

## Rethinking the canon: Auguste Comte and Johann Gustav Droysen on explanation and understanding

*Mykola Bakaiev*

National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy (Kyiv)

The explanation-understanding distinction has first become mainstream in the philosophy of Wilhelm Dilthey (1833–1911). As Rudolf Makkreel acknowledges in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Dilthey is best known for how he distinguished between the natural sciences and human sciences: the natural sciences explain, while human sciences understand (Makkreel, 2016). In fact, he is so famous for this that many would think that it is he who introduced the notions into philosophy and with their help distinguished between natural sciences and humanities. While it is true that Dilthey enriched and popularized the notions, it is not true that he has introduced them. I urge rethinking the current canon by investigating Diltheyan sources. One such source is British philosopher John Stuart Mill, whose notion of moral sciences was translated into German as *Geisteswissenschaften*, which will eventually mean human sciences in Dilthey's philosophy. However, here I would like to go deeper, focusing on French philosopher Auguste Comte (1798–1857), who influenced Mill's philosophy and introduced the notion of explanation (explication) into the philosophy of science, and German historian and philosopher Johann Gustav Droysen (1808–1884), who reacted to the positivist methodology of science by introducing alternative (*Erklären*) to explanation notion of understanding (*Verstehen*) as a method for historical research.

Comte introduced the notion of explanation while formulating the Law of Three Stages in the first volume of *The Course in Positive Philosophy* (1830) that divided human knowledge into theology, metaphysics, and positive knowledge or science. The difference between theological, metaphysical, and positive stages is the difference in explanation. Theology explains that phenomena are the result of an arbitrary interference of supernatural forces. Similarly, metaphysical explanation sees phenomena as the derivation of abstract entities. Finally, positive knowledge or science uses positive

or scientific explanation, which explains phenomena by linking it to other phenomena with the help of general statements or laws (Comte, 2014, Première leçon II, pp. 3–5). The most striking difference between the three kinds of explanation is that the last one explains nature without invoking supernatural or abstract powers.

A significant problem with the Law is that it has no place for history. History is not a science because it does not use general laws, while the subject of history, which is the past, cannot be directly observed. History is not metaphysics because the historical past is not abstract, and not theology, because it is not supernatural. Unlike Comte, Droysen finds a proper place for history as a science in *The Outline of the Principles of History* (1858). Droysen distinguishes three different kinds of science: logic, physics, and history. They differ in their methods, the essence of which is to recognize (*erkennen*), to explain (*erklären*), and to understand (*verstehen*) respectively (Droysen, 1868, s. 11). While recognition is about recognizing the logical forms of reasoning and explanation corresponds to Comte's positive explanation, understanding is the grasping of another person's inner life through expressions we perceive, which happens in the hermeneutic circle: "the individual is understood in reference to the whole from which it emerges, and the whole – in reference to the individual in which it is expressed" (Droysen, 1960, s. 25). In historical research, understanding helps us to understand better the past through inner lives (thoughts, motives, beliefs, and so on) of our ancestors that we perceive in expression they have left in the material of history (sources, remains, and monuments).

Thus, Comte's explanation and Droysen's understanding are important ideas in philosophy of science that are now associated with Dilthey's work but existed before him.

#### Reference list:

Comte, A. (2014). *Cours de philosophie positive : première et deuxième leçons*. Université Paris-Sorbonne, LABEX OBVIL. Retrieved from [http://obvil.sorbonne-universite.fr/corpus/critique/comte\\_cours-philosophie-positive](http://obvil.sorbonne-universite.fr/corpus/critique/comte_cours-philosophie-positive).

Droysen, J. G. (1868). *Grundriss der Historik*. Leipzig: VERLAG VON VEIT & COMP.

Droysen, J. G. (1960). *Historik: Vorlesungen über Enzyklopädie und*

*Methodologie der Geschichte. München: Oldenbourg.*

Explanation and Understanding. (n.d.). *PhilPapers*. Edited by Finnur Dellsén (University of Iceland). Retrieved from <https://philpapers.org/browse/explanation-and-understanding>.

Makkreel, R. (2016). Wilhelm Dilthey. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2016 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.). Retrieved from <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2016/entries/dilthey/>.

## Відповідь прагматизму на кризу ствердження в суспільстві

*Богдан Беня*

Національний університет «Києво-Могилянська Академія»  
(Київ)

Філософія американського прагматизму зазвичай асоціюється з постаттю Річарда Рорті. Втім, не менш цікавими є ідеї передпрагматиста Ральфа Емерсона і Вільяма Джеймса, які набувають особливої актуальності в сучасному інформаційному суспільстві.

Якщо термін «постмодерн» полісемантичний і охоплює майже все, що є післямодерне, то поняття «інформаційного суспільства» дозволяє говорити про сучасність предметно. Зокрема, наскрізною рисою інформаційного суспільства є (1) криза репрезентації та (2) домінування голої фактичності замість рефлексії. Обидві тенденції означають, що суспільство більше не здатне вибудовувати цілісну систему філософсько-світоглядних орієнтирів, які б репрезентували реальність у її смисловому вимірі та були своєрідною мапою для орієнтування людини у її житті (Lash, 2002).

Причини розчарування у філософсько-світоглядних системах зрозумілі: стрункі й логічно продумані концепції в реальному житті часто використовувалися для виправдання численних злочинів, зокрема у тоталітарних політичних режимах. Утім, як доводять теоретики та дослідники інформаційного суспільства (Lash, 2002; Михед, 2016; Nichols, 2017), це розчарування привело і до протилежної крайності – втрати простору