expressed thought but as an unconscious context which is operative in the organization of a work, and from whose inner form understanding arises; a writer does not need it — indeed, will never be fully conscious of it; the interpreter draws it out, and that is perhaps the supreme triumph of hermeneutics."⁹

At first the thought here appears to be the same: the inner form of the creation is not conscious to the creator himself but can and must be drawn out by the interpreter. But at the same time, the doctrine is decisively deepened here: Dilthey's "inner form of the work" replaces Boeckh's "laws of grammar and style" and is bound so tightly to the "idea of a literary work" that the act of understanding better goes beyond mere form, penetrating deeply in to the thematic heart of the work itself. Dilthey believed that creation, not only of form but also of content, proceeds unconsciously. This is Dilthey's doctrine of "unconscious creation", which is at the heart of his philosophy. Thus, according to Dilthey, understanding an author better than he understood himself is possible because creation takes place unconsciously and comes to full consciousness only during interpretation. And understanding the author better than he understood himself is possible to the extent and only to the extent that creation takes place in the unconscious. Here it becomes clear how much this question leads us beyond a mere methodology of the humanities into the deeper question of the essence of man.

PRELIMINARY DISTINCTIONS

It would be possible to develop the full sense of our formula using only these two passages in Boeckh and Dilthey. For the doctrine of unconscious creation is indeed the key to understanding what it means to understand an author better than he understood himself. Nevertheless, it will be useful to investigate a bit further; if we were to stop here we might overlook essential questions which would escape our attention entirely. We must first ask, whether better-understanding coincide with understanding itself — that is, whether one can better-understand everything that one understands, or whether better-understanding is a narrower realm within the more encompassing realm of understanding itself.

But before we approach this question we must first resolve an ambiguity that obscured our very first reflections. We began with a sense of the presumptuousness of wishing to know more [13/14] about another person than he himself knows. The problem here is the ambiguity of the concept of understanding, on the one hand it can refer to understanding the report that the other has made of his psychic life, which is something separate from it. When we speak here of understanding a writer, we always mean understanding the text that he has written or the work that he has formed. We exclude the question of his psychic experience and consider the object that is its result.

Two questions which could only have confused our particular purpose are thereby eliminated. The first is to what extent the strength and fullness of content of an immediate psychic experience can be repeated in the experience of understanding. There seems to be no doubt that this can occur only to a very limited degree, and that in this sense understanding can never equal, let alone surpass, the experience. The second question is how far the significance of this experience in one's own life can be better understood by another person. The fundamental

⁹ Dilthey, *loc. cit.*

question implied here about the relationship between the understanding of self and the understanding of others would take us in an entirely different direction, and we cannot pursue it further in this essay.

For our purposes, the possibility of better-understanding refers only to the work and, in the simplest case, to a given literary text — and never to the individual psychic substructure that is the basis for this work.

The word "writer" in this case designates the work that is under consideration, so that the formula, strictly speaking, means understanding a *work* better than it was understood by its own creator. The formula has thus lost at least a part of its problematic character, although what remains will make difficulty enough.

THE CONDITION OF THE POSSIBILITY OF UNDERSTANDING-JUST-AS-WELL: THE CONCLUSIVENESS OF A WORK

Having made these preliminary distinctions we can now approach our subject directly. But before we can meaningfully ask to what extent it is possible to understand a writer better than he understood himself, we must first answer a simplified question: to what extent is it possible to understand a writer *as well* as he understood himself — that is, to what extent is an understanding possible that completely exhausts the writer's intended meaning?

