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**THE ERKLAEREN-VERSTEHEN CONTROVERSY AND ITS  
RELEVANCE FOR AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY**

**BY**

**IWUAGWU, EMMANUEL KELECHI**

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## **THE ERKLAEREN –VERSTEHEN CONTROVERSY AND ITS RELEVANCE FOR AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY.**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Philosophy begins in wonder. Many facts in life are not immediately intelligible. Many natural events and modes of human behaviour puzzle us, thus seeking some sort of explanation. The primary interest of philosophy is therefore to provide answers or explanations to the fundamental questions of life. In seeking explanation we are also seeking to understand the phenomena under investigation. Explanation makes what may not be immediately intelligible understandable; it unravels the apparent mystery surrounding it and makes it somehow familiar and intelligible. In explaining we engage ourselves in answering questions as to “how”, ‘when’ ‘why’ etc. in explaining also we try to simplify or clarify a given proposition or position to make it more comprehensible.

In the history of philosophy there are various schools of thought, which have championed various positions with regard to the most suitable method of explanation and understanding in the natural and social sciences. This controversy most pronounced in the philosophical disputations of the positivists, the neo-positivists and the behavioral scientists will be briefly reviewed in this paper.

In as much the problem of explanation and understanding is a universal problem in philosophy, the Erklären-verstehen (explanation- understanding) controversy will be studied with regard to its relevance to African philosophy.

### **THE ERKLAEREN-VERSTEHEN CONTROVERSY AND ITS HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

The Erklären-verstehen controversy simply translated means the explanation- understanding controversy. Ordinarily in every aspect of human study what an explanation does is to provide understanding. According to Vernon Pratt:

Something happens which puzzles us, and in seeking an explanation **we are seeking to understand it. This can only be, it is suggested, by assimilating what we cannot understand to what we can –by showing that things that puzzle us are capable of being interpreted, in some not immediately obvious way, as ‘the same’ as the things that do not puzzle us (77).**

From the above it is clear that what we do not understand needs an explanation. The Erklären- verstehen controversy is more of an interdisciplinary controversy, which arose in sorting out the primary methodological concerns proper to the philosophy of the natural, and socio- historical sciences. Simply put, can we use the same methodology of explanation and understanding in the physical and social sciences? Are there different ways of understanding and explaining social and physical phenomena?

**The Erklären- Verstehen controversy in the philosophy of the natural and human sciences as articulated by Karl-Otto Apel has three developmental stages (*Contemporary Philosophy*, 19-49). The terminological distinction between ‘Erklären’ and Verstehen’ was first made in order to suggest an epistemological foundation for the methodological autonomy-claim of the historical sciences’ or more generally of the social sciences by J.G.Droysen in 1858 and W. Dilthey in 1883. This distinction was considered to be based on Hermeneutics as against the natural sciences which were considered to be based on causal or nomological explanations. This can be considered to be the foundation and first stage of this controversy also called the E/V controversy. Max Weber adopted it with some modifications for his foundation of understanding sociology. At this stage the primary methodological concern was to answer the question “whether or not these new sciences... had to follow the paradigm of the natural sciences “ (e.g. physics) which appears more successful after**

getting rid of sympathetic and teleological understanding in favour of causal or nomological explanation.

The second stage of this controversy was the Neopositivists in defense of their “unified science” thesis explicitly rejected the explanation-understanding dichotomy and the autonomy claim of the social sciences, the Neopositivists thesis was in turn based on the deductive- nomological (DN) model of causal explanation as it was newly articulated by Carl G Hempel and P.Oppengeim. This position of Hempel will be briefly outlined later.

This controversy, which appears temporarily rested, was again genuinely revived from within analytic philosophy, which was an offshoot of logical positivism. Karl Popper, the later Wittgenstein and British ‘ordinary language philosophy’ championed this. This revival “was inaugurated through the development of Popperism especially as a response to the challenge of the history of science) and by the emergence of a certain Neo-Wittgensteinianism with inspirations from Collinwood, Webber and Merleau-Ponty” (Apel, 23-24).

This third stage is currently being championed by G.H. Von Wright and the “critical theory” school as well as the “transcendental pragmatics”. The pertinent viewpoints of these scholars and schools have contributed immensely in the proper understanding of the various sciences with their attendant methods of explanation and understanding.

