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HERMENEUTIC PERSPECTIVE IN METHODOLOGY OF HISTORY

Abstract

The philosophy of history expresses a knowledge of method that works on how to interpret historical knowledge. The fact that the mere existence of historical knowledge is not enough to make sense of history has revealed the need for the field of philosophy of history. In this context, it cannot be said that the developing philosophy of history is a common and valid method that has reached a consensus on the interpretation of historical information and evidence. However, it is out of the question for the philosophy of history to operate with such a reductionist and singular method. The philosophy of history includes the method that develops theories on how to interpret historical knowledge in the most accurately and philosophically discusses these theories. The interpretation of history is as important as the existence of historical evidence. In this context, the importance of the interpretative (hermeneutic) method within the philosophy of history should be explained, because history, which is a discipline within the human sciences, cannot be comprehended only by the direct transfer of documents. In other words, history requires a method different from natural sciences due to its essence. At this point, the method of the interpretive philosophy of history should be explained and its importance in the science of history should be emphasized.

Keywords: Hermeneutic, Philosophy of History, Interpretative History.

TARİH METODOLOJİSİNDE HERMENEUTİK YAKLAŞIMI

Öz

Tarih felsefesi en temelde tarihsel bilginin nasıl yorumlanacağı konusunda çalışan bir yöntem bilgisini ifade etmektedir. Tarihsel bilginin yalnızca mevcudiyetinin tarihi anlamlandırmak konusunda yeterli olmayışı, tarih felsefesi alanına duyulan ihtiyacı ortaya çıkarmıştır. Bu bağlamda gelişen tarih felsefesinin ise tarihsel bilgi ve kanıtların yorumlanması konusunda fikir birliğine varmış ortak ve geçerli bir yöntemi olduğu söylenemez. Ancak zaten tarih felsefesinin de bu denli indirgemeci ve tekil bir yöntemle iş görmesi söz konusu değildir. Tarih felsefesi tarihsel bilginin en doğru şekilde nasıl yorumlanabileceği üzerine kuramlar geliştiren ve bu kuramları felsefi bir biçimde tartışan yöntemi kapsar. Tarihin yorumlanması en az tarihsel kanıtların varlığı kadar önemlidir. Bu bağlamda tarih felsefesinin içerisinde yer alan yorumlayıcı (hermeneutik) metodun öneminin açık edilmesi gerekir çünkü insan bilimleri içerisinde yer alan bir disiplin olan tarih yalnızca belgelerin doğrudan aktarımı ile kavranamaz. Bir başka deyişle söylenmek istenirse, tarih özü gereği doğa bilimlerinden farklı bir yöntemle ihtiyaç duymaktadır. Bu noktada yorumlayıcı tarih felsefesinin metodu açık edilmeli ve tarih bilimi içerisindeki önemi vurgulanmalıdır.

Anahtar kelimeler: Hermeneutik, Tarih Felsefesi, Yorumlayıcı Tarih.

Introduction

Daniel Little states that philosophy of history is a field in which there are many different approaches, and one cannot speak of a single approach in the context of the philosophy of history. Therefore, when we use to term "philosophy of history" we cannot refer to a specific, traditional field. Because these fields in philosophy of history, rarely engaged with each other. Nonetheless, there are common questions that can be clustered in metaphysics, hermeneutics, epistemology, and ethics in the context of history: "(1) What does history consist of—individual actions, social structures, periods and regions, civilizations, large causal processes, divine intervention? (2) Does history as a whole have meaning, structure, or direction, beyond the individual events and actions that make it up? (3) What is involved in our knowing, representing, and explaining history? (4) To what extent do facts about human history create moral responsibilities for the present generation?" (Little, 2020).

An important area of philosophy of history that argues around these common questions can be seen as the hermeneutical tradition. The hermeneutical tradition claims that history should be studied differently because it is *quintessentially* different from natural sciences. The fact that history is a field of human acts is proof that it does not work with the laws of nature. Therefore, the necessity of interpreting history arises at this point. I will show in this paper hermeneutic history is a valid method of presenting historical events. I will do this by giving brief historical progress of hermeneutic history and providing a comparison between hermeneutic studies and causal historicism. Finally, I will provide theories of how to properly present historical events using hermeneutic history.

