

# **The Conceptual History of *Erlebnis*: Lived-Experience from Dilthey to Fanon**

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## **Abstract**

The concept of lived-experience is widely used. It is not, however, widely defined. In this paper, I argue that we need to return to the development of the concept in order to see how it is intended to be used. My argument will proceed through three parts: (i) I will give an account of the development of the term in Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911), where lived-experience is developed as way to analyze the figures and aims of the German Romantic movement; (ii) building on this, I will argue that lived-experience is an applied hermeneutical strategy that interprets the way in which collective socio-historical contexts frame and coordinate individual temporal, spatial, and psychic being-in-the-world; (iii); finally, I will argue that the poetical-phenomenological source of this development is central to understand applications because it is especially concerned to conveying something of the dynamic and unvivisected reality involved in living in a given context, rather than just explaining sets of facts involved with these contexts. In this last section, I will bring in Frantz Fanon's use of lived-experience as a paradigm for its application as an applied hermeneutical strategy and sketch some features that can be learned from it. My overall aim of this paper is that this will clarify the way in which this hermeneutical strategy is a useful one for applied contexts.

## **Keywords**

Phenomenology, lived-experience, Wilhelm Dilthey, Frantz Fanon, Friedrich Schleiermacher, Hans-Georg Gadamer, hermeneutics

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The term ‘lived experience’ is today so faded and worn thin that, if it were not so fitting, it would be best to leave it aside. Since it cannot be avoided, it is all the more necessary to understand its essence.

Martin Heidegger

*Towards the Definition of Philosophy* [*Zur Bestimmung der Philosophie*], 1919

In both the humanities and the social sciences—especially in contexts which feature applied political analyses or intentions—there is probably no other approach as prevalent or important, yet as willingly loose and ill-defined, as that of “lived-experience.” It has grown increasingly frequent in recent scholarship across a wide variety of disciplines and contexts (Casey, 2023). In fields as diverse as critical race theory, public policy, climate science, or ethnographic research, lived-experience is employed as if its meaning was clear and without need of further explanation, elaboration, or justification. One can usually cite or refer to the “lived-experience” of a person or group without fully articulating what lived-experience, as a concept, is meant to indicate or encompass. If it is defined at all, it is most often defined tautologically as identical to a first-person experience rather than an objective third-person analysis. There are two common types of definition in scholarship. One usually involves subjective narration in a tautological way that means something equivalent to experience, along the lines of the following: “We define ‘lived experience’ as a representation of our human experiences” (Moran et al., 2022, p. 79).

In another dominant mode, lived-experience is used to isolate that which cannot be named or reproduced in any scholarly analysis from critique, something inaccessible except for those who have undergone these experiences. Within this frame, it is used to reserve a certain authority for those in possession of the particular lived-experiences in question which cannot be duplicated by those who have not undergone these experiences (Walton et al., 2001). This isolationist approach positions undergoing an experience, e.g., having mental health issues, being a religious minority, as identical to acquiring an unquestionable expertise in these areas.

The range of semantic meaning that the concept “lived-experience” has accrued is so vast, in contexts so far removed and unmoored from its historical development, that it may seem that the concept no longer has any use and perhaps should be abandoned. None of these definitions—whether lived-experience as subjective narration or as experiential privilege—fully encompass the intentions behind the conceptual development of lived-experience. I maintain, nevertheless, to cease to use the concept would result in an even greater conceptual impoverishment, and all these uses of lived-experience include important categories and frames of reference to understand the role that subjectivity and experience play in essentially any state of affairs pertaining to human society, which cannot be fully explained or analyzed by an objective relaying of facts alone. Fully accounting for a state of affairs requires an analysis of the subjective features, ones in the form of an account in the “what-it-is-like for X” formula. The novelty of lived-experience as a method born within hermeneutics is that the form of the subjective “what-it-is-like” analysis is supposed to be rigorously defined. It is this rigour that I think is now lost in the amorphousness of contemporary usages. This work is not meant as a polemic against specific uses of lived-experience or against its employment as a general framework in any field of scholarship. On the contrary, given the importance of this concept in contemporary academia, I think making explicit the contribution of the concept’s historical

development will help in re-establishing a rigorous concept of lived-experience. I think addressing lived-experience's conceptual coordinates is essential in giving a concreteness and definiteness to its use in the numerous contexts in which it is applied.

In this paper, I argue that we need to return to the development of the concept of lived experience to see how it is intended to be used and how it can be employed in new and novel contexts.<sup>1</sup> My argument will proceed through three parts: (i) I will give an account of the development of the term in Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911), where lived-experience is developed as way to analyze the figures and aims of the German Romantic movement; (ii) building on this, I will argue that lived-experience is an applied hermeneutical strategy that interprets the way in which collective socio-historical contexts frame and coordinate individual temporal, spatial, and psychic being-in-the-world; (iii); finally, I will argue that the poetical-phenomenological source of this development is central to understand applications because it is especially concerned to conveying something of the dynamic and unvivisected reality involved in living in a given context, rather than just explaining sets of facts involved with these contexts. In this last section, I will bring in Frantz Fanon's use of lived-experience as a paradigm for its application as an applied hermeneutical strategy, and sketch some features that can be learned from it. My overall aim of this paper is that this will clarify the way in which this hermeneutical strategy is a useful one for applied contexts.