### **EXPLANATION AND UNDERSTANDING IN THE PHYSICAL AND SOCIAL SCIENCES**

Explanation and understanding are very indispensable tools for the growth of any scientific study be it physical or social science. Without understanding every phenomena or action is nothing but a puzzle and without explanation it remains an unresolved puzzle which hinders progress and development. Explanation presupposes the questions “why”, “when” “how far”, “how much” etc.

According to John Hospers in his *Introduction to Philosophical Analysis*:

**“Why” normally introduces a request for an explanation. But “why?” is an ambiguous question: it may be the request for reason or the request for an explanation (240).**

According to Hospers when one is asked why he believed a proposition is true, he is been asked to proffer reasons in support of his belief. This reason makes the proposition more plausible and acceptable. Explanations may also be of events, processes or happenings in the course of nature: we may be asked to explain why iron rust, why rivers flood, why one sleeps, why cancer kills etc. Explanation of why events occur which is what is mostly involved in scientific explanation is only one of the several kinds of explanation. Ordinarily we can explain in the sense of making something clearer, we may explain what a passage of a poem means.

Because of the importance of explanation and understanding as scientific tools of study, philosophers of various schools of thought and disciplines have put forward various methods of explanation and understanding as well as various senses in which these concepts can be employed. We will now briefly look at these positions.

#### **(1) EXPLANATION WITH REASON:**

In this context one is challenged to provide the underlying reasons why he holds to certain beliefs as true and others as false. Faced with typical social phenomena in need of explanation for example why people go to mosques on Fridays and to churches on Sunday? Why do people believe in and worship God? This typical social issue is open to various explanations. The Marxist with the bias that religion is the opium of the masses may explain this phenomenon away by saying that the poor take refuge in God as some kind of “father-substitute”, benefactor and protector in a cold and harsh world. On the other hand, the psychoanalyst with Freudian bent will employ the childhood sense of dependence in trying to explain this phenomenon, whereby he sees the childhood desire for parental care and protection as the underlying reason for man’s believe in an Omnipotent all provident father. Outside

**the Marxian and Freudian explanations there may be other primitive reasons underlying such belief. This model of explanation with reasons is a very much acceptable model of explanation in the social sciences like sociology, anthropology etc than in the physical sciences.**

## **(2) TELEOLOGICAL OR PURPOSIVE EXPLANATIONS.**

According to John Hospers this is the oldest type of explanation.

Storms and other natural catastrophes were thought to be explained by **the wrath of Gods or other beings who controlled these events, and gods were believed to do these things in order to wreak vengeance on human beings, or bring them back into line or Display their power, and so on (245).**

Hospers, however, did acknowledge that this primitive way of explaining, purposive explanation is no longer in vogue though we explain events in human realm by brining in purpose. For example we can explain the action of a man who drank five bottles of beer in twenty minutes by saying “someone bet him N5,000 that he couldn’t do it.”

**In teleological or purposive explanation we state the purpose or intended goal underlying actions and events in nature. A fundamental point of departure between explanations by reference to reasons and purposive explanation is that in the later (purposive) the goals or reasons for actions are consciously entertained whereas in the former they need not be consciously entertained. This is why some scholars also call this explanation intentional explanation.**

**According to Karl Otto Apel, G.H. Von Wright offered the most explicit and most comprehensive methodological application of the Neo-Wittgensteinian approach with regard to the causality/teleology- focus of the E/V controversy (30). Von Wright proposed as a humanistic alternative to causal explanation in the natural sciences a model of teleological or intentional explanation based on five arguments of post- Wittgensteinian action theory (G.H.Von Wright, 10).**

These five arguments in support of teleological explanation include (a) internationality, (b) practical inference, (c) the onto-semantic distinction between the language games or conceptual frameworks related to reasons of actions on the one hand and causes of behaviour –events on the other (d) the logical connections argument and finally (e) intentional explanation (Apel, 30-31). This kind of explanation is classified under functional explanation and is a veritable tool in social sciences and in history.