To begin with the most obvious example: we understand a mathematical proposition when we grasp the intrinsic coherence of its terms. Obviously such a proposition cannot be understood better or worse. As long as its inner coherence is not seen with absolute clarity, the proposition has not been understood at all. And conversely, once the proposition is really understood — that is, once its inner necessity has been grasped — there is a total clarity which cannot be improved upon. The meaning of the proposition coincides perfectly with the understanding.¹⁰

The objection may be raised that this example of a mathematical proposition is inappropriate to our problem, which concerns the humanities. But this objection is not tenable, for mathematics is a pure case of intellectual understanding and what appears here with greater clarity is true of every other proposition or combination of propositions that expresses its sense in clear and logically impeccable form. In this vein Fichte declared, in his introduction to his *Wissenschaftslehre* of 1794, [14/15] "What has been thought with complete clarity is understandable." He then added, looking back upon his own work, "And I am conscious of having thought everything with complete clarity."¹¹

Another example, which takes us from the purely logical to the concretely real is the relation of means to ends, which I would like to designate technical understanding (in the broadest sense). In the context of the means-end relationship, the inner inevitability of a human action, of a tool, of a part of a machine can be understood insofar as they are the meaningfully and purposefully applied means to the achievement of predetermined ends. Understanding means grasping them as means to the end, that is, being able to infer with certainty the intended end from the given means. And the same is, of course, true of every verbal report of human action, as long as the goal-directedness of the reported behavior is expressed clearly enough.

We are dealing here with that form of historical understanding which was convincingly developed by von Gottl-Ottlilienfeld in his *Grenzen der Geschichte (Limits of History)*. Historical reality differs from mere nature, he says, because "here logic is found in the events them-

¹⁰ I wish to emphasize here that even in the understanding of a mathematical proposition the situation can be conceived of in this way only as a rough approximation. It must be presupposed that the proof is already in its classical form, and the proof must not be seen as a part of a larger system of proofs.

¹¹ Fichte, Vol. I, p. 283.

selves, as it were; it is part of their substance; it is decisive for their particular structure,"¹² so that understanding is only the bringing out of this inherent logic. In all of von Gottl-Ottlilienfeld's examples there is the same essential characteristic: an inner logic of the thing itself, which permits an inherent certainty of understanding. Because of this inner logic, understanding has a precisely defined completeness which permits neither mere approximation on the one hand, nor improvement beyond what is contained in the thing itself on the other.

This, by the way, is the only area in which there is a solution to the so-called "hermeneutic circle" in the humanities: even though the process that leads to such knowledge can never be put into a form that proceeds rigorously, step by step, still the solution can be justified as the only one in which the multiplicity of parts comes together in a unified whole. This is true even of the simplest example, such as the understanding of a Latin sentence: even though one may approach the correct meaning of the sentence only by trial and error, the correct solution finally stands out with an inherent certainty as the only one in which each individual part is meaningful and necessary.¹³

In all cases of certainty of understanding the work under consideration contains an inherent characteristic: following the lead of Freyer¹⁴ we may usefully designate this characteristic "conclusiveness." "Conclusiveness" means an inherent completeness in the finished work: nothing in it remains indeterminate and unformed, and every thing that is willed and intended comes to its full definition. "Conclusiveness" is the condition of the possibility of certain understanding.

If, as Gottl-Ottlilienfeld points out, the understanding of a technical structure is in terms of the logic of its inner purposefulness, then the presupposition of such technical understanding is that what was produced was totally structured by purposeful action. Whenever the actor has erred, whenever he has behaved inexpediently and has tried to use inexpedient means to reach his goal — indeed, whenever means, in itself possible, is not the most expedient for the achievement of the goal — then unambiguous understanding will be possible. [15/16]

We can apply this insight to the understanding of a text: a text is understandable when the writer has expressed his thoughts in a truly clear and sensible way. When he does not succeed, when he remains unclear and confused, understanding can never achieve total clarity. Complete clarity of the text is the condition of the possibility of understanding with certainty.

Thus, when a work has been fashioned with total conclusiveness the goal of understanding exactly what the writer really meant can be achieved. Here one need not be satisfied with a lesser degree of understanding because this total conclusiveness makes possible total comprehension. Conversely, such understanding cannot be surpassed, for the author has left nothing indefinite which might be improved upon. Here is the pure case of a writer being understood exactly as he understood himself.

BETTER-UNDERSTANDING AS COMPLETING WHAT IS UNFINISHED

We must note that what is totally conclusive and *only* what is totally conclusive is unambiguously understandable. The limits of conclusiveness are also the limits of understanding with certainty. If conclusiveness is not achieved in the creative process, understanding remains uncertain and at the mercy of opinion.

