**Chapter XY**

**The heuristic and epistemic account of Verstehen in 20th century American philosophy**

[Fons Dewulf]

[Ghent University]

**Abstract:** In this paper I distinguish two ways to approach *Verstehen*: a heuristic and an epistemic perspective. Whereas the heuristic perspective conceives *Verstehen* merely as a subjective methodological aid to guide empirical research, the epistemic account conceives it as a way to transform source-material into empirical evidence. I use the contemporary investigation of Shakespeare’s sexuality to illustrate this distinction. I discuss the heuristic account of *Verstehen* as originally defended by Carl Hempel and Theodore Abel and show how their account had its origin in an interpretation of Dilthey as a relativist by the American philosopher Maurice Mandelbaum. By revisiting the earliest responses against Hempel’s heuristic account, from Paul Oskar Kristeller and Otto Neurath, I argue that from the very beginning the heuristic account lacked any credibility to be applied to real debates in the humanities, like the debate about Shakespeare’s sexuality.

**Keywords**: Hempel, Understanding, Dilthey

**XY.1. To bi or not to bi?**

When discussing a philosophical concept, it can be easy to forget the reason why the introduction of that concept mattered in the first place. Without care for the rationale of their investigations, philosophers often find themselves lost among the possible positions or theories concerning their concepts. To retrieve the original intent of the introduction of a philosophical concept is one purpose which the history of philosophy can pursue. This historical essay serves such a purpose. The object of its investigation is the philosophical reason to theorize about *Verstehen*. I aim to show the importance to distinguish two different and non-complementary ways to approach *Verstehen*, from a heuristic and an epistemic perspective. Whereas the heuristic perspective conceives Verstehen merely as a subjective methodological aid to guide empirical research, the epistemic account conceives it as an essential part of empirical research itself, because it transforms source-material into empirical evidence.

Instead of choosing a specific philosopher’s point of view to begin my investigation, I start from a paradigmatic question which the concept of *Verstehen*, I think, should illuminate. Did William Shakespeare have an erotic attraction to males, and did he actually express this attraction in physical acts of affection? This is a factual question about the sexuality of a man who has been dead for over 400 years. Since this question is about Shakespeare’s inner desires and sexual intention, there is no way of ascertaining an answer by some form of direct observation, even if we would have a time machine at our disposal. In order to answer the question, like most questions in literary or intellectual history, we have to use available physical manifestations, like texts or behavior, as evidence of Shakespeare’s sexual orientation. In the case of Shakespeare, the remaining, possible manifestations of his sexual orientation are scant.[[1]](#footnote-1) There are no reliable autobiographical documents or contemporary witnesses and no preserved correspondences. The only manifestations of Shakespeare’s inner life are his published works, and of those, only the published collection of sonnets, are likely candidates for an autobiographical interpretation.

Although it might seem ridiculous to use only these sonnets as evidence to answer the question of Shakespeare’s sexual orientation, every interpretation of the sonnets also begs the very question. In the first and largest sequence of sonnets (1-126) the author persona addresses a “fair youth” who is clearly identified by several pronouns and descriptions as male. Only in the second and much shorter sequence (127-154), a “dark lady” appears in the narrative as an antagonist for the love between the author character and the fair youth. One reading of the poems thus suggests some kind of love triangle, where the author of the sonnets is attracted to both the male protagonist and female antagonist.

Ever since the reprinting of the sonnets in the 1640 edition by John Benson, the sexuality of Shakespeare has been a point of contention for readers (Matz 2010; Smith 2007). Benson decided to rearrange some sonnets, placing all poems directly addressed to a male in the beginning of the sequence, suggesting that all others, especially those that express more overt sexual desires, are addressed to a woman (Matz 2010, 484). He even changed some gendered words to cohere with his rearranged sequence. After Benson’s publication, multiple editors of the sonnets have time and again attempted to rearrange the sequence and gendered words. Sometimes they wanted to dissuade a potential bisexual reading, or they tried to ensure that the affection of Shakespeare for a man was not interpreted sexually, but as a form of friendship.

In contemporary Shakespeare scholarship, there is no consensus on the question of Shakespeare’s sexuality. Some scholars still defend that the sequence addressed to the fair youth describes a passionate, but non-sexual friendship between two men. Other scholars argue that the sonnets are fictional and should not be used to assess the sexuality of Shakespeare, which subsequently must remain hidden to us (Bevington 2020). Yet, a growing number argue in favor of both the autobiographical interpretation of the sonnets and the overtly bi-sexual nature of Shakespeare’s erotic feelings that are laid bare in the collection of poems (Wells 2004; Pequigney 1985; Hamill 2005). Despite a lack of consensus, the state of the debate has reached a fascinating evidentiary complexity. The nature of sonnet writing and homoerotic desires in the Elizabethan period are crucial in the various accounts. Based on this research, at least one interpretation has been discarded on evidentiary grounds: Shakespeare’s description of sexual desires towards the dark lady, if they are read as autobiographical, cannot be taken as evidence of his heterosexual identity, since sexual orientation at this time was never conceived within mutually excluding identity-terms, i.e. that a person is either homo- or heterosexual (de Grazia 1993).