I. What is ‘hermeneutic’?

Originally the word of hermeneutic comes from Hermes, the messenger of the Gods in Greek mythology. In the Greek language, ‘hermeneiein’ also means proclamation, translation and explanation. Considering the philosophical and scientific meaning, hermeneutic epistemologically reflects that written documents and physical objects alone are not enough to fully explain the past. It also requires talent and knowledge to interpret these items to see the real picture of historical events. The hermetic approach first appeared in Christian theology. In the Medieval Era, Origenes and Augustinus developed a hermeneutic which depends on Christianity. They tried to find new holy meanings in the Bible (Özlem, 1999: 199). After a while, hermeneutic became a philosophical doctrine. In the Greek language, the word ‘sophia’ means creating a philosophy not only by collecting the facts, it also includes using these facts efficiently and truthfully. However, especially after the Enlightenment Era, this method of understanding history has been seen as unscientific and imagination.

Giambattista Vico (1688- 1744) had a different approach to understanding history. Unlike Descartes’ intellectual approach to history, Vico advocated that history consists of people’s actions and understanding the past means to understand what people created. Of course, he was alone in his thinking that external conditions determined how people acted and reacted. His theory was, to find the meaning of the past, one must understand how people perceived themselves during the period the event occurred. He arrived at this theory after investigating linguistics, mythology, and legal systems. He also examined folklore, roots of words, legends, myths, etc. According to him, there were significant clues in folklore, myths and legends which show how people lived and thus, how the historical event should be interpreted.

Collingwood separated nature and ‘human nature’. He asserts that all history is a performance of the past on historian’s minds. The only way for a historian to understand past events is ‘re-thinking them in his own mind’ (Gilderhus, 2007, 44). Additionally, according to Collingwood, understanding history is to understand people’s attention. The key question should be ‘why did these people attract B, rather than A?’. Chronology, records, and artifacts from these people should be understood. This is called ‘the emphatic approach’ (Jenkins, 1997, 56).

Studies by Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911) and Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) cemented this emphatic approach as a valid historical method. Dilthey claims that hermeneutic is not only a method for understanding history, but it can be a method in order to understand psychology. First, written documents should be criticized in terms of verbal meaning which means philologically. Of course, when we are evaluating these documents, we should consider the meaning of the words as they would have been used in the historical period. Then we can reach the prevailing psychology of the term. However, it is not enough to reach the whole truthfulness of the period. Because we can only understand the past within the context of how we live today. In other words, how we understand the past is relative.

When Dilthey advocates an understanding of history is possible but it is limited because our comprehension has been shaping according to today and today’s world, not the past, on the other hand, Heidegger says that ‘Language is the house of being.’ And understanding is a being action. People always do hermeneutic when they understand the past, they also understand themselves. It means that hermeneutic is not a method like Dilthey’s said- it is a basic action of

a human being. When we accept that the external world is not separated from people. In this situation, we can admit that first ‘everything, which surrounds to people, can be understood.’

In addition to Heidegger’s approach about everything can be knowable, Gadamer also admits this dogma. According to him, a human being’s comprehension is pre-determined. People do not find new; their only knowledge is about what they have. There is not a concept in nature. However, history consists of a history of concepts. For this reason, instead of natural laws, Gadamer proposes that *vorstehen* (pre-understanding) method which is possible with ‘language’. He claims our all knowledge comes from our language. Language is the door that opening to the world, so we can use language and understanding history (Doğan, 1999, 202).

After brief information on hermeneutic historiography, I would like to give a comparison between understanding and explanation methods in history. In strong opposition to methodological hermeneutic is ‘causal historicism’. Carl G. Hempel provided the main classification under discussion in 1942 with the publication of his significant essay ‘*The Function of General Laws in History*’. In this work, Hempel argued that history can be explained as consideration of reasoning, verifiability of trustiness of facts as a universal condition. (Gilderhus, 2007, 81). Regarding this analytical perspective, analytic history, which depends on explanation, can be done with some logical laws like deduction and induction. This method is used for every discipline which processes with natural laws. On the other hand, it is a controversial issue that history can be run work only explanation?