## **(3) EXPLANATION AS A REDUCTIVE ACTIVITY**

Here explanation is seen as a reduction of a strange unusual, puzzling or complex phenomenon, process or event to term which describe a commonplace or familiar occurrence. According to P.W. Bridgman:

Explanation consists in reducing a situation to elements with which **we are so familiar that we accept them as a matter of course so that our curiosity rests.**

This view is also shared by Vernon Pratt who holds that it is familiarity, which makes an action immediately intelligible. A familiar action needs no explanation (79). The action of a man who wears an overcoat in harmattan is one with which we are familiar, whereas the behaviour of a person who lies down in the middle of the road is strange, and therefore needs explaining.

**According to Norman Campbell:**

**By tracing a relation between the unfamiliar changes and the extremely familiar Changes we are rendering the former intelligible, we are explaining them.**

Thus by reducing the unfamiliar to the familiar we are explaining it, making it understandable. We are familiar with the fact that kerosene does not mix with water and that coloured water mixes freely with uncoloured water. When we see a red liquid failing to mix with a transparent liquid water. It appears somehow strange until we are told that the coloured liquid is kerosene, immediately the apparently strange occurrence becomes intelligible and understandable.

#### (4) EXPLANATION BY SUBSUMPTION UNDER LAW

This model holds that explanation is nothing but subsuming whatever is strange and needs explanation under a general law or theory which immediately unravels the mystery surrounding it.

**According to John Hospers:**

**Whether we explain particular occurrences or things, reference to laws or theories is always involved in their explanation: and the law or theory must be one we already accept, else we will not accept the explanation (242).**

Thus for Hospers, to explain an event is simply to bring it under a law: and to explain a law is to bring it under another law. To explain an event we need the laws and the particular facts. Example “when we ask for the explanation of a particular event such a “why did the pipe burst?” the explanation include (1) certain laws of nature e.g. that water expands when it freezes) and (2) certain particular facts (such as that the temperature dropped below the freezing point in the basement last night) with both of these, the law and particular fact we can explain the event (241). Even when we explain the laws of nature we invoke other laws of nature. Example why do balloons rise in air? Why does iron rust? Etc.

This model of explanation is currently been championed by Carl G.Hempel as Deductive – nomological explanation and probabilistic explanation. In his essay *Explanation in Science and in History* which is concerned with the logic of modes of explanation in inquiry, Hempel compares explanation in natural science and in history. He holds that two basic kinds of laws are developed in science. First those based primarily on deduction in which the thing to be explained is subsumed under a general law, often with a causal connection. The second is the “probabilistic- statistical’ laws which refer to what often happens rather than what always happens. Hempel regards these as the two basic modes of nomological explanation (explanation through law) in scientific enquiry (Brown, 154).

Hempel is of the view that explanations in historical inquiry fall under one or the other of these two basic modes of scientific nomological explanation.

Hempel also calls the deductive-nomological explanation covering law model or deductive model of explanation and holds that a good number of scientific explanations can be regarded as deductive – nomological in character. He posits this example:

Consider, for example, the explanation of mirror images of rainbows, or of the appearance that a spoon handle is bent at the point where it emerges from a glass of water, in all these cases, the explanandum is

**deductively subsumed under the laws of reflection and refraction. Similarly, certain aspects of free fall and of planetary motion can be accounted for by deductive subsumption under Galileo’s or Kepler’s laws (Hempel, 157).**

Hempel further argues that causal explanations which in explaining particular event specify its cause are also deductive nomological in character though not all deductive nomological explanations are causal (158).

#### PROBABILISTIC EXPLANATION

According to Hempel while in the deductive-nomological explanation the laws and the theoretical principles involved are of strictly universal form. They hold that in all cases, with certain specified

conditions fulfilled, an occurrence of certain nature will result. The probabilistic explanation has no such force or universal character. According to Hempel:

**This kind of explanation, too is nomological, i.e. it accounts for a given phenomenon by reference to general laws or theoretical principles ;but some or all of these are of probabilistic-statistical form , i.e. they are generally speaking, assertions to the effect that if certain specified conditions are realized then the occurrence of such and such kind will come about with such and such a statistical probability (159).**

An example of a probabilistic explanation is that the subsiding of acute stomach pains in a given case might well be attributed to and explained by reference to the administration of 50mg of flagyl tablet. This particular event cannot warrant us to invoke a universal law to the effect that the administration of 50mg of flagyl will invariably subside acute stomach pains. We can only assert it with some high statistical probability not with certainty.