Granted this relationship between understanding and conclusiveness, it is possible to take one

¹² Friedrich von Gottl-Ottlilienfeld, *Wirtschaft als Leben*, Jena 1925, p. 339f.

¹³ For Georg Kerschensteiner precisely this inherent certainty that accompanies the correct solution is the basis of the uniquely constructive meaning of the work of translation, cf. *Begriff der Arbeitsschule*, p. 57ff.

¹⁴ Hans Freyer, *Theorie des objektiven Geistes*, 3rd edition 1934, p. 90ff.

of two positions. For the sake of certainty, we might limit understanding to those cases where the conclusiveness of the work makes perfect understanding possible. But we must realize that total conclusiveness is an ideal which is achieved in only a few exceptional cases, such as mathematical propositions. This first approach applies, to a certain extent, to literature and the fine arts, since here the creator selects his material with a view toward a completed work. But there are difficulties: to stress only what is complete in a work is to lose sight of the entire historical background within which the completed work is, after all, only an unusual, exceptional case. This restriction would substantially diminish the possibility of a truly comprehensive insight. For the historian, of course, a restriction to the conclusive work is altogether out of the question. He is interested not only in what is complete but in the full extent of reality, and he must wrest its meaning from every available source that might contribute in any way to his investigation. This brings us to the second possibility.

For here an entirely new task arises: to understand not only the complete but the incomplete — that is, not restricting ourselves to those objects in which a certainty of understanding is guaranteed by their very nature, but venturing out into the uncertain, trying to grasp what is meant and intended in a work, even if it has not been brought to full expression. The task is to understand not only what a writer actually said in the very words of his statement, but to go beyond that and understand what he "wanted to say"¹⁵ — in other words, to understand him better than he understood himself. Under what conditions is such better-understanding possible? At first it again appears to be presumptuous: how can I, the one who understands, presume to penetrate so far into the innermost thoughts of another?

We already know from our previous discussion that such better-understanding is possible only when conclusiveness is not achieved in a work, when a certain imprecision remains in the work itself. We are not referring here to the minor contradictions and inaccuracies which occur in isolated passages and which can be resolved by reference to the work as a whole. These cases have a solution and do not interest us further. We are confining ourselves to the more important contradictions which cannot be resolved by referring to the work as a whole, but are integral to the work as such. A thought process has apparently not arrived at its full conclusion. This can have two reasons: one is the incompetence of the writer, in which case the matter is not worth further effort; or it can mean that important and decisive matters are being dealt with, whose mastery is beyond the power of a single individual. In this case our task must be to reach beyond the words themselves and pursue the thought process operative here, so that we can understand what was meant and intended.

But we may fear that when understanding is no longer held in check by its object's conclusiveness, subjectivity and arbitrariness will hold sway. Yet closer reflection shows that this is not necessarily so. It is, of course, true that the certainty of understanding which is possible in the presence of complete conclusiveness is not attainable in these new cases. But this does not result in arbitrariness if control, while no longer provided by the work, is now supplied by the subject matter it treats. When I attempt not only to interpret the completed work but also to use it to penetrate into its subject matter itself, this subject matter provides a context in the light of which what was incompletely or even incorrectly expressed can be recognized and corrected.

Here we have ascertained the first and simplest case of better-understanding: the understanding of the fragmentary and incomplete. In this case it is possible to surpass the level of understanding achieved by the writer himself, to carry the thoughts which he began through to their conclusion and to define more precisely from this conclusion the level that he did achieve.

¹⁵ As formulated by Kant in the last sentence of his essay *Über eine Entdeckung, nach der alle neue Kritik der reinen Vernunft durch eine ältere entbehrlich gemacht werden soll*, and recently by Martin Heidegger, *Kant und das Problem der Metaphysik*, Bonn 1929, p. 193.

The possibility of this better-understanding depends, however, on having the thematic insight that will complete what has not been fully developed in the text. And the prerequisite of this possibility is, of course, that the text is determinate at least to the extent, that its goal can be ascertained with sufficient clarity. This can indeed be the case, but might not be; and this latter possibility gives rise to new uncertainties which must be dealt with separately.