George Simmel in his book, explains that historical events are composed of consolidation of particularly and countless conditions. A general impression, which is composed of the integrity of particular and countless conditions, might be considered that the reason for the events. Thus, we cannot understand history only with an explanation. Historians should search a meaning within the event, and, they search for an intention behind the action, and finally, they should search for a feeling behind the action. History is meaningful with comments (Simmel, 2008, 46).

I believe that the explanation method has inadequacy to elucidate the past correctly. Because historical events are inherently individual and unique. Past belongs to human actions and these actions were depending on people’s intentions, ideas, and feelings. Therefore, we cannot content with a scientific generalization which cannot provide us a stable validity on history. Based on this perspective, ‘understanding side of history is essential. In addition to this, it should be considered that there must be a balance between explanation (*erklären*) and understanding (*verstehen*).

In this part, I present some theories about ‘How might be possible history’s respectful comprehension? First of all, Karl Popper’s proposition might be useful in this context. Karl Popper in his book ‘*The Poverty of Historicism*’ proposed a three-step method for historians. The first step is consisting of a harmonically analyses of social events and understanding of their intentions, motivations, social structure. According to him, it is required that analyzing intentions, social group’s interests, and relationships between state and society but there is a more important thing there; ‘to embrace the importance of event’. A second step is- because of insufficiency of explanation- understanding the meaning of the event. In addition to this, he advocates that ‘In order to understand social life, we must go beyond the mere analysis of factual causes and effects, i.e. of motives, interests, and reactions caused by actions: we have to understand every event as playing a certain characteristic within the whole. The event gains its

significance from its influence upon the whole, and its significance is therefore in part determined by the whole.” The third step of Popper is about ‘inference by analogy’. Eventhough periods are uniqueness, and no event repeats itself in a different period, it can be suggested that some similarities and analogies might be helpful for the historian as a method of intuitive understanding of history. In such, similar cases, -considering the unavoidable difference between two period-historians should appraise the meaning of certain events by comparing them with previous periods.

Quentin Skinner, in his article ‘*Hermeneutics and Role of History*’, also suggests a method to understanding history and making effective hermeneutic of the past. First, he claims that there is an inconvertible relationship between work and its time. The work reflects its own time. If historians want to understand the past, they should relate to the past. In order to provide this, he suggests a two-phased method for interpretation of the past. First, he focuses on clarification of text. The text should be examined with the author, who creates the work, and the author’s words. As a second step, we must be connecting with the author’s intention. What is his/her intention when he/she uses these words? The historians should consider the possible answer to the question that ‘Why did he/she write this?’ The simple way is understanding the author’s intention, Skinner claims that historians should focus on examples that author’s used. For example, when we try to understand a Shakespeare tragedy, we should start by looking at the tragedy’s hero’s characteristic feature. What did Shakespeare think and present to us this character? Idioms, jargon, daily language are clues of the author’s idea. Finally, we need to get into the author’s brain. When we search the author’s intention, we should benefit from the language of author. The words of the author’s used idioms are an indicator of the time. (Skinner 1975, 220)

After all these theories which are relevant to history’s interpretation, I would like to focus on the question that ‘How might require skills of hermeneutic history be?’ In view of such information, I believe that there might be a balance between scientific facts and the insightful perspective of the historian. Generally, historians are agreeing with statements like ‘war of A, is occurred between x and y country in (date) ‘I claim that this perspective can not be adequate to understand history.

History is composed of human and their actions within the framework of thoughts, feelings, and intentions. These actions are unique and cannot repeat it. For this, history involves ideographic sciences which focuses on an understanding of the single case, rather than nomothetic sciences which focus on general laws. Based on this, it can be said that history deals with individuals and intrinsically it cannot be limited with situated rules. When historians are building a bridge between explanation (erklären) and understanding (verstehen), I believe that three main steps should be regarded by the historian;

1. Complementation of knowledge,
2. Insightful perspective and interpretation, concepts
3. Open-ndness to other possibilities

As a first step, a historian should collect extensive information about the past. Evident, sources, facts, should be known inclusively. In order to create effective and truthful work, using a different and wide range of sources is important and necessary. That does not mean the historian needs to a generalization between similar cases and labels them as a ‘law’. The

historian's investigation starts with questions likewise all science does. In this stage the historian should be objective -as much as possible - and he/she should be open-minded to different views about the issue.

As a second step, these sources should be criticized; this means that every era should be evaluated with its terms. Mary Fulbrook, in her book *'Historical Theory'* claims that before historians looking at sources or evidence, historians should be aware of these categorizations and concepts. Because whether the historians aware it or not, they always use these categorization and concepts. This is an unavoidable situation for historians. Concepts and categorization provide a great convenience in terms of forming and measuring the past. Besides, there is a considerable relation between the collection of evidence and the historian's conceptual framework.

According to Mary Fulbrook, language of the past cannot be pure. Because the language is always fulfilled with political and ethical values. She explains that the language in which the historian writes can be variously located: it can reconstruct the concepts of s previous era (reconstructing in a historicist manner, sometimes known as 'immanence'); it can impose on the past the categories of the present or employ often heavily loaded concepts of contemporary political and social debates; it can seek to use explicitly defined theoretical categories. But it cannot escape, in one way to another, the use of situated language.

Concepts are inheritably not neutral; concepts are created by historians. When analyzing even the same society, each historian has a different opinion about the society. Mary Fulbrook called this situation 'double hermeneutic'. (Fulbrook, 2002, 76). From this term of Fulbrook, I figured that the past has its own reality. Even the historians might not reach whole the reality, they will create a meaningful framework of the past. On this point, the historian's intellectual tendency will be important. The latter historians should also consider former historians' tendencies. For example, the concept of 'power' is changing according to a historian's perspective. A Weberian historian's description and perception of power will be different from a Marxist historian. For this reason, clarifying concepts that are served by a historian is a crucially important issue.

Revealing the past requires an examination of terms within their own periods. When this revealing process, historians should notice the fact that first; past and today's world cannot share the same values. It means that there is no universality between societies. Thus, concepts of societies should also be considered within their own uniqueness. Using concepts in different societies leads to an anachronistic perspective which means that misjudgment of historical events because of attributing today's concepts into the past's world. I am agreeing with the idea that the concepts which are used by a historian are constructive apparatus, and all historians use them inevitably. Therefore, historians should be aware of their own imposed concepts to the past, and also, they should try to understand their colleague's concepts.

Mary Fulbrook's other spotlight is about 'extreme examples' of a specific historical event. According to her, when historians trying to revive the past, they should avoid degradation of the historical event into a single reason or a condition. Because in the light of a quite extreme example, the entirety of the past cannot be understood. The historians need exhaustive questions and answers. When they are inquiring about the past with multiple consciousnesses of the period, they should not command the past according to their own contemporary concepts. It is essential to the prevention of an anachronistic evaluation of the past. (Fulbrook, 2002, 86)

Max Weber has a clear sense of the inescapability of concepts which is situated by the historians. And he claims that the historians whether they are Marxist or non-Marxist, can be consensus on important concepts of the period. His comprehension method depends on ‘ideal types’. In some ways, he used terms instead of concepts. He aware of immense generalization on history can not give us the reality of the past. We can facilitate using these ‘ideal types’ in order to understand the past. This ideal type’s phenomenon provides comprehension of singular occurrences. Using these ideal types, historians can not reach a general view, on the other hand, the historians learn how they can evaluate special conditions of the term. In other words, he tried to understand human behaviors within social conditions. It means that understanding an action within social and individual dynamics. His treatment can be counted as the purely psychological side of understanding history. Nevertheless, in order to prevent confusion, I have to say that Weber’s psychological approach can not base on the nomothetic side of psychology. It is more likely that Weber was expecting benefit from sociology and using psychology as an understanding method of human behavior instead of psychology’s restrictive side which examines people’s behavior according to some criteria like ‘what should a person be in order to count as ‘healthy and normal.’ Nonetheless, he thinks that all these psychological acquisitions are inadequate to understand people’s behavior. Because there is a distinction between singular and social action. The historian should emphasize these distinctions.

He was the ability to think about the possibility of countless occurrences of the past. In addition, he connected with both, social and political conditions. For this, he focused on several points. First, historians should be aware of social and political conditions at the same time. Second, historians should consider a conceptual framework. Finally, they should be open-minded for current interest, for this, the historian should leave a space for conditions which are needed to be explaining and understanding again.

