Introduction

Around the turn of the Twentieth Century, Wilhelm Dilthey, in characterising the humanistic disciplines as “Geisteswissenschaften,” sciences of “spirit” (Geist) as opposed to those of “nature” (Naturwissenschaften), appealed to Hegel’s notion of objective spirit (objektiver Geist).1 However for Dilthey, a neo-Kantian, Hegel’s concept had to be disentangled from what was considered the unsupportable metaphysical system within which Hegel had presented it. In contrast, Dilthey gave the notion a broadly epistemological significance by correlating it with a distinct type of “understanding” peculiar to the Geisteswissenschaften.

Dilthey had extended to the human sciences in general the idea of a peculiarly “hermeneutic” approach to the linguistic disciplines forged by in the early Nineteenth Century by F. D. E. Schleiermacher. While the Naturwissenschaften were rightly concerned with
explaining (*erklären*) phenomena in terms of causal laws, the *Geisteswissenschaften* aimed at understanding (*verstehen*) the meaning expressed in actions and other expressions of social life, not just linguistic ones. Here Dilthey thought he was making explicit what was present in the historiography of the romantic “historical school” stemming from the work of Leopold von Ranke, and this approach, rather than Hegel’s *metaphysical* one, would stand as the exemplar of an anti-naturalistic approach to history: “Today we can no longer retain the presuppositions on which Hegel based this concept [of objective spirit]. He constructed communities from the universal, rational will. Today we must start from the reality of life … Hegel constructed metaphysically; we analyse the given.”

Dilthey found the notion of *objektiver Geist* fruitful for capturing the idea that the human sciences examined societies in terms of the specific cultural and meaningful practices and institutions within which the psychological capacities of individual agents developed. While cultural systems were the expressions of life-forms that were ultimately grounded in human nature, humanistic understanding could not be reduced to the sorts of explanation that ultimately applied to the natural world. Cultural life was, rather, characterised in ways that seem broadly similar to those explored more recently in terms of the idea of normative or rule-following “forms of life” commonly associated with the later Wittgenstein. For example, while a human action *qua* physical event—in an oft-repeated example, the raising of an individual’s right arm—may be potentially explainable in the way that applies to any other natural event, the same event described as a conscious and intentional *action*—that of *voting* for a particular motion in a meeting, say—invokes other non-physically reducible considerations. To take this case, it is impossible to say *what voting is*, without referring to the practices of culturally variable institutions concerned with collective decision making.

As John Searle has pointed out, for such meaningful intentional actions, a physical event X will only “count as” an instance of an action Y if there exist the relevant background institutions which can be thought of as “systems of constitutive rules … of the form ‘X counts as Y in context C.’” Stressing the normative or “rule-following” patterns manifested and their non-reducibility to *mere* nomological regularity invokes a distinction that might be likened to Kant’s distinction between acting “in accordance with laws,” and acting “in accordance with the representation of laws.” However, Kant’s position on