BETTER-UNDERSTANDING AS CLARIFYING THE BACKGROUND

We can see that in all cases of understanding or better-understanding discussed so far, interpretation proceeds, as it were, in the direction of the writer to be understood; the one who understands puts himself in the writer's place in order to complete his work by thinking further about what the writer began. But now we can see the limit of this procedure: it can only be used when the goal of the work to be understood is unambiguously clear. When the goal is unclear and must be determined, new uncertainties arise and a new approach is necessary — a distancing from the immediately given thought process, which Boeckh called "n flexion".

It is now clear that our discussion so far has by no means exhausted the possibilities of interpretation; on the contrary, these possibilities only arise [17/18] when the interpreter's position differs from that of the author so that he can see from without what the author saw from within and can place himself outside of and, if you will, above the writer's direct thought process. These things are self-evident to every interpreter from his own work, but they must be emphasized so that we can understand their full significance for our problem.

Further, the decisive and basic concepts of a thinker are usually not expressly defined and must be determined by the interpreter from their use. The same is true of a thinker's background assumptions and guiding intuitions. They are usually not expressly treated, and can be gathered only from the work as a whole.

This is not carelessness on the author's part, nor is it a case of ignoring the precautionary rules of scientific method. On the contrary, it is deeply rooted in the very essence of human creativity. A person's fundamental concepts and guiding convictions are so self-evident to him that he does not specifically reflect upon them — indeed he may not even be conscious that these convictions are not self-evident in themselves, but peculiar to him and historically determined.

Every writer's achievement is grounded in a specific world view, but he need not be aware of this ground. In fact, only to a very limited extent can he know of it at all. It is a part of the essence of human life to be supported at every moment by an understanding of life which gives direction but which can never be made objective in its entirety. Creativity is supported by this understanding, but creativity looks away from itself and towards its subject matter; it sees only its subject matter, and not its own relation to it. For the interpreter on the other hand, this background is not self-evident. He can gain access to the work only by working out this background and understanding the work in the light of it.

Thus it is clear that the understanding of the creator and the understanding of the interpreter can never coincide. They do not see the same thing but different aspects of the same thing. This occurs not only because what is important to the one is unimportant to the other, but also for the deeper reason that the interpreter can see more than the creator, who is, in a sense, entangled in his work. We are again confronted by the complex relationship between self-understanding and the understanding of others, which we do not wish to deal with at present. Let us only point out the simple insight that at this point the claim to understand an author better loses its presumptuousness, if only because we can now see that the interpreter must necessarily understand other than —• and thus, in some ways, more than — the one who is

understood. The claim loses its pre-sumptuousness also because this better-understanding occurs only in a certain definite sense and does not at all mean that the interpreter has exhausted the full extent of the work to be understood.

In summary, then: when we leave the level of purely logical conclusiveness and enter the realm of expressions of human life whose coherence depends upon the world view proportionate to that life, interpretation cannot be satisfied with repeating what the writer said. Since the interpreter is another person, and since what was self-evident for the author is not self-evident for him, he must elucidate the background from which the work has arisen. He cannot understand the writer as the writer understood himself; but if he is to understand him at all he must go [18/19] beyond what the writer expressly said about himself, and even beyond what he expressly knew about himself — that is, he must understand him better than he understood himself. Thus, better-understanding is by no means an intensification of understanding-just-as-well, but lies on an entirely different plane. To put it epigrammatically: there is no understanding that is not essentially a better-understanding.

CREATIVE INTERPRETATION OF EXPRESSION; THE THEORY OF UNCONSCIOUS CREATION

The previous reflections can be deepened in an essential respect. As we have seen so far, better-understanding depends upon the interpreter's distance whereby he can objectify the writer's position as a whole from the outside, whereas the writer himself is so immersed in all of the unexpressed presuppositions of his world view that he can never — or only with great difficulty — be totally conscious of it. What we call better-understanding is thus a consequence of the difference of standpoint and the different possibilities for perception which arise when a world is seen from within and from without.

The fact that no one can be conscious of what is self-evident to him permits us to speak of "unconscious creation." But this sense of unconscious creation must be sharply distinguished from the notion of "unconscious creation" which, developed primarily by Dilthey, has been a guiding force in the modern theory of expression. Only by considering this theory can we achieve the deepest understanding of our maxim.