I think Weber’s conjunctive approach which is about consideration of both; social and political dynamics can be work on historical understanding. Weber’s ‘ideal types’ of the method is useful apparatus or a beneficial key for the understanding reality of the past. Historians deal with the world which is not alive now. Understand the past attempt and comprehend the reality of the past require theories. Theories or suppositions are very interpretative tools for the hermeneutic historian. Weber has a significant notation for these. He thinks that ‘we can design unreal conditions in order to understand reality.’ For example, a historian can imagine a known historical fact and he/she should ask the question that ‘What would have happened if A country had won the war instead of B country?’ ‘A historian can be able to think about other possibilities of the past. Additionally, the historian tried to establish what the other possibilities of the past were?’ Because historian’s comprehension can not be limited with the question of ‘What exactly happened in the past?’ An extensive and respectful works need more and for this, historians should also achieve to the other conditions of the past. Thinking conditions and people actions designing with different scenarios can be possible with comparative studies. Comparative studies admitting of historical knowledge are analyzing profoundly. Because a historical event or a historical phenomenon can examine with multiple perspectives or interdisciplinary studies. In order to provide this, a historian should know that “What was happening in the different areas at the same time in the past?”. Thanks to these comparative studies historians can understand that what was original and what was not. Certainly, a study that is formed our design, might not reflect the reality of course. On this point, the historian should be aware of the fact that anytime there might be an anomalous factor

on historical events. Historians know that historical events occur with combining of a lot of factors. For instance, the effect of the regime of the country can combine with the economic condition of the country and this situation can create a new order in the country. When historians counting and including new possibilities of the past in their studies, their main purpose is to try to understand a specific possibility within endless possibilities. In fact, this study can be counted as an evaluation of objective probabilities. To sum up, historians' effort is to understand historical conditions and examine "What were the consequences of these conditions? 'When they are doing that the significant point is consideration and evaluation also a specific or unique historical condition of the period? According to Weber, this approach is not only a synthesis which is combining both explanations intended for understanding and motivational coherence, but also an indispensable interpretation for the sake of science's objectivity. (Özlem, 1999, 364).

As I mentioned before, my third point which is for effective interpretation work is about sustaining an open-minded perspective of the historian. From a relativistic view, each work that is created by a historian should have a suspicion. Because, likewise every science discipline, history inherently a progressive science and depending on new finding it will be changed. However, that does not mean that there is no real fact illuminated by the historians. Historians when balanced bridging between scientific text and bright interpretation of the text, can also do ingenious studies balanced with vulgar realism and relativism. I believe that historians can investigate the other historian's representation of the past. However, enforcement of one and true perspective on history is not appropriate for the nature of the science of history. In order to provide sophisticated and unafraid of new knowledge work for history, Keith Jenkins serves a proposal or a solution in his book. He grounded his work on -as the name he called- 'positive reflexive skepticism'. According to him, the historian should ask questions on not only founded evident of the past but also the historian should ask questions on created or situated historical object. In addition to this, historian should inquire about that "Why this question asked and why others don't?" (Jenkins, 1997, 68).

Leibniz (1646-1717) evaluated the historical knowledge within the framework of the probabilities. Because according to him, historical knowledge's nature is depending on randomness and contingency. In this respect, when we think of rational aspect, we can mention probable historical knowledge (probabilitates historica). On the other hand, when we evaluate the historical knowledge in terms of methodological, it is clear that the historical knowledge can be attainable via archive studies and source criticism which is the critique of works of art and written documents. However, these works can not give adequate information about the past. It means that historical knowledge can not be classified as 'knowledge the of law' which is used by natural sciences. Thus, Leibniz emphasizes that historical producing is missing and limited (Özlem, 1999:47).