I take the discussion of Shakespeare’s sexuality to be a paradigm example of the evidentiary difficulty that scholars in the humanities face: they have to justify why they understand a physical symbol, like a text, as evidence for some aspect of the inner life of a person. Other paradigm cases of this problem would be the debate whether there were atheists in the sixteenth century (Wootton 1988), or whether Hawaiians worshipped Captain James Cook as the God Lono (Obeyesekere 1997).[[2]](#footnote-2) The German philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey identified this evidentiary problem as the problem of *Verstehen* (Understanding).[[3]](#footnote-3) He introduced it as a distinct epistemological problem for the humanities [Geisteswissenschaften] in opposition to the natural sciences. Ever since the introduction of *Verstehen* as central to the epistemic identity of the Geisteswissenschaften (human sciences), philosophers have disputed its relevance in an evaluation of these sciences.

**XY.2. The heuristic account of *Verstehen***

Philosophical disputes over *Verstehen* have seen many faces. However, within the Anglo-American intellectual world, two mid 20th century classic texts have greatly shaped later discussions on *Verstehen* in the philosophy of history: Carl Hempel’s “The Function of General Laws in History” and Theodore Abel’s “The Operation Called Verstehen”. Hempel and Abel similarly defended that *Verstehen* should be conceived as a mere heuristic method in humanities research with no epistemological significance—I will call this the heuristic account. On this account, *Verstehen* refers to the use of one’s common sense familiarity with human behavior to come up with a lawful generalization concerning human behavior, like “everyone who is cold, will look for warmth” (Abel 1948, 213). Such a generalization expresses the regular connection between two identifiable instances of some kind of behavior, in this case between “feeling cold” and “looking for warmth”.

As an illustration of his ideas, Hempel (1942, 40) used the toy-example of a migrating population. Although one could image many reasons for people to move from one location to another, the most likely connection according to (Hempel’s) common-sense is the following: *People who live in poor conditions will migrate to regions that they recognize as offering them better prospects*. This generalization connects two kinds of events, namely being in a region with poor living conditions and migrating to another region with better prospects. Such a generalization can operate in an inference:

1. Johanna lives in poor conditions and thinks that living in California would be better.
2. People who live in poor conditions will migrate to regions that they recognize as offering them better prospects.
3. Johanna migrates to California.

The generalization expressed in b) connects Johanna’s individual behavior/situation as expressed in a) and c). Discovering a generalization like b) guides an investigator of migrating populations in two ways. First, if the conditions of the population before and after migration are known, the researcher can use the generalization to state why the migration was to be expected given the initial conditions. If the migration has not yet occurred, the researcher can even predict its occurrence given information of the initial conditions (Hempel 1942, 38). Second, if the condition of the population before migration is not known, the investigator can use the theoretical generalization to guide research on their living conditions before the migration (Hempel 1942, 48).

How does the researcher come up with generalizations like b)? Abel calls such invention “internalizing”. “We imagine how we would have been affected by such an impact” and “we find, then, that in all its essential features the operation of Verstehen is based upon the application of personal experience to observed behavior” (Abel 1948, 215). Hempel describes the method in a similar way: “(the historian) tries to realize as completely as possible the circumstances under which they acted, and the motives which influenced their actions; and by this imaginary self-identification with his heroes, he arrives at an understanding” (Hempel 1942, 44). Crucial to the heuristic reading of *Verstehen*, is the relativity of this procedure to a historian’s personal imagination.[[4]](#footnote-4) The heuristic account allows the possibility that the intuited generalizations of two historians might differ radically, if they have had different life experiences. It essentially relativizes the validity of the intuited generalization to subjective credibility only (Abel 1948, 217).

For both Abel and Hempel, *Verstehen*, relativized in this way, could only be a research heuristic. Because the commonsense generalization was given to the investigator through his subjective experience, it had to be confirmed by appropriate evidence independently of its validity based on the researcher’s imagination (Hempel 1942, 44; Abel 1948, 216).[[5]](#footnote-5) Thus, it becomes a matter of luck whether the use of one’s imagination is actually helpful in research: some intuitive generalizations connecting observable behavior will be vindicated by further evidence, others will not. However, if the researcher uses *Verstehen* without the necessary, evidentiary control, it also becomes a dangerous method.

Hempel (1942, 45) explicitly mentions the possibility that investigators could produce a correct prediction of some event, based on the generalizations originating in their imagination, even though they have no empirical confirmation for the generalizations. Such a prediction would not be warranted from an epistemological point of view. Abel and Hempel concluded that *Verstehen,* at best, is an intuitive short cut in the scientific investigation of the human world. At worst, it is used as a fictional procedure of metaphysics which illegitimately replaces the justificatory role of empirical research. Thus, for Hempel and Abel, the reason to investigate *Verstehen* lay precisely in their cautionary warning, not to confuse *Verstehen* with proper reasoning in the human sciences, which they understood as continuous with reasoning in the natural sciences (Abel 1948, 218; Hempel 1942, 48).

Hempel’s and Abel’s account of *Verstehen* and their rationalization of historical practice in general has been received extremely poorly by professional historians ever since it was published (Novick 1988, 399). It is not hard to see why so much scorn was directed to the heuristic account, if one applies this account to research on Shakespeare’s sexuality. In that case, intellectual historians would have to use their imagination and their own familiarity with erotic feelings to intuit some kind of generalization expressing a regular connection between ‘writing sonnets like Shakespeare’s’ and ‘having a bi-sexual orientation’. Afterwards, the historian would have to find empirical evidence to support the intuited generalization.

However, no Shakespeare scholar ever discussed any such generalization. Moreover, it is unclear what kind of evidence could be used to support it. One possibility would be to find all sonnet-writers in the early-modern English world and then attempt to find out their sexual orientation independently from an interpretation of their sonnets. However, this only moves the problem to another area. When can you use witness-reports or correspondence from the 16th century as evidence of sexual orientation? Even if one excludes this problem, the fictional scenario in favor of a heuristic account has its own issues.

The heuristic account presupposes that the behavior or the historical event under investigation is behavior that can be subsumed under some general concepts. This presupposition enables the supposedly intuited universal generalization to inferentially connect two instances of these concepts. In the case of Shakespeare’s sexuality, the presupposition is hard to sustain. It’s not in virtue of Shakespeare’s writing of sonnets in general that scholars infer anything about his sexuality, but in virtue of Shakespeare’s writing of the sonnets that he did write, with the specific, gendered characters that are in it and the specific affectionate wordings that he used. There is no comparable sequence of sonnets. There is no meaningful *kind* of sonnet writing behavior that the literary historian can connect to having some kind of sexual orientation.

Even in the ideal scenario that there is independent evidence that every other writer of sonnets, had sexual passions for men in the Elizabethan era, the possibility could remain that Shakespeare, even though he was a writer of sonnets, had no sexual passions for men. Such ideal scenario would yield extremely weak evidence, because it offers no theoretical reason to relate both kinds (writing of sonnets and having a sexual passion for men). The current debate surrounding Shakespeare’s sexuality is a debate over what the sonnets, in their historical and literary uniqueness (specific characters, emotional phrases, etc.), are evidence of. Within a heuristic account, there is no room for such a debate. By design, any question concerning non-generalizable events or behavior cannot be the object of evidentiary dispute, because all evidence is only meaningful within a theoretical framework that uses generalizations over kinds of events or kinds of behavior.

From the perspective of the heuristic account, the contemporary investigation into Shakespeare’s sexuality is non-sensical, a mere play of words. Yet, such an investigation exists and has resulted in a vivid scholarly—might one say scientific?—debate. Given the inapplicability of the *heuristic account* to this paradigm case of *Verstehen*, there might be something wrong with the way Hempel and Abel framed their theory of *Verstehen* as a cautionary tale against scholars in the humanities. Two early responses to Hempel’s 1942 paper already attempted to diagnose the problem of this framing, one from Paul Oskar Kristeller, another from Otto Neurath.

**XY.3. Response I: Paul Oskar Kristeller**

When Hempel’s 1942 paper was published in the *Journal of Philosophy*, Kristeller was a lecturer in the history of philosophy at Columbia University. Hempel and Kristeller had both arrived in New York in 1939 as intellectual migrants, escaping Nazi-occupied Germany. They were both acquainted with Ernest Nagel and Sidney Hook and most likely both visited an informal philosophy discussion group “The New York Circle” organized by Nagel and Hook (Dewulf 2018). Philosophically, Hempel and Kristeller were direct opposites. Kristeller was a historically trained philosopher-philologist who before 1933 had been working with Martin Heidegger. When he left Germany, he had letters of recommendation not only from first-rate German philosophers like Heidegger and Ernst Cassirer, but also from first-rate German philologists, like Werner Jaeger and Eduard Fraenkel (Obermayer 2014). In contrast, Hempel was an a-historical philosopher who had been trained by two of the leading German scientific philosophers, Hans Reichenbach and Rudolf Carnap. Hempel’s interests were mainly situated in the formal analysis of meta-scientific concepts, like confirmation and later also explanation. During the Second World War, Kristeller became assistant editor of the *Journal of the History of Ideas*, one of the first English journals specifically focused on intellectual history. Because of his background in German historical philosophy and his own historical work on the renaissance, Kristeller was well placed to discuss Hempel’s ideas on the use of imagination in historical practice.

Kristeller responded in the paper “Some Remarks on the Method of History” (with Lincoln Reis as co-author) which was published in *The Journal of Philosophy* in 1943.[[6]](#footnote-6) Kristeller and Reis argued that the historian should not attempt to replicate all scientific standards from the natural sciences. “If he wishes to be scientific, he will reach his goal not so much by talk about science or by blind imitation of the specific methods of another science, but rather by applying to his particular method and subject-matter its own demands of scientific accuracy” (Reis and Kristeller 1943, 234). Their reason to emphasize methodological autonomy for the historian lay in what they took to be the misapplication of epistemic norms to domains where they don’t apply.

For Kristeller and Reis, the scientific historian aims to infer and reconstruct past events (including ideas and feelings of historical actors) from the available source-material. In contrast to Hempel’s heuristic account, they claimed that generalizations are not a necessary part of this inferential procedure. In order to use source-material as evidence for a specific claim about the past, two basic justificatory procedures must be applied: fact-finding and interpretation (Reis and Kristeller 1943, 235). As they admit themselves, they only repeat well-known, earlier methodological principles of the historian’s practice from traditional historiographical manuals of Bernheim, Droysen and Langois and Seignobos. The historian must collect possible sources, select the relevant ones for the investigation and then perform a critical analysis (investigating whether the sources are from the relevant period and were authored by the relevant person)—all processes that differ from methodological problems in the natural sciences. In the case of Shakespeare’s sexuality, this translates to key choices.

Should one adjust the arrangement and wording of the sonnets as they were first published in 1609? Was the author of the sonnets also the author of the other works in the Shakespearean corpus? These choices have to be justified by the historian, and only then an attempt can be made to reconstruct a past intention or a past event based on the available source-material. Kristeller and Reis identify this reconstruction as the evidentiary problem particular to the humanities—*verstehen*. “This is where scope for a properly disciplined historical imagination enters and in a sense is the special mark of the historian” (Reis and Kristeller 1943, 237).

According to Kristeller and Reis, a historical imagination is necessary to reconstruct the past from available traces. This is most obvious when only fragments of a work remain and the historian is forced to reconstruct an author’s thoughts or intentions from those fragments. In their view, an analogous situation prevails everywhere in literary history, history of art, intellectual history, etc. However, Kristeller and Reis do not think that the historian should “indulge in wild hypotheses or in phantasies” in order to arrive at some generalization (Reis and Kristeller 1943, 237). The historical imagination is *disciplined* and is also not aimed at the production of generalizations. Every reconstruction of the historian must be supported by further evidence from source-materials. In the case of the sonnets, most scholars in favor of the bisexuality-thesis maintain that sonnets 18-126 describe the increasing infatuation of the author-character with the male fair youth. As they point out, these sonnets use phrases to express the homoerotic affection of the author character for the fair youth. Whether phrases like e.g. “he was but one hour mine” (sonnet 34) are verbal data that detail physical intimacies between the author and the fair youth requires an interpretation of the meaning of these phrases - something that in itself requires familiarity with the idioms of 16th century English poetic language, a broader interpretation of the phrase within the narrative of the poem, which in turn is supported by the narrative of the sonnet sequence.

Nothing in this case suggests the use of a vivid imagination on the part of the historian or the literary critic which would only be valid relative to their subjective experience. According to Kristeller and Reis (1943, 238), the chief types of error in history are “disregards of available evidence, lack of criticism, a failure to verify the sources and a misinterpretation of the available source materials”. *Verstehen*, understood in this way, delineates the particular way in which historians of the human past have to infer intentions and beliefs of actors from available source-material, just like physicists must also support their theoretical models with available experimental data. However, unlike physicists, historians of the human past often cannot conceptualize the objects of their investigation as members of some general kind. Unlike the experimental sciences, the historian mostly studies objects which are not recurrent. The historian should allow the *possibility* that his object of study can only be conceived in its concrete uniqueness. “Such concreteness does by no means forbid description or even understanding, but it can not fit any neat scheme of inductive generalization” (Reis and Kristeller 1943, 242). In historical studies (of human culture), experimental repetition is excluded from the potential methodology. In the case of Shakespeare’s sonnets, this problem is evident: there is no way to repeat Shakespeare’s life, alter his sexual orientation and find out whether the content of the sonnets also changes.

Although Kristeller was a student of Heinrich Rickert, he never mentions the idiographic-nomothetic distinction between the cultural sciences and the natural sciences as it was introduced by Wilhelm Windelband and later developed by Rickert. Kristeller’s point is not that historiography should *only* be concerned with the specificity or uniqueness of historical events (idiographic approach). His point is a) that some historical events (like e.g. Shakespeare’s sexual orientation) have to be investigated scientifically in absence of a lawful, theoretical framework covering those events and b) that they also *can* be investigated in such a way.

**XY.4. Response II: Otto Neurath**

In 1943 Hempel also received very similar criticism for his ideas on *Verstehen* from someone who was intellectually much closer to Hempel’s own tradition of scientific philosophy. Otto Neurath, trained as a historical economist, became an important member of the Vienna Circle in the 1920s. From 1934 onwards he was the central organizer of the Unity of Science movement, a broad collective of intellectuals, including Hempel, who intended to renew both philosophy and science (Reisch 2005). From 1934 onwards Hempel and Neurath had an extensive correspondence about the future of the Unity of Science movement, and especially the relevance of historiography and historical perspectives on science for that movement (Dewulf 2020). During the Second World War, Neurath found refuge in Oxford. Unlike his colleagues in the movement, he decided to remain in Europe, but became increasingly concerned with the intellectual developments in the USA.[[7]](#footnote-7) In 1935 Neurath had already complained to Hempel that the logic of science should not be conceived as a “cookbook” containing abstract recipes for rationality applicable in all domains.[[8]](#footnote-8) After reading Hempel’s 1942 paper he became disappointed about Hempel’s treatment of the historical sciences as if they were entirely similar to mathematical physics. Specifically, he did not agree that historical events can always be subsumed under generalizations, either of a deterministic kind (All A’s are B’s) or of a probabilistic kind (95 % of all A’s are B’s). In his letters of 1943 and 1944, Neurath emphasized the ‘unpredictability in principle’ of most events in the social domain.[[9]](#footnote-9) He wrote that “the unpredictability of chance is already there before, in so far as items are concerned, which are not sufficiently repeated”.[[10]](#footnote-10) In another letter, he wrote:

You see I think the so-called probability standpoint in history would imply, that we get 6000 Hitlers and then tell something how they behave "on an average". Usually people think that the behaviour of Hitler and the Nazis may be based on probability statements dealing with masses, as if that were in discussion here. IT IS NOT. Could you show me, very roughly, what you intended in your article on p. 41, with illuminating examples, please. (Neurath to Hempel, 25 November 1944, Nr. 246 VCA)

On that page Hempel had suggested that historical generalizations could be of a statistical nature. He gave the example of the child Tommy who comes down with the measles (Hempel 1942, 42). After some days Tommy’s brother also comes down with the measles. According to Hempel, the infection of Tommy’s brother could have been expected with a high probability given the condition that Tommy and his brother spent time together in close proximity. Hempel presumed that a probabilistic generalization was in play, something like “it is very probable that someone who has not yet had the measles and has been in close contact with a person who has the measles will also get the measles”. Hempel believed that generalizations in history are of the same character: their probability values would not be numerical, only “at best known quite roughly”.

Neurath was not convinced by this epidemiological example of the application of probabilistic generalizations. In the case of the measles, at least, it is possible to support some kind of probability for the contagion of the measles through repeated observations or experiments. The contagion of Tommy’s brother can be subsumed under a general kind of event: a contagion in the context of close contact with an infected individual. Given the right kind of retrospective observational study of multiple infectious cases, it is possible to infer the probability of contagion in general given these initial conditions (which were assumed similar in all investigated cases).

However, the social, political and cultural preconditions of historical events differ in varying degrees. As a consequence, in many cases an assessment of probability cannot be made. Neurath gave the example of Hitler’s rise to power: unlike the contagion of Tommy’s brother, Hitler’s rise to power cannot be grouped under some general kind of event which is open to investigation through observations or experiments. In the case of Tommy’s brother, it is possible to isolate the relevant initial conditions, similar in all cases, such that the contagion could be expected, namely the close contact with another infected person. What the relevant initial conditions for a historical event are, is more difficult to discern. Neurath emphasized this problem to Hempel: “You speak of ‘determining conditions’ without even touching the point, that the whole aggregate may appear as ‘determining conditions’”.[[11]](#footnote-11) As Kristeller also pointed out to Hempel, the historian cannot isolate which aspect of his object is relevant beforehand. What is relevant about the sonnets such that they can serve as evidence for Shakespeare’s sexuality, is not guaranteed by a general theory which conceives the sonnets under a general kind of behavior. Is it Shakespeare’s writing of sonnets, writing of sonnets to a man, writing of sonnets to a man within a particular narrative, etc.?

When Neurath wrote his comments to Hempel in 1943 and 1944, he was frustrated by Hempel’s neglect of actual historical research. Almost no historical work discusses historical events as if they can be conceived as members of a general kind. Presuming that historical studies are like the epidemiological study of the measles without any real example from historical literature was a mockable idea according to Neurath, as if we are able to generate 6000 Hitlers under various conditions and investigate the outcome. He was especially upset that Hempel quoted Maurice Mandelbaum’s book *The Problem of Historical Knowledge* as a positive inspiration for his paper: “That you call M. Mandelbaum’s analysis clarifying hurt me deeply, I just wanted to quote this book as an example of overwhelming metaphysical confusion”. “Why start from this Mandelbaum business and not from some historian or anthropologist?”[[12]](#footnote-12)

**XY.5. The source of Hempel’s framework: Maurice Mandelbaum**

Mandelbaum’s book *The Problem of Historical Knowledge* was one of the first English monographs which discussed German and Italian philosophers of history including Croce, Dilthey, Mannheim, Simmel, Rickert and Troeltsch. In the book Mandelbaum argued against a relativist epistemology for the historical sciences and defended a realist interpretation of historical narratives: events in historical narratives represent real events, and the historical narrative represents causal relations between the events (Mandelbaum 1936/1967, 188). Mandelbaum does not conceive the causal relations as lawful connections between events, but as singular products and producers of change (1936/1967, 264). Hempel disagreed with this interpretation of historical causation, and argued that every causal relation should be understood as a regularity relation between events expressible as a lawful generalization (Hempel 1942, 48).

Although Hempel and Mandelbaum had a difference of opinion in this respect, they both framed their account in opposition to a relativist understanding of historical science. Mandelbaum identified Croce, Dilthey and Mannheim as the source of such a relativist understanding: all three threatened to reduce the validity of historical accounts to the personal values of the historians or their imagination (Mandelbaum 1936/1967, 83). On Mandelbaum’s reading of Dilthey’s method of *Verstehen* relied purely on the use of the historian’s imagination. According to Mandelbaum, *Verstehen* entailed an argument from analogy, i.e. that only those experiences of historical actors which were also experienced personally by the historian could be inferred from past manifestations. This limits the validity of verstehen to one’s personal knowledge of inner experiences. Mandelbaum understood this subjective foundation of *Verstehen* as the main problem of Dilthey’s work: it introduced a fundamentally subjective element in the writing of history. Mandelbaum’s conclusion on Dilthey was harsh: “In the end, there is a final subjective feeling of certainty which cannot be transcended or rendered intelligible by logical means” ( 1936/1967, 66).

On this reading of Dilthey, contemporary historians with a sexual passion for men could recognize Shakespeare’s sonnets as manifestations of their own sexual affection, whereas contemporary heterosexuals would be barred from such an inference. If this is how one conceives *Verstehen*, it is epistemologically defunct from the beginning. By using personal imagination as confirmation for one’s claim, the validity of the historical conclusions is necessarily relative to the subjective experience of the historian defending them. In agreement with Mandelbaum, Hempel and later also Abel emphasized that the use of “empathetic understanding” should not confuse an appeal to our personal imagination with empirical soundness. Consequently, Hempel and Abel both solved Mandelbaum’s subjective interpretation of *Verstehen* by relegating it to mere research heuristic (with potential dangers).

Both Mandelbaum and Hempel believed that *Verstehen* had no role to play in the acquisition of evidence for historical claims. However, such heuristic account of *Verstehen* entails a problem: how can the historian use manifestations from the past, like the sonnets, as evidence of past events in the first place, given the absence of any general theoretical framework about those events? Given that historians have no reliable knowledge of how men *in general* manifest their sexual affection for other men, nothing about Shakespeare’s sexuality can be inferred from the availability of his sonnets. Thus, these poems are destined to remain mute to the extent that they are conceptualized as singular expressions of Shakespeare and not as instances of some general kind.

If it were possible to create a general theory of human expressions applicable across times and cultures, the epistemological problem of *Verstehen* would not exist. However, in the absence of such a theory, there are three possibilities. This first option is skepticism about knowledge of the past, especially of human intentions: Shakespeare’s sexuality, and most other topics like it, cannot be objects of our knowledge. At best, they would be objects of speculation only. Hempel’s and Abel’s heuristic account take this option: to the extent that the sonnets are not subsumed under some well-confirmed generalization, they cannot be evidence of anything at all. Any inference that is made based on their contents can only be speculation. As mentioned earlier, Hempel’s and Abel’s reason to have a theory about *Verstehen* lay exactly in the warning that such a theory entails, i.e. not to confuse the use of one’s imagination with proper empirical standards of justification.

The second option is a form of acquaintance-epistemology. This would imply that the historian can, in absence of any mental mediation through a general theory, infer the correct conclusion from his source-material. Mandelbaum believed that “the historian need merely look at his material in order to find ties of existential dependence” (Mandelbaum 1936/1967, 261). In the case of Shakespeare’s sonnets, this position entails that a historian of English literature would merely have to look at the sonnets to understand that the first 126 poems originate from Shakespeare’s sexual affection for men. This option introduces a miracle into the epistemological process: it replaces the problem of evidence with an instant acquaintance of the causal relation between historical events. It is not surprising that Neurath classified Mandelbaum’s position as “overly metaphysical”. Mandelbaum did not have a theory of *Verstehen* at all, exactly because it could not serve a purpose given his acquaintance epistemology.

A third option is to conceive verstehen as a necessary element in an epistemic practice where the objects under investigation cannot be captured within a general theory—I will call this option the epistemic account of *Verstehen*. The reason to have a theory about *Verstehen* lay in the recognition that there is an epistemological problem typical for the human sciences: the use of sources as evidence in absence of a theory which conceives those sources under general concepts. Kristeller and Neurath, although they worked within very different intellectual traditions, both urged Hempel to abandon the heuristic account and take up an epistemic account. Such an account entails an intellectual challenge: to reconceive what is a rational inference and what not, given the absence of a general theory about the object under investigation. If you have a general theory, then an instance which was predicted by the conjunction of theory and initial conditions, can count as confirmation of that theory. Or, you can use a well-confirmed theory to infer one object given another one, e.g. infer sexual passion for men given specific poems. In absence of such a general theory, this is no longer an option. Consequently, how you think about confirmation and evidence must change as well.

In his exchange with Hempel, Neurath pointed out that theories in the cultural/social domain should not be evaluated with the same epistemic values as theories in the non-human domain, specifically concerning prediction. Some theories in physics allow precise predictions for the state of a system, given conditions of its past. It is not rational to desire such predictions from historiographical theories. Neurath wrote Hempel that the difference between physics and historiography “is not a question of exactness, but of non-predictability”.[[13]](#footnote-13) In his book *Empirische Soziologie* Neurath had already argued that prediction should not be expected in the social domain, because regularities between social events are unstable. According to Neurath (1931, 130), each individual of a social system can react differently to new events in his social environment: some individuals will perform abnormal behavior compared to the others in the group, and this abnormal behavior can then expand among groups and between groups. Contrary to the parts of complex machines, individuals of a society can change their regular behavior. Moreover, the sociological theories can also become part of the social system that they are describing and have the potential to change that very system by describing it (Neurath 1931, 132). Unlike machine parts or the movement of planets, the regularities displayed by human behavior are not robust under constantly changing conditions. The problem is not that human behavior is very complex, but that it is variable, especially in relation to the (scientific) representations of that behavior. This limits the projection of social regularities into the future and consequently the possibility of predictions.

Kristeller and Reis also discussed the difference between rational norms for theories in historiography and the natural sciences. Because historians interpret their sources in the absence of a general theory, every object of historical interpretation can be conceived in a great variety of ways (Reis and Kristeller 1943, 242). Both the selection of the sources and the aspects of the sources that historians construe as relevant will determine their interpretation. Consequently, historical interpretations will vary depending on these choices. Kristeller and Reis believed that the best way to describe the product of historiography is as a narrative. Historical narratives have to be confirmed by evidence—they have to remain in accord with the sources. However, the choice of the narrative structure will play an important role, both in selecting the sources and deciding which aspects to highlight in the absence of any lawful generalization (Reis and Kristeller 1943, 243).[[14]](#footnote-14)

**XY.6. Dilthey’s cognitive and logical perspective on Verstehen**

Given that most actors involved with historiography/sociology never endorsed a heuristic account of *Verstehen*, how did both Hempel and Mandelbaum come to frame *Verstehen* as a subjective procedure relying purely on the personal imagination of the historian? Hempel most likely never read Dilthey, but Mandelbaum, who was an important source for Hempel’s 1942 paper, did. And Mandelbaum’s ideas hinge on a specific reading of the last chapter of Dilthey’s unfinished manuscript *The Formation of the Historical World in the Human Sciences*. Specifically, Mandelbaum refers to the following passage from the chapter *Exegesis or Interpretation* to emphasize that there always remains a final subjective feeling of certainty in the process of understanding.

There is something irrational in all understanding, just as life itself is irrational; it cannot be represented in a logical formula. The ultimate, although quite subjective, sureness residing in this re-experiencing cannot be replaced by any cognitively tested inferences that explicate the process of understanding. (Dilthey 2002, 239)

Here, Dilthey defended that the reconfiguration of physical objects as the manifestation of an inner object necessarily relies on the cognitive process of re-experiencing what was at stake for the historical actors involved. Mandelbaum concluded from this passage that Dilthey considers *Verstehen* ultimately as a subjective and irrational procedure. What Mandelbaum does not mention, is Dilthey’s characterization of *Verstehen* in the paragraphs directly following this one. There, Dilthey conceives *Verstehen*, not only from a cognitive point of view, but also from a logical point of view, i.e. as an inference. Dilthey contrasts inferences in the natural sciences with those in the human sciences, because the latter do not use a general theory to infer an inner thought from an external manifestation.

The process of understanding based on this is to be conceived as inductive. This induction is of the kind in which an incomplete series of cases is used not to infer a universal law but a structure or ordering system that gathers the cases as parts of a whole. (Dilthey 2002, 240)

Because the induction does not rely on general laws connecting the inner thought and the external manifestation, it would be mistaken to evaluate the success of the inferences in the human sciences in the same way as one evaluates the success of inferences in the natural sciences. For Dilthey, the task of a logic of the human sciences is to find the rules to assess this type of inference (Dilthey 2002, 240). Mandelbaum never mentioned this task as an epistemological challenge, nor Dilthey’s specific epistemic characterization of *Verstehen* as a form of inference. Mandelbaum chose to focus purely on Dilthey’s cognitive assessment of *Verstehen* as the subjective re-experiencing of an event in the historian’s imagination. The logical characterization of verstehen was abandoned. Hempel followed this reading.

Neurath’s and Kristeller’s early responses to Hempel’s 1942 paper were attempts to disambiguate the cognitive and the logical aspect of *Verstehen* which Dilthey had mixed together. Neurath did not conceive the re-experiencing of an event in one’s imagination as an important task for the historian, and Kristeller equally did not attribute any importance to the historian’s personal imagination. Instead, both attempted to characterize epistemic norms for inferences in the human sciences—norms that differ from those in the natural science, given the absence of general laws covering the objects contained in the inferences.

Despite these early responses, the heuristic account of *Verstehen* remained in place as a *potential* position on the problem of *Verstehen*. Hempel’s reputation within American philosophy steadily rose in the 1950s and 1960s. He never abandoned the heuristic account throughout his life: he never replied to Neurath’s long letters about the 1942 paper, and he never engaged Kristeller’s narrative perspective.[[15]](#footnote-15) As a consequence, many scholars set themselves the task to respond against Hempel.

The amount of papers written between 1945 and 1975 against the heuristic account of Hempel and Abel is immense (Danto 1966; Dray 1957; Mink 1966; Skinner 1969; Weingartner 1961; Taylor 1971). One of the most cited papers within this set of critics is “Interpretation and the Science of Man” by Charles Taylor (1971, 49), who gave three reasons why general hypotheses have no role to play in the sciences dealing with the cultural domain. First, there is the problem that historical and social events cannot be shielded from possible external interference: experiments cannot be set up to isolate specific preconditions to an event. Second, and related to the first reason, is the problem that differing interpretations of human expressions cannot be judged by their different predictions. And third, and most fundamentally, humans are self-defining animals: their self-understanding can shift radically through time. In close similarity to Neurath, Taylor also argued that human behavior is variable in relation to the representations of that behavior in a given society. Any representation of behavior has the potential to alter that very behavior.

The success of prediction in the natural sciences is bound up with the fact that all states of the system, past and future, can be described in the same range of concepts, as values, say, of the same variables. (Taylor 1971, 49)

However, the states of cultural systems are dynamical to the extent that the range of concepts used to describe these states differ throughout time. “Human science looks backward. It is inescapably historical” (Taylor 1971, 51). Taylor’s position resembles Kristeller’s and Neurath’s arguments against Hempel’s heuristic account: in virtue of the fact that we have no means to find a warranted general theory capable of covering all historical events as kinds, we should not use the epistemic norms available in the natural sciences when evaluating theories in the humanities.

**XY.7. Conclusion**

Was Shakespeare sexually attracted to a man and did he express his affection in physical intimacies with this man? There is no available evidence to answer this question such that a dispute over the answer would be irrational given that evidence. However, given a background of interpretative assumptions, the collection of Shakespearean sonnets can be used to support several mutually exclusive answers. Our theories about Shakespeare’s sexuality are underdetermined by the available evidence. This epistemic situation is not unique to the human sciences in any way; it abounds in the natural sciences as well. Given that new evidence about Shakespeare himself is not likely to turn up, progress in the debate must rely on progress in the support for a given set of interpretative assumptions. In fact, research on the nature of sexuality in the 16th century has achieved such success: we can now assume that sexual attraction to people of the same sex was a recognized category of behavior in the 16th century, as a natural, but sinful affection in all men. This assumption excludes all interpretations of the sonnets that portray a bisexual Shakespeare as anachronistic.

The absence of a general theory concerning sexuality and its relation to poetic expression did not make the debate impossible or speculative. The sonnets play an evidentiary role: an interpretation of their content limits possible positions concerning Shakespeare’s sexuality. From the perspective of the heuristic account, as defended by Hempel and Abel, the absence of any general theory about the relation between sonnet writing and sexuality nullifies the evidentiary importance of the sonnets. From the perspective of the epistemic account, the debate on Shakespeare’s sexuality proves the possibility of rational argumentation in absence of generalizations covering the objects of investigation. Defenders of the epistemic account have recognized the need to evaluate the relation between theory and evidence in the human sciences differently from that relation in the natural sciences, exactly because the objects of investigation often cannot be conceived as members of some general kind. That one *can* argue about Shakespeare’s sexuality is the reason why *Verstehen* is an epistemic problem.

This inferential characterization of the problem of *Verstehen* has been available ever since Dilthey. Unfortunately, in Anglo-American philosophy, *Verstehen* has often been framed as a subjective procedure which relies entirely on the use of one’s personal imagination. This is how Maurice Mandelbaum introduced Dilthey’s ideas to the American philosophical community in 1938. Once an interpretation of a philosophical concept has been introduced within a community, it is hard to remove. Hempel’s framing of *Verstehen* along the lines of Mandelbaum is a good example: it ensured that generations of philosophers either accepted his framing of *Verstehen* as the subjective use of imagination or were forced to argue exactly against it. Ultimately, any position on *Verstehen* comes down to the attitude one has towards cases like the debate on Shakespeare’s sexuality: should we conceive it as a form of investigation that is part of what we take rationality to be, or not? A positive answer leads to an epistemic account of *Verstehen*, a negative one to the heuristic account and its related skepticism concerning our knowledge of the past.

**XY.8. References**

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1. In this essay I use Shakespeare as a name to refer to the author of the Shakespeare-corpus. Some scholars see an important link between the question of the author’s sexual orientation and the question who that author was (Hamill 2005). In this essay, I am neutral as to who actually was the author of that corpus. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For an illuminating discussion of this case as an epistemological problem, see (Roth 2008). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. In contemporary philosophy of science, there has been a revival in the study of scientific understanding. Within this revival, understanding refers to an epistemic aim of scientific theories, in contrast to explanation and description (de Regt 2017). Because it is necessary to distinguish Dilthey’s problem of understanding in the human sciences with this contemporary debate in philosophy of science, I chose to use Dilthey’s term of *Verstehen*. If understanding is an aim of science, one might question whether Dilthey’s *Verstehen*, e.g. next to explanation, also gives understanding. However, I want to stay neutral to (the meaningfulness of) this question and will not discuss it. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Both Hempel and Hempel, in the context of their discussion of sociology/historiography, equate “understanding” to *einfühlen*, the process of imaging oneself to be someone else (Abel 1948, 216). The intellectual origin of this equation will be discussed in section XY.5 below. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. It is important to note that Hempel in his later career revisited the notion of “understanding”, in context of science in general, as the intellectual aim of scientific explanations. Explanations enable us to understand ourselves and our world (Hempel 1965, 333). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. At the time, Lincoln Reis was a student of history at Columbia University. Because Reis did not have an academic career after he left Columbia, it is difficult to assess what Reis’s contribution to the paper was. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Neurath’s increasing worries about the intellectual developments in the USA during the war are exemplified in his war-correspondence with Rudolf Carnap (Tuboly and Cat 2019) [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Neurath to Hempel, 2 February 1935, Nr. 244 Vienna Circle Archives (henceforth VCA), Noord-Hollands Archief, Haarlem, The Netherlands. Quoted by permission of the Wiener Kreis Stichting, Amsterdam. All rights reserved. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. For a discussion of Neurath’s ideas about unpredictability in principle, see (Reisch 2001). For Neurath’s positive reception of some hermeneutic ideas about *Verstehen*, see (Uebel 2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Neurath to Hempel, 21 September 1943, Nr. 246 VCA. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Neurath to Hempel, 25 November 1944, Nr. 246 VCA. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Neurath to Hempel, 25 November 1944, Nr. 246 VCA. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. This distinction does not imply for Neurath that the sciences are disunified. Sciences which lack the capacity of prediction, are still sciences in the sense that one can confirm their statements through observation and experimentation expressed in a physicalist language. Neurath is merely pointing out that predictive power is not an essential feature of scientific theories. Kristeller and Reis also make a similar point: historiography is a part of science, even though it lacks predictive power. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Today, the narrative tradition in philosophy of history has greatly expanded this very same idea. For a recent contribution to this tradition, see (Roth 2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Hempel wrote Kristeller in 1943 that, despite Kristeller’s interesting discussion of historical criticism, he did not agree with Kristeller’s rejection of the role of generalizations in history. This letters seems to be the only exchange Kristeller and Hempel had about their papers. Hempel to Kristeller, 25 November 1943, Paul Oskar Kristeller Papers, box 42, folder 24, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Library. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)