We must first understand precisely what Dilthey meant by "expression" (*Ausdruck*) or "experiential expression" (*Erlebnisausdruck*). Expression can be distinguished from other forms of human creativity — such as goal-directed action, which we discussed previously — by the way it reaches down into the depths of the unconscious life. Goal-directed action is human creation insofar as execution of a plan occurs step by step — the goal, which is clearly known from the outset, being thereby transposed from project into reality. Expression, on the other hand, is human creation insofar as something formed in the process of creation from out of the depths of the unconscious life; what is formed was not previously known to the creator, and often surprises even him. The difference is precisely the one Klages developed from the point of view of bodily motion, between willed movement (*Willkürbewegung*) and expressive movement (*Ausdrucksbewegung*).¹⁶ Our cautious use of the phrase "insofar as" is necessary since there never occurs in reality purely goal-directed, or a purely expressive action; these are always united on the two sides of one and the same word — although, naturally, one side or the other will predominate in any individual case.

The difference is this: insofar as a human work arises from purely goal-directed action, it achieves that conclusiveness which we previously recognized as the condition of the possibility of understanding-just-as-well. But insofar as the work is expression, understanding-just-as-

¹⁶ Cf. e.g., Ludwig Klages, *Graphologie*, 1935, p. 27ff.

well is meaningless because in expression the person does not understand himself at all, for he is creating from out of the unconscious; almost he will understand himself late when he observes his own work, looking back on it as a stranger. Expression thus has the profound result of creatively producing something new from the depths of life, in a manner unconscious even to the creator himself. Only in this relationship to the unconscious [19/20] is human life creative in the true sense. But what does better-understanding mean in this case? Its meaning is difficult to grasp because in expression there is no understanding already present to be improved upon. This is, after all, what is meant by saying that expression is unconscious. And conversely: precisely *because* expression does not understand itself as an object, it needs the interpretive understanding which will draw out what is contained in it and bring it to full consciousness. So expression and interpretation, creation and understanding reciprocally need each other; only in this reciprocal relationship is the development of spirit accomplished. Expression is creative but is in itself blind and indeterminate. And conceptual interpretation cannot create anything of itself, but must refer to a previous achievement of unconsciously creative life — yet only through interpretation can the meaning of this achievement be brought out. Interpretation here is not a mere articulation of meaning that is already complete in the expression; it is itself a creative achievement, defining what is still uncertain and co-creating the meaning. It is only in this sense that we speak of the unfathomability of a work of art, of the unfathomability of every human work in which the unconsciously creative activity of expression is operative: through interpretation the content of the work is creatively enlarged.

Here we find the deepest meaning of our maxim about better-understanding, although in the light of this meaning the maxim is revealed to be only a provisional and insufficient formula. Every understanding of expression is necessarily a better-understanding because, first, a person does not understand his expression of himself, which requires interpretation for its own completion; and because, second, interpretation is essentially a creative activity, which wrests a meaning from what was disclosed in expression.

This is not true of the interpretive activity that achieves only the levels which we discussed previously; it is true only of those ultimate peaks of understanding in which a meaning, previously unactualized, is won from its expression in a work. Here interpretation itself is creative. And it is in terms of this ideal of interpretation that we must ultimately define the meaning of the humanities.

THE LIMITS OF BETTER-UNDERSTANDING

Thus interpretation is disclosed as ultimately a process of creative development, in which the one who understands and the one understood participate together in the reciprocally alternating developmental course of spirit. But here we must pause and ask: is this the final word? One hesitates to answer in the affirmative since creative development would then seem to be limitless. Thus the question arises of the limits of the possibility of such creative development and transformation. The answer to this question is provided by the concept of life which forms the basis for this interpretation of understanding. Understanding in the sense of a truly creative development is possible only insofar as the one who understands and the one understood genuinely have something in common; that is, insofar as it can truly be said that the same life created both the expression and the interpretation which appropriates it. For only within such community is it possible for the content of expression to be continued in a new effort, in which one person really develops the work of another. The limits of interpretation are now clear: the creative possibility of interpretation ceases when a gap separates the one who

under- [20/21] stands from the one who is understood.¹⁷

There was once an age which, in its optimism, believed in the understandability of everything human, an age which refused to recognize the narrow limits which too often frustrate the will to understand. And since this age also defined the concept of understanding too loosely, equating it as a matter of course with inner identification, it invited the criticism that such an attitude of understanding everything and forgiving everything obliterates all limits, making impossible any really decisive action or clear judgment of values.

But this criticism is false. It fails to recognize that understanding does not mean the abrogation of one's own position. We do not understand only what we are joined to by the sympathetic relationship of a shared life. We do not understand only the possibilities of our own life but also the attitudes of fundamentally different world views. It might even be said that it is precisely our unrelenting pursuit of an opponent's weaknesses (which are, after all, essential traits) that provides the immense energy with which we penetrate to his innermost hidden motives. Not only love but also hate has the power of enlightenment and sharpens the vision of understanding.

There is a true understanding even of an enemy. It has a characteristic and indispensable role which has been previously noted all too infrequently. Drawing on Nietzsche's notion of "critical history," one might speak of a critical understanding whose characteristic role is its liberating effect. It is directed against what is alien — both when the alien is without, opposing and inhibiting one's own life, and when it is within, one's own life having fallen away from its true essence or become rigid. Critical understanding thus makes room for the free and living development of one's own presence. It is a necessary and indispensable activity for every historical life, since such life can assert and develop itself only in confrontation with other possibilities. This is why all spiritual development occurs only in liberating confrontation with its past. Such confrontation is as essential to spiritual development as is the relationship of creative understanding just discussed.¹⁸

But we must be aware of the limits of this critical understanding also. It is a genuine better-understanding, capable of revealing what remains hidden even to the one who is understood. But it can never be creative. Incisive as it is —and precisely because of its incisive-ness — it is essentially analytical and destructive. It illuminates, it discovers, it reveals, but it does not construct; it does not produce new meaning. This is not to disparage its value, its unique and indispensable contribution to life lies precisely in its critical character. Critical understanding is necessary as long as a person must battle for his innermost essence; but as soon as it is no longer motivated by the seriousness of one's own confrontation it degenerates into the gaze of uncontrolled curiosity. Yet true critical understanding plays its role most properly only when it maintains a relationship to creative understanding. And understanding is creative only insofar as both unite in the continuity of one and the same life which they serve in common.

How far the community of life extends that unites the one who understands with the one understood cannot be previously decided in any individual case. It can, in fact, be different in one and the same author — as in Plato or Kant — depending on the part of his work in question. But what is decisive in this: only to the extent of my stake [21/22] in it can I really accept the other's insights as mine; only to that extent is there possible a further development of my own; only to that extent does the subject matter move of itself. But when I remain a mere observer, or have decided against it, understanding already exists and can change no more. So understanding differs essentially according to whether it is for or against what it confronts as other. And since there is always this other, all understanding is rooted in a decision. I can not

¹⁷ Cf. the sections on the structure of understanding in my essay "Zur Frage nach der Objektivität der Geisteswissenschaften" in *Das Verstehen: drei Aufsätze zur Theorie der Geisteswissenschaften*, Mainz/Rhein 1949.

¹⁸ Cf. my essay "Über das kritische Verstehen" in *Das Verstehen*.

say that I will understand first and then take up a position according to the results. For the taking of a position is always prior to understanding and, in fact, guides its course. Better-understanding, also, is possible in either direction. But here too the taking of a position is not something subsequent that could, but need not, follow upon the results of understanding, as if understanding would be possible even without it. On the contrary, only after the taking of a distinct position are the ultimate possibilities of understanding released, whether it be in the critical sense, in the incisiveness of its penetration, or in the creative sense, in a truly developmental act, which does not simply accept what already exists but draws a new meaning out of the inexhaustability of every great expression of life and thus increases its significance.

Although both critical and creative understanding must be considered equally primary functions of life, from the point of view of better-understanding affirmative interpretation is primary: the ultimate possibilities of understanding can come into play only when the one who understands affirms the one who is understood in an innermost union.