### **I - The Development of Lived Experience: Hermeneutics and Romanticism**

The concept of lived-experience arises in the debates at the end of that century that saw the invention and formalization of hermeneutics, the science of interpretation. Specifically, lived-experience arises in the context of 19<sup>th</sup> century German intellectual culture in the debates surrounding new developments and intensification in the relationship between philosophy and poetry that characterized the era of Goethe. The formalization of hermeneutics as a discipline was primarily carried out by Freidrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834), who was simultaneously the most important German translator of Plato and the most significant Protestant theologian of his age. Schleiermacher held the prestigious Chair in Theology at the foundation of the University of Berlin in 1810, and his professional duties required him to lecture on numerous disciplines, including philosophy, philology, logic, along with biblical interpretation and theology.

This trajectory moves from Schleiermacher through to Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911), who followed and expanded Schleiermacher's work in hermeneutics. Where Schleiermacher envisioned hermeneutics as autonomous discipline concerned with understanding as such, Dilthey saw it in service of an ambitious philosophical project trying to come to grips with the way understanding was obtained and advanced in all the disciplines that comprise both the natural sciences [*Naturwissenschaften*] and the human sciences or humanities [*Geisteswissenschaften*]. The intersection between the specific needs of the philological, the theological, and the philosophical are important for the development of hermeneutics. The development of lived-experience cannot be understood except as coming out of the motivations of the hermeneutic tradition, especially as following from Schleiermacher's unique contribution to their development. This is important because it indicates the kind of understanding that lived-experience is supposed to bring to light, which is a particular kind of understanding achieved only in and through a direct engagement in a particular context.

The history of hermeneutics is unwieldy to narrate. One may, as Heidegger does, locate its beginnings in Plato and Aristotle (Heidegger, 1999). This would not be incorrect. Especially important in this regard is Aristotle's *On Interpretation* (the Greek title *Περὶ Ἑρμηνείας* includes the root for hermeneutics). This text analyzes the forms of propositions and the relationship of language to truth. The philosophical task of the relationship of language to its object in these texts are taken up in Christian tradition in two ways: as a theologically motivated tool for interpreting biblical texts in the Church Fathers or the Reformation or as a philological technique for understanding classical literature in the Renaissance. Given his institutional place between these disciplines, Schleiermacher's contribution is to have reached behind their backs to the task of understanding itself which is common to both groups. As Gadamer (2013) puts it, Schleiermacher is "not just one more stage in the history of the art of understanding" (p. 185). Before Schleiermacher, questions of interpretation arose in response to the specific needs of biblical interpretation. For some examples, these include the four senses of medieval scriptural interpretation, in allegory with regards to texts such as in Dante's *Divina Commedia*, or in the Protestant Reformation with the co-location of *sola scriptura* with *sola fide*, or in the Counter Reformation with the emphasis on the magisterium of the Church as the counterpoint to *sola scriptura*. Coming out of and so aware of these traditional debates, Schleiermacher did not just introduce a principle of equality to hermeneutics such that it applied to all texts. Rather, Schleiermacher was the first to thematize the question of how understanding as a *technē*—as a tool for understanding [*Verstehen*] in and for itself—could be carried out. "Hermeneutics," Schleiermacher writes, "as the art of understanding does not yet exist in a general manner, there are instead only several forms of specific hermeneutics" (Schleiermacher, 1998, p. 5). As Paul Ricoeur characterized this in the following way: "It would be ridiculous to say that hermeneutics begins with Schleiermacher. But with him a specific problem does arise: that of understanding as such" (Ricoeur, 1977, p. xx). For Schleiermacher, understanding discourse cannot be limited to, or exhausted by, questions of grammar, philology, or translation, as important as those are to the act of understanding. In engaging with the concept of understanding as such, Schleiermacher meant to make explicit the relationship between history, context, speech, ideas, and meaning that concatenate in any discourse. In this way, hermeneutics in the philosophical sense would not just be limited to texts but have a broader use for the act of interpretation and therefore understanding in any context. Schleiermacher's goal was to provide ways and tools for thinking about the processes and strategies involved with any act of understanding as such.

One of the principle tasks that Schleiermacher saw for hermeneutics is the relationship between the particular and the universal, a feature intrinsic in all discourse but paradigmatically for Schleiermacher in the reading of a text: "Every person is on one hand a location in which a given language forms itself in an individual manner, on the other their discourse can only be understood via the totality of the language" (Schleiermacher, 1998, pp. 8-9). The syntactical rules of language are universal insofar as concepts, words, and grammar are not the creation of the individual but are shared, and how they convey it is determined through and in a context, tradition, and a particular history. But what is conveyed is nonetheless individual and particular as these universal concepts are employed as a vehicle that can accommodate a potentially infinite variety of discursive meanings. Drawing out Schleiermacher's argument, one should try not to fall to one extreme or the other regarding the universal and particular, but locate the act of interpretation as taking into account this very relationship between the way in which a particular

speaker makes use of the universal rules and the contexts available to them in making use of these rules. If it can be glossed, the hermeneutical problematic is to discern the kinds of relationships that obtain between the universal and the particular in a given discourse.

Dilthey's goal was to build on Schleiermacher's work on hermeneutics. Dilthey studied at the University of Berlin under Friedrich Trendelenburg (1802-1872), himself a student of Schleiermacher. After winning an essay contest organized by the Schleiermacher Society in 1860, Dilthey was additionally commissioned by the Society to write the biography of Schleiermacher, publishing the first volume of his *Leben Schleiermachers* in 1870 (Nelson, 2019). Specifically, in expanding on Schleiermacher's work, Dilthey wanted to ground the knowledge achieved in the humanities in a way appropriate to its own aims and methods and that did not see the objective perspective adopted in the natural sciences as the ideal paradigm. He claimed that as a science the humanities needed its own methodological grounding that is not borrowing from the methods proper to the natural sciences but that is scientific in the German sense of *Wissenschaft*. As Heidegger characterizes this, "All Dilthey's work is motivated by the desire to comprehend scientifically the intellectual, socio-historical reality of humankind, of 'life', and to ensure that this comprehension rests on a sound scientific foundation" (Heidegger, 2011, p. 4).

How does Dilthey go about this? Dilthey grounds the validity and distinctiveness of the humanities in their hermeneutical structure. That is, by their desire to understand human life in different contexts rather than catalog or reduce it to its constituent parts: "the method which permeates the human studies is that of understanding and interpretation" (Dilthey, 1989, p. 49).

Collectively, the human sciences consist of various forms and contexts which occasion interpretation and understanding to get at the issue which is the question. Specifically, the human sciences [*Geisteswissenschaften*] name "all the disciplines that have socio-historical reality as their subject matter" (Dilthey, 1989, p. 56). The term *Geisteswissenschaften* and its reference to *Geist* for Dilthey correctly locate the subject matter in the interrelation between the capacity of spirit to produce with its cultural achievements (Dilthey, 1989, p. 56).

The understanding unique to the human sciences is to be fundamentally distinguished from the perspective of the natural sciences, which takes as its domain the causal nexus of the natural world. This is a methodological decision that reflects that relationship between our sense of the inner world of spirit and the outer world of culture. The psychological constitution of human beings as an organism takes place within the natural world and represents their most complex expression. But as the natural world is the basis of human life and culture, the understanding of these achievements cannot be resolved with the same methods used to study the uniform and causally regularized natural world. In adopting this position, Dilthey is rejecting a prevailing nineteenth century approach adopted by Auguste Comte (1798-1857) and J.S. Mill (1806-1873) of applying the methodological tools of natural science to the development of the humanities and the cultural sciences. As representative of the position that Dilthey is positioning himself against one can cite Book Six of J.S. Mill's *A System of Logic*, where Mill argues that there is a tight analogy between the methods used in the natural sciences to study the world and the ones used to study the development of human culture. As Mill says:

The laws of the phenomena of society are, and can be, nothing but the laws of the actions and passions of human beings united together in the social state. Men, however, in a state of society, are still men; their actions and passions are obedient to the laws of individual human nature. (Mill, 2001, pp. 49-50)

It is precisely the idea that all domains of human society can be explained through concentrating on individual human nature as understanding by way of the natural sciences. As Dilthey explained, “The answers given to these questions [of the foundations of the humanities] by Comte and by J.S. Mill and the empiricists seemed to me to truncate and mutilate the historical reality in order to assimilate it to the concepts and methods of the natural sciences” (Dilthey, 1989, pp. 49-50). Putting forward a methodology that was appropriate to the particular needs of the humanities was the central aim of Dilthey’s project.

Dilthey was most suspicious of the idea that the form any legible explanation takes in a scientific framework is through causal explanations of data obtained through the senses about physical processes. The type of relationships that the facts of physical processes have to one other is one of uniformity. Take the scientific explanation for Earth’s gravity. The mass of the sun is the *explanans* put forward to satisfy the *explanandum* of the force of gravity exerted on Earth. This notion presupposes the regularity of gravity and a force which acts in a constant way with regards to any mass. Once natural sciences has established the regularity of a transition between two physical processes without an intermediary, it can say that it has established some fact of nature. Within this sphere, its methodological framework cannot be questioned.

There is also a realm of inner experience that concerns a range of facts where a different set of explanatory laws obtain between a very different set of facts: “The independent position of such a discipline [the human sciences] cannot be contested, so long as no one can claim to make Goethe’s life more intelligible by deriving his passions, poetic productivity, and intellectual reflection from the structure of his brain or the properties of his body” (Dilthey, 1989, p. 61). This is the realm of the human sciences, which requires a different logic than the one employed in natural science to be adequate to our understanding of it. In the broadest sense, articulating these respective domains and fashioning the methods most appropriate for understanding them is Dilthey project from his first theoretical work, *Introduction to the Human Sciences* (1883). This project is meant to be foundational for all instances and applications of a programme of human sciences. Dilthey seeks to articulate the principles of the human sciences themselves, which he sees as what would include and unite “the basis for the judgments of the historian, the conclusions of the political economist, and the concepts of the jurist, and which at the time assures their certainty” (Dilthey, 1989, pp. 49-50).