**John Hospers refers to this probabilistic explanation as explanations which involves laws only in a very loose sense – a rough-and –ready generalization that is true much of the time but does not hold true for all cases”(242). For example, the fact that Tom caught cold because he has been playing with Dick who had cold cannot be defended when we are reminded that Harry also played with Dick and did not catch cold.**

Hempel therefore concluded that probabilistic explanation is nomological in that it presupposes general laws;

**But because these laws are of statistical rather than of strictly universal form, the resulting explanatory arguments are inductive rather than deductive in character. An inductive argument of this kind explains a given phenomenon by showing that, in view of certain particular events and certain statistical laws, its occurrence was to be expected with high logical, or inductive, probability (160).**

## **EXPLANATION AND PREDICTION IN SCIENTIFIC INQUIRY**

It is the view of Hospers and other analytic philosophers that to explain something is to predict it. “The explanation of an event or of a law must explain why this event occurred rather than some other one”(Hospers, 242).

An explanation must go beyond the particular event explained .It must explain other events or laws including some future events. Hospers argues that the test of an explanatory principle is its predictive power, which enables one to make accurate predictions on the basis of it. He says:

**Since laws explain many other things beside the events they were invoked to explain, and since many of these other occurrences will quite naturally be in future, the laws would consequently explain these also (243).**

Thus our knowledge that water expands on freezing will enable us to predict that the bottle of water in the deep freezer will burst if left overnight there. It must however be known that explanatory power of laws is not enough, it must be combined with a statement about particular conditions for it to yield a prediction. Even in social sciences Karl-Otto Apel speaks of predictively-relevant explanations of recurrent actions (i.e. ways of behaviour), by recurrent motives (i.e. causally-effective good or bad reasons, including wants, beliefs and habitualized rules ), (Apel, 43).

**This emphasis on the predictive aspect of the social sciences is being championed by the positivists. One of its advocates, the contemporary economist Milton Friedman writes:**

**The ultimate goal of a positive science is the development of a “theory” or “hypothesis” that yields valid and meaningful (i.e. not truistic ) predictions about phenomena not yet observed (Methodology, 511).**

Among the many interesting implications of this conception of science Vernon Pratt hold that this view has led some thinkers to argue against one’s intuitions, thinking that there is no need for a theory to be based upon assumptions which are true to reality (74).

#### **UNDERSTANDING AND EXPLANATION IN SOCIAL SCIENCES.**

As we have seen above Carl G. Hempel consistently argued that his two basic modes of explanation does not go only for the natural sciences but also for the social sciences and history. Hence he is of the opinion that there is no need to look for different modes of explanation and understanding for different sciences. He said the above position simply means,

**That the nature of understanding, in the sense in which explanation is meant to give us an understanding of empirical phenomena, is basically the same in all areas of scientific inquiry; and that the deductive and the probabilistic model of nomological explanation accommodate vastly more than just the explanatory arguments of say, classical mechanics: in particular, they accord well also with the character of explanations that deal with the influence of rational deliberations...(Explanations, 178).**

Against this background of the parallel between social and natural sciences especially as put forward by Mill with regard to the possibility of predicting and generalizing human behaviour, Peter Winch, Alasdair Macintyre and John Beattie argued that since social science inquiries are about conscious or thinking people, its inquiry must be conducted on a different basis from natural science.

**Peter Winch argues forcefully in his book *The Idea of a Social Science*, that since human action intrinsically involves meaning and deliberation, the analyst must understand this “from the inside” as it were, if he is to understand it as human action: it is not just a matter of observing it from outside as in the natural sciences (Brown, 190). According to Winch:**

**The historian or sociologist of religion must himself have some religious feeling if he is to make sense of the religious movement he is studying and understand the considerations which govern the the lives of its participants. A historian of art must have some aesthetic sense if he is to understand the problem confronting the artist of his periods... any more reflective understanding must necessarily presuppose ... the participants’ unreflective understanding (194).**

In this Winch is arguing that since one of the things that mark human beings as humans is their possession of ideas and values, it is only through an understanding of these and the associated norms and rules which govern meaningful action in different societies , that the scholar can reach a proper understanding and explanation of social action.