This approach can be called that historical skepticism. It can be said that being a skeptic, always questioning on the evident and not to be enforcement of one and truth in the past, is a beneficial perspective on understanding the past in this context. About this issue Mary Fulbrook has an excellent expression. She says, there is a potentially infinite number of possible historical accounts, for several reasons. For one thing, there are innumerable possible standpoints in the present and potential questions which can be posed to the past. For another, each historian engages in a creative act of the imagination in the ways he or she selects to represent the answers brought back about that question to the present. To write history entails a

leap of the imagination in both directions- immersion into the atmosphere of a particular moment, time, or place in the past, attempting to interpret understand an alien world; and an imaginative re-creation of that past to make the connections with groups in a particular time and place in the present. The historian is a creative intermediary. Yet is not the case that ‘anything goes’; not all accounts are equally ‘empirically adequate’. It is possible to design ways of testing hypotheses, of checking the validity of interpretations or explanations, the accuracy or otherwise of statements of fact, and the plausibility of statements about relations between facts. Historians can get things wrong-and stand to be corrected (Fullbrook, 2002:193).

Conclusion

I have argued in this article that history is a science that requires the interpretation of evidence. Because the nature of this science bases on actions that are unique and unrepeatable. Besides, there are no historical laws that we can observe subjectively. Therefore, when it comes to answering the extremely important question that how history should be written, the hermeneutic approach is quite insightful among the theories of philosophy of history. For this purpose, I have mentioned firstly the historical process of hermeneutic perspective on historical methodology. Second, I have presented theories about “How should understanding method can be done effectively?” Finally, I tried to combine theories with my opinion, and I claimed that hermeneutic approach should be a part of methodology as an effective and proper method of researching the past.

When historians researching the past, they need some tools to making sense of the past. I think it is impossible to consider history with the famous motto of Ranke, “to show it had really been”. Because just findings (evidence) can not give the past if we think the fact that the other well-known dictum “sources can not speak”. I think the stage, which is after confronting the sources of the past, the perspective of historian determines that whether the historical knowledge can be evaluated preciously or not. It is very clear that sciences’ important doctrine is the ability to ask to question and create a hypothesis and be receptive to the new ideas. As a science of history has a little different from other sciences in some ways. As I told before, history inherently belongs to ideographic science which investigates singular events in the particular time. In this point, I have doubts to think history attaching some rules or laws which are given us the same consequences every time and create a universal validity. From my point of view, is it a sign that history has a closeness to the subjectivity and it deserves to interpretative with an artist’s eye rather than a scientist. I am not completely against to explanatory (erklären)) approach, I believe that without understanding (verstehen), explanation would remain insufficient. I propose that there can be established a correlation between them. However, I also believe that scientific approach in history, should not create laws like nomothetic science’s does, because historical events consist of combining both; multi and complex factors which of them sometimes can not be realized even.

In order to create a plausible and sophisticated thesis, I emphasized on the theories about ‘How can we understand the past truly? I benefited from the historian’s perspective like Karl Popper, Max Weber, Collingwood etc. Finally, I tried to collect to my opinion. I can say that hermeneutic perspective requires attention and awareness. Moreover, this awareness should be in multiple ways. First, the historian should declare his/her perspective and he/she illuminate his/her studying style, concepts, methods etc. And he/she should articulate the tendency or intentions. Secondly, the historian should always keep his/her suspicious of the findings. In

addition to this, he/she should also have a suspicion on sources which created by a historian. After the historian shows this sensibility and awareness, the historian should serve a work which is balanced with heuristic- means depending on finding- and insightful guessing of the period. For this, I really approve that complementation of knowledge –as much as possible- is very essential. Historians should do extensive research without the fear of knowledge. For this, of course the historian should have the competence to distinguish historical reality with his/her sensibility. To understand history and make meaningful work, my other point is, careful use of definitions, concepts and categories. In fact, it is still important to be aware again. When historians making sense from the past, they should be loyal to the concepts of the past to not create an anachronistic and deceptive work. I believe that clear description of the concepts and illuminating them with a historian's meticulous attitude can solve the anachronism problem. Afterward, the historians should serve their works as saying process instead of said. It means that they should allow the work's progressive and falsifiable with new research or an idea or another theory. I claim that as historians even if we see the same past, we realize different points. Instead of creating a plural and one truth of the past, it is more reasonable that being open-minded to new ideas and approaches and discussing them for the sake of the development of historical knowledge. I am completely believed that such works which are formed by wisely interpretation and hermeneutic will contribute to the methodology of history.

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