But this project is not merely a cartography which maps the locations of two separate domains. More fundamentally Dilthey also wants to think of the integration between these two realms, as they both form the two parts of sciences as a whole, just as they form the two parts of the world as whole: “the human sciences do encompass natural facts and are based on knowledge of nature” (Dilthey, 1989, p. 66). Thinking the two domains correctly will allow us to think of places where they abut or overlap in the correct manner. It is these relationships between the human sciences and the natural sciences, and within these domains their respective materials, that Dilthey

ultimately wants to understand. This crossroads is named by Dilthey as a “nexus,” one that cannot be understood except as an inter-related unity of different components.

But what, exactly, is co-implicated in this nexus for Dilthey—and why cannot it be explained through causation alone like in the natural sciences? The contents of this nexus are the diverse faculties of psychic life (such as processes like perceptions, memories, language thought-processes, desires) which are taken as a whole in their interconnection. These processes have a certain way they progress and eventually terminate, before passing into another. It is the characteristic of psychic life that these processes are intertwined, and cannot be understood if you abstract these components and analyze them without their relation to one another. The psychic structure that Dilthey is taking pains to analyze is the inner relation and progression by which these psychic facts are connected to one another (Dilthey, 2002, p. 35). Taken from this physical perspective, lived-experience arises at this point psychologically, as the structural unity between the processional nexus of psychic life and its relating to the world and one’s place in it as a meaningful whole. Psychologically the mind is constituted by a set of faculties which are involved in its relationship to the world. Lived-experience understands our directing and use of them in terms of the goals of our life on the level of our subjectivity as such. As Dilthey writes, “lived experience is first of all the structural unity of attitudes and contents. My perceptual attitude with its relation to an object is just as much lived experience as my feeling about something or my willing something. Lived experience is always certain of itself” (Dilthey, 2002, p. 47). To use a simple example of the perception of a simple object to illustrate what Dilthey is getting, what is in question when analyzed in terms of one’s lived experience is not the brute *factum* of an object or a description of the object but the object and my orientation and feelings toward it. As he says, “Contents like red or blue and attitudes like apprehending the red or being pleased by it are there for me” (Dilthey, 2002, p. 47).

Dilthey understands lived-experience to follow from an account of the changing and morphologically unstable life of a living subject, but one that nonetheless is the ground and motivation of all our cultural achievements. This is why the methodological grounding for the human sciences, in contradistinction to the natural sciences, must be found in a philosophical grounding that begins with a descriptive psychology. The motivations (as causes) for what we create are rooted in our experience of the world:

Only in inner experience, in the facts of consciousness, have I found a firm anchor for my thinking. . . . All science is experiential; but all experience must be related back to and derives its validity from the conditions and context of consciousness in which it arises, i.e., the totality of our nature. (Dilthey, 2002, p. 47)

The developments of human culture cannot themselves be understood through methods of natural sciences. In order to explain cultural developments and achievements for any domain in the human sciences, thinking must have recourse to an area of research that takes into account motivations for how we orient ourselves to the world and to ideas through phenomena such as feelings, desires, freedom, restrictions, etc. It is this relationship that cannot be statically captured without doing violence to its nature, but one that must be accounted for in the human sciences. For Dilthey, *Erlebnis* or lived-experience names the experiential source of the cultural achievements that the human sciences sustain, produce, and interpret. It is this focus that

differentiates it from the natural sciences [*Naturwissenschaften*], whose object is on facts as positivistically conceived.

Though lived-experience forms the methodological foundation of Dilthey's articulation of the humanities, it arises in a different context and appears in its applied form in the other principle strand of Dilthey's scholarship, namely his work on German Romanticism. In my judgement, this area is the most fruitful context in which to see lived-experience adopted and applied a hermeneutical strategy. This can even be seen in Dilthey's coining of *Erlebnis* as a term of art in German. The noun *Erlebnis*—translated into English by the seemingly redundant phrase 'lived-experience' and similarly in French as "l'expérience vécue"—was more or less coined as a technical term by Dilthey. There are instances of it existing in German before in some archaic and incidental usages, but it only comes to prominent use with Dilthey (Gadamer, 2004, p. 53). The verb form *Erleben*, from which it is related, is older. In any case, *Erlebnis* is a more common term for experience in German is *Erfahrung*.

In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer notes that the verb *Erlebnis* did not have wide-currency or use in 19<sup>th</sup> century German until Dilthey coined it; *Erleben* was seldom used even if it was not totally unknown (Gadamer, 2004, pp. 53-57). The noun *Leben*, of course, is the common German word for life. The prefix "*Er*," when added to a verb, has the sense of carrying the action in question through to some state of completion; the suffix "*nis*" functions to turn a verb into a noun. German is nothing if not precise. Thus, etymologically, *Erlebnis* is trying to capture the enlivened aspect of whole, coherent experiences. We can now see that the English translation of lived-experience is not redundant, but trying to capture the dual poles of the immediate character of living through something along with the sense-making and reflective aspect of experiencing that is implicit in the German as Dilthey is trying to convey it.

In this case, it is not surprising that the first theoretical usages of *Erlebnis* by Dilthey is in the context of an analysis of poetic literature, beginning with his 1877 work *Poetics* that was further refined and expanded in his work through to *Das Erlebnis und die Dichtung: Lessing, Goethe, Novalis, Hölderlin* in 1910. The name *Erlebnis* was used by Dilthey to describe what was already happening in German literature, particularly in the *Sturm und Drang* movement but in Romanticism in general, especially focused on trying to understand Goethe and his contemporaries. This was a literary culture that centered the idea of a *Bildung*, or self-cultivation, both as a literary genre (*Bildungsroman*) that narrated the course of this development and as a way to understand the conditions of poetic creation itself. These conditions involve cultivating one's life as a whole as if it were an artistic creation; that one's own life is taken hold of so it can be crafted and deepened through the experiences one has. Gadamer characterizes the significant features of this development in terms of the way he understanding living his own life:

Goethe more than anyone else tempts one to coin this word [*Erlebnis*], since in quite a new sense his poetry acquires intelligibility from what he experienced. He said himself that all his poetry had the character of a vast confession. . . . The essence of biography, especially nineteenth-century biographies of artists and poets, is to understand the works from the life. Their achievement consists precisely in mediating between the two meanings that we have distinguished in the word "Erlebnis" and in seeing these meanings as a productive union: something becomes an "experience" not only insofar as it is



experienced, but insofar as its being experienced makes a special impression that gives it lasting importance. (Gadamer, 2004, p. 57)

It is with continual reference to this poetic context of Dilthey's hermeneutical work that lived-experience can be appreciated as a concept. But this is not simply because that is where Dilthey anchors lived-experience as a concept for a methodological framework; it is because lived-experience is paradigmatically the form of self-consciousness that Dilthey is trying to put forward as a practical goal. As Dilthey understands it, *Erlebnis* is really making explicit what is a Goethean theoretical-poetical ideal: "Goethe and the Romantics were linked inseparably in their efforts to further the emancipation of the poetic imagination from the domination of abstract thought and 'good taste' which knew nothing of the power of life" (Dilthey, 1985, p. 236). This development of lived-experience in nineteenth century German poetry and philosophy happens within this larger context of the development of modern self-understanding of subjectivity in poetry, largely inspired by Goethe. As Charles Taylor puts it, Nature was not to be understood mechanistically. It was more like a living organism. In other words, "the Romantics were rebelling against a dead, mechanical view of Nature. And they were also rebelling against mind-body dualism, and against a purely instrumental approach to nature. . . . They longed for a unification of self, unity with our emotions, with nature in us, and with nature as a whole" (Taylor, 2024, p. 5). It is just this longing for unification that Dilthey wants to understand and articulate.

The figure of the poet is crucial for Dilthey because it develops a model of subjectivity where concertedly intense living and attendant reflection thereupon is affirmed and brought to articulation within one's work: "Poetry is the representation and expression of life. It expresses lived experience and represents the external reality of life" (Dilthey, 1910, p. 237). For this reason, poetry has such an important function as the paradigmatic sense-making expression of one's lived-experiences. As Dilthey continues:

poetry, unlike science, does not try to cognize what is actual, but rather to let us see the significance of events, people, and things from the perspective of life-concerns. The riddle of life is concentrated in an inner nexus of life-concerns that interweaves human beings, their fates, and life-environment. Thus life is always revealing new aspects of itself in poetry: it reveals infinite possibilities for seeing, evaluating, and creatively advancing life. An event becomes a symbol, not for thought, but for seeing the coherence of life through the life-experience of the poet. (Dilthey, 1910, p. 237)

To put it simply, Dilthey's work on poetry is an attempt to understand philosophically how the process of significant life moments are made sense of through their translation into poetry, and this sense-making activity further redefines the sense-making subject. This is because it involves a hermeneutic understanding of poetry built upon the more fundamental reality of the living subject that animates it and brings it about. Hence, Dilthey can write, "The subsoil of poetic creation contains personal lived experience and understanding of alien circumstances, and the broadening and deepening of experience through ideas" (Dilthey, 1985, p. 251). In trying to understand the genesis of lived-experience, Dilthey is articulating how the poetic imagination draws upon and expresses the vivid reality of life and its connection to our biographical development as a coherent narrative of self-creation. It is deeper and more expressive than

merely factual expressions of the same events. It was precisely this sense of the dry factuality of the Enlightenment that Goethe and the Romantic movement sought to overcome. Poetry expresses the inter-relation between the individual, the social and historical context in which the individual lived. To adopt phenomenological language, the “what-it-is-like” of being a particular person in a particular time and place. In doing this, it maps new ways of feeling and thinking. The reading of poetry as an act conveys new ways of understanding lived-experiences to readers. In Dilthey’s understanding, poetry is privileged as a genre for articulating and also for conveying lived-experiences.

This process of articulating and interpreting lived-experience is ultimately a hermeneutical one. In trying to articulate it, one enters into an instance of the hermeneutical circle. The task of understanding an experience entails understanding what is involved in both the motivation and context in which those experiences are legible in a constant dialogue with our own experiences and their background conditions. What is sought after is precisely “The understanding [*Verstehen*] of other persons and their expressions of life [that] is based upon both the lived experience [*Erlebens*] and understanding of oneself, and their continual interaction” (Dilthey, 1977, p. 123). In the following section, I will outline the meaning of lived-experience as a hermeneutical practice in terms of the structural elements of background and subject in play in the continual interaction.

## II - Dilthey’s Concept of *Erlebnis* - From Hermeneutics to Phenomenology

What, then, is lived-experience for Dilthey? The most concerted conceptual elaboration of lived-experience in Dilthey’s corpus are found in the fragmentary notes he prepared for his revision of his text *Poetics* around 1907 and 1908. These notes were written to be a study of the works of Goethe, Hölderlin, and Shakespeare (Dilthey 1985). It is especially useful because it links the components of Dilthey’s hermeneutics from texts like *Descriptive Psychology and Historical Understanding* with lived-experience as exemplified paradigmatically in *Goethe and the Poetic Imagination*. If I am returning to Dilthey to retrieve a specified definition of lived-experience to supplement and support its usage in scholarship more broadly, the most generically useful articulation of lived-experience can be extracted from this text. Dilthey is giving account of the full measure of a life in terms of the experiences we self-consciously hold to be significant for us that contributes or constitutes what we are. Lived-experience is most basically a way of thinking about time, specifically the temporality of the present. As a temporal modality, the present is the mechanism that correlates and integrates the narrative continuity of the life of the subject with on-going external reality that is both remembered and experienced in its continuity. It is not every experience we have that falls under the category of a lived-experience, but one which belongs to us and accompanies us in a particular way through reflexive awareness. More colloquially, it is something we hold onto, not because it is a discrete event (such as memories) but because it enframes our experiential intake. Lived-experiences structures our ability to have and undergo experiences. Let us proceed to see how this is carried out.

In a nutshell, Dilthey’s conception of lived-experience is fundamentally an account of the way in which we engage with time in terms of meaning-making. In the *Fragments for a Poetics*, we have what is perhaps the most straight-forward definition of *Erlebnis* given by Dilthey: “A lived experience is a distinctive and characteristic mode in which reality is there-for-me” (Dilthey

1977, p. 223). The present is privileged as the site where this occurs, but the present experience conjoined with reflective awareness of background conditions. The concrete example Dilthey uses to illustrate this is grief. When a loved one dies, we experience grief at their loss and are aware we are undergoing a process of grieving. It is “a reality that manifests itself immediately, that we are reflexively aware of in its entirety, that is not given and not thought” (Dilthey, 1977, p. 224). Grieving is the result of a singular event (i.e., the death of a loved one) but its wide-ranging effects color the whole of our outlook and shapes the way we engage with the present, with implications from the past and for the future in the way we experience our own relationship to time. We can talk about grief psychologically as a time-bound emotion associated with a particular psychological series of effects (e.g., sadness, listlessness, depression, etc.). But considered in terms of lived-experience, grief picks out segments in the past and future in the way that it engages in consciousness with the present. There is unity in this process of living, and the meaning of any one lived-experience as set in the narrative of a whole and ongoing life: “Everything that is experienced is experienced by oneself, and part of its meaning is that it belongs to the unity of this self and thus contains an unmistakable and irreplaceable relation to the whole of this one life” (Gadamer, 2004, p. 61). The subject is the nodal point of a nexus of relations, to use Dilthey’s language. Lived-experience plays a role in the unity of the subject, because what is in question are events that the subject experiences as being central and implicated in its very being. The subject is being shaped by lived-experiences which it can then in turn shape. As subjects we unify this into a narrative of ourselves and it is how we make sense of what we are.

It is not just a phenomenology of time, though Dilthey was very interested in Husserl’s work (Dilthey, 2002, p. 30). Lived-experience is meant to include as fundamental for temporality the interrelation between the general and the particular; in this case the generality of the statically established world in its mutually affecting social relationships to a continuously developing and reflexively self-aware particular individual. The way we interpret lived-experience of others operates sympathetically through the continual interaction of the touchstone of our own lived experiences. In the most basic sense, lived-experience is a method within the humanities to convey a means of understanding [*Verstehen*] others and make sense of expressions of life. This is the reason for its centrality in Dilthey’s project to build a rigorous set of methodological tools for the human sciences.

In contrast, as a theoretical-poetic ideal, lived-experience is more than a theoretical frame by which we can examine certain modes of being-in-the-world and their results as cultural achievements. The reconstruction of lived-experience is also the basis of the achievements of culture: “Lived experience provides the basis for religion, art, anthropology, and metaphysics. We must not only accept these experiences as they come, but generate and multiply them” (Dilthey, 1985, p. 223). Lived-experiences significantly contribute to the narrative whole of what we are. But it is also not something like in the Freudian unconscious. It is not a subterranean influence that affects our conscious life without us knowing the cause. A lived-experience is “there-for-me because I have a reflexive awareness of it, because I possess it immediately as belonging to me in some sense” (Dilthey, 1985, p. 223). As Dilthey writes on its explicitness:

The expression [lived-experience] can indeed contain more of the psychic nexus [*seelischen Zusammenhang*] than any introspection can reveal. It raises life out of depths

which are unilluminated by consciousness; but at the same time it lies in the nature of lived experience that the relationship between this expression and the spiritual or human meaning [*dem Geistigen*] which is expressed in it can only very approximately be taken as a basis for the understanding. The expression of lived experience does not fall under the judgment "true" or "false" but rather that of truthfulness and untruthfulness. For here dissimulation, lying and deception sever the relation between the expression and the spiritual meaning expressed. (Dilthey, 1977, p. 124)

In other words, it is a part or aspect of the way we are that we know about or are conscious of. We are aware that these experiences contributed in some way to shaping us. Because we are aware that the experiences are theoretically possible to indicate something of the relationship a life had in its living out itself in a particular context, and how this living out made them what they are. Lived-experience is nothing other than carefully tracing this relationship. What we learn from Dilthey are the interaction between the background structures of a particular individual and this interaction with them in subjective experience in the creation of whatever work they accomplish on this basis.

A question remains as to the universality of this application. European phenomenological accounts of lived-experience have pretensions of experiential universality of first-person experience, but they also contain the seeds of their undoing by opening up the door to particularity by foregrounding the concept of experience. A limitation with Dilthey's position is that it posits itself as universal, even though it arises in such a specific time and context that characterized intellectual life in nineteenth century Germany. If lived-experience is understood as a particular hermeneutical strategy aimed at protecting the flow of life from objective accounts which would staunch the flow, can its methodological form be transposed to other contexts? This is just the project of Fanon, to whom we now turn.

### III - Prospectus for the Concept of Lived Experience

In this final section, I would like to return to my argument that a more concretely articulated version of lived-experience is necessary for it to achieve the specificity required for it to have scholarly application that I have called for. For an indication of a rigorous application of lived-experience we can learn, I contend, from the phenomenologist and post-colonial thinker Frantz Fanon (1925-1961). In this section, I want to show how Fanon applies lived-experience as a hermeneutical strategy to bring the concept of race into relief through a phenomenology of racial lived-experience. My argument, broadly speaking, is that Fanon's applied use of lived-experience provides both a methodological clue for any application whatever, along with a model by which to look to for structuring future applications of lived-experience. In this prospectus, I primarily want to focus on Fanon's contribution to lived-experience as a methodology, so I will focus on the form involved.

The principle methodological instance from the work Fanon in his chapter "L'expérience vécue du Noir" found in his 1952 text *Peau noire, masques blancs*. Fanon's use of phenomenological hermeneutics is not often seen as a methodological contribution in its own right. I want to argue that it is. This can be found in the concept of lived-experience [*L'expérience vécue*] that he employs in *Peau noire, masques*. In a nutshell, Fanon's contribution to this method is in the very

means of its application to a context in the identification and interpretation of the features of concrete day-to-day life that racialized interpellation structure and determine.

I want to stick to Fanon's contribution to the methodological framework within a philosophical tradition, while keeping Fanon scholarship in mind (cf. Marriott, 2018). Robert Bernasconi has recently published a study on Fanon's engagement with phenomenology that tracks his relationship and contribution to discussions in French existential phenomenology (Bernasconi, 2020). The relationship between phenomenology and hermeneutics is a closely knit one, but in this section, I want to focus specifically on Fanon's relationship to the hermeneutical tradition. Phenomenological description is relied upon so as to achieve an understanding (hermeneutically) of racialized existence. As Fanon will articulate, the lived-experience of the black subject will not look like that of any other subject (racialized or otherwise), but it will involve the same elements. What are these elements? Fanon's methodological contribution to the hermeneutics of lived-experience is that he does not just apply phenomenology to a distinctive context but rather shows how the background of a social context actively forms the horizon of the experiences that a subject has in their understanding of themselves and the world in which they inhabit. In this, I am in no way trying to exhaust or encompass Fanon's account of *l'expérience vécue du noir*. I am merely trying to indicate what can be taken methodologically from Fanon's account.

In his chapter "L'expérience vécue du Noir," Fanon offers a methodological re-thinking of the concept of lived-experience. There is a question of which sources and traditions Fanon is drawing from and his critiquing in his account of lived-experience. Because of the reception of phenomenological hermeneutics in the French speaking world, it was already a widely used and adopted concept. He certainly knew of Dilthey's work, as there is a Spanish language study of Dilthey in his personal library entitled *Dilthey, Jaspers y la comprensión del enfermo mental* by Luis Martín-Santos (Fanon, 2018, p. 744). But it is likely that lived-experience was mediated primarily through Fanon's direct knowledge of the French philosophical tradition. He owned Merleau-Ponty's *La Structure du comportement* (1942) and *Sens et non sens* (1948), and more significantly attended Merleau-Ponty's lectures while at the Université de Lyon (Fanon, 2018, p. 745). The concept of lived-experience is also heavily marked in articles that touched on this subject in issues of the journal *L'Évolution Psychiatrique* when they appeared in that publication (Fanon, 2018, p. 769). Innovating and adopting from these German and French receptions of phenomenology and hermeneutics of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Fanon re-employs the conceptual materials of this tradition to articulate the lived experience of racialized black subjects. Fanon shows how the synthesis of direct racialized interpellation produced and enacted in a historical context constitutes the lived-experience of a racialized black subject (Fanon, 2008). Here, the focus of his critique is what he calls "ontology." This ontology is taken in a very specific way, as an account of racialization that sees in terms of static essences alone, in the form of objective facts. It is indeed this objectifying account that reifies racial essentialization. Fanon writes that "Ontology does not allow us to understand the being of the black man, since it ignores lived experience. For not only must the black man be black; he must be so in relation to the white man" (Fanon, 2008, p. 90). His account is made in conversation with ontology as a critique of it, here taken to mean an account that relies on the static and reified, or again objective. Such an account is impossible when, as he mentioned, "the Blacks have had to deal with two systems of reference," namely those of themselves as well as white culture imposed on them as if it was

their own (Fanon, 2008, p. 90). Or as he continues, “The white gaze, the only valid one, is already dissecting me. I am fixed” (Fanon, 2008, p. 90).

An account that merely names the process the racialized and colonized subject undergoes would not have much explanatory power because it would not have access to the sphere where racialization operates. Racialization pertains to the most basic phenomenological structures in how the world is structured and life is lived within it. These two coordinates are co-constituted and so for that reason hermeneutical in nature. A mere tabulation of facts (e.g., “colonization consists in imposing racialized norms”) would not provide access to understand what racialization consists of most fundamentally. This is directing the very flow of how life is lived. It is because the area of most concentrated effect is not in the deepest sense the way blackness is defined in abstraction through ontology in Fanon’s sense.

Fanon, then, does not merely offer a description or tabulation of racism and its effects but the relationship between the racializing consequences of the world as the background context and with the way being in this world forms the structure of black subjectivity. The narrative of a racialized life is subject to this structural imposition on the form that it takes. Lived-experience, for Fanon, includes basically three elements that encompass both the racial structure of the world and the structural effects of living in such a world as a racialized subject: (i) the structuring element (i.e., the background structure of racialization); (ii) the effects this structure on the narrative unfolding of a racialized life (i.e., the experience of oneself as racialized); and (iii) the effect the racialized subject has on the world that has structured the narrative of their life (i.e., actions or reflections based on this structure): “Ontology does not allow us to understand the being of the black man, since it ignores the lived experience. For not only must the black man be black he must be black in relation to the white man” (Fanon, 2008, p. 90). What is important for Fanon, therefore, is the way in which black subjectivity is produced, and that this cannot be captured with a static understanding of being, but one that includes the relationship between the elements.

It is not just that there is racism as a structuring element and there are the lives of people who are interpellated through structures of racism. In Fanon’s articulation, lived-experience shows how the background context (i.e., the general racist structures) operate on and for a subject (i.e., the specific individual doing the living) over the course of their life and how this colocation changes the subject itself. As I have argued in the previous section, for Dilthey, lived-experience is not experiencing in the biographical sense but in the cohesive subject-forming sense, that is what we think of our life as we live it. This is what understanding means. Within the context of hermeneutics, it is an attempt to understand the development of the individual and their works as self-aware subjects. It is an account or making-sense of something that cannot be conveyed without being mutilated, namely the perduring and living experience of life. It is not an assertion of the brute fact of subjectivity and its inherent ineffability nor the biographic narration of what happens to a particular subjectivity or a group. It includes these, but is not exhausted by them. Rather, as I have shown with Dilthey’s work on the concept of lived-experience, the explanatory power of lived-experience is rooted in triangulating a particular background context through the experience and continual reflections occasioned by a single person’s life through contextually inflected interactions within this background context.

What Fanon's account brings out is the structural elements involved in an account of lived-experience as an applied hermeneutic methodology. These elements are not limited to poetry but can be expanded in potentially infinite directions. As a methodological contribution, Fanon's account of lived-experience shows that a rigorous application of lived-experiences involves articulation of these the elements of (i) the background structure; (ii) the reflection of this structure on the form that living must take; (iii) the self-aware reflection of the subject that the background structure has on their life, and the way in which this has changed them, or caused them to change, the background structure.

In conclusion, I have argued that a more rigorous concept of lived-experience is needed to match its near ubiquitous use. I have appealed to its historical development. Dilthey's innovation is the development of a hermeneutics that identifies and interprets the features of concrete day-to-day life and the accumulation of experiences that are structured and largely determined by way of the background of a society. This account was offered originally in trying to give a basis to the particular kind of knowledge in the humanities. Its basis cannot be understood through methods taken from natural sciences or as objective knowledge. Rather, it is only as a product of lived-experience that we can get at thinking through and reflecting on the reasons life flows in the direction that it does.

Lived-experience has a long scholarly tradition that is often ignored in contemporary debates about its meaning and usage. However, it is precisely this nineteenth century academic context that is essential for understanding why it is important, and for avoiding loose appeals to lived-experience. In Dilthey's account, lived-experience functioned as a rigorous articulation of the historical and developmental nature of knowledge in the humanities. In this paper I have traced this history. What is conveyed in lived experience is precisely the "nexus," in Dilthey's language, between the background structures of society with the on-going creative reflection of an individual or group on them. It is hermeneutics, the art of interpretation in the broadest sense, that is the sense meant within phenomenology. Put in this way, it is an attempt to articulate being-in-a-particular time and context. It is an attempt to understand the relationship between the structural background of the world, the psychic conditions of the subject, the relationship between these histories, at the point of conjoinment between these that comes together in subjectivity. In other words, lived-experience is the question of what it is, and what does it mean to be, in such and such a context, history, place. The acts of interpretation involved in entering into the hermeneutical circle are constantly in flux.

In my argument, a foregrounding of the elements involved in lived-experience as a hermeneutical strategy will occasion reflection on rigorous senses in which this concept can be employed in different contexts I cannot anticipate here. What I want readers to take away is this sense that "lived-experience" is a concept with a history. It aims to preserve the animated and living aspect of life and does not let us off the hook of scholarly rigour. As I see it, this means thinking with its conceptual history in mind. But concepts, like us, have lives of their own.

### Notes

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