**While Macintyre agrees with Winch he calls for more than understanding of local views and ideas in order to make a proper analysis of social situations.**

**On his own Beattie agrees with Winch and Macintyre that ideas and values form an essential part of social action and social institutions and must be understood as such, he however observes that in every inquiry especially social inquiry, ‘pure description’ is never feasible. We never come with totally open minds to the data, we are already biased.**

**It should be noted that the above scholars share the tendency to speak of ‘understanding’, ‘explanation’, or ‘meanings’ rather than ‘general laws’, ‘measurement’ or ‘verification’, this stance is quite different from that of the positivists.**

More recently the opinions of Winch and his school are being reinforced by Vernon Pratt who equates familiarity with intelligibility and understanding. He is of the view that when an action is our own we know that it is associated with a particular kind of 'conscious experience' and understand it immediately. When, for example, I throw the watch I am trying to repair across the room, I know myself that it is a manifestation of an irrepressible feeling of frustration welling up in me. This my conscious experience enables me to understand and explain the action of one who behaves as such. According to Pratt:

**It is this familiarity from-the-inside ... that constitutes 'intelligibility' as far as actions are concerned what I understand immediately, what it makes no sense to seek to explain, are actions of the kind I myself have performed, for in their case I know the 'inner-experience' with which they are associated. Understanding other peoples' behaviour is thus a matter of interpreting it as somehow involving those same association (80).**

From the foregoing it should be clear that though all sciences follow some aspects of scientific investigation the social sciences and the physical or natural sciences must have different method or standards of valuation. We can't dismiss the social sciences from the scientific community because they fail the physical sciences criteria of prediction and verification. Every science must be judged by its standards and the standards and methodology of all sciences cannot be the same in all cases.

#### **THE RELEVANCE OF ERKLAEREN-VESTEHEN CONTROVERSY FOR AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY.**

Without prejudice to the universalist school of thought in African philosophy as represented by Bodunrin, Kwasi Wiredu, Odera Oruka and Pauline Hountondji who hold that a philosophical problem has a universal relevance and the same methods to all men everywhere irrespective of cultural affliction. African philosophy has a distinguishing mark of being idea, meaning and value laden; this feature is not immediately discernable which has led some scholars to dismiss it as no philosophy.

All philosophy, as we have observed above, begins with wonder. It grows out of the need to provide answers to the basic question posed by man and his environment like the reality of death, the seen effects of invisible force, birth, growth, sickness, change of weather, the idea of time etc. Since African philosophy like every other philosophy is a search to unravel or demystify some puzzles in nature and to provide answers to some fundamental questions about man and his environment, the importance of the Erkslaren – Vestehen controversy for it cannot be over emphasized.

Bodunrin in his article "The question of African philosophy" analysed the trends put forward by Odera Oruka as the current repository of African philosophy (philosophy, vol.52). Scholars like J.Mbiti, Oruka, Bodunrin, K.C Anyanwu, Onyenwuenyi, Wiredu etc. have also suggested some form of methodology for African philosophy which can basically be classified under the following four methods: the free style methodology of conceptual analysis and integrative methodology. In whichever perspective or methodology we are presenting African philosophy its primary role will be to do nothing other than explaining the questions raised in life and to lead man to have a better understanding of himself, his fellow man and the world in which he lives naturally, socially, metaphysically etc.

The relevance of the Erklaeren-Verstehen controversy and its attendant contributions to the growth of philosophical body of Knowledge becomes very pronounced when we consider the fact that African philosophy viewed either from its ethno-philosophic perspective or from the perspective of philosophic sagacity where it emerges as African wisdom, is to a great extent reposed in proverbs, myths, folklores and signs. This fact makes the question of explanation and understanding indispensable in African philosophy. Thus African wisdom concealed in proverbs need to be exposed or unveiled to make them intelligible meaningful and understandable.

The idea of cause and effect plays a prominent role in African philosophy the apparent existence of invisible forces that cause some visible effects cannot be dismissed by the wave of hand. There is need to



explain and understand their reality or non-existence. The controversy can assist in no small measure in proffering a model of explanation.

Teleological, causal, intentional or purposive explanation model can as well be said to be indigenous or widespread to the African. For the African, nothing happens for nothing, there must be a purpose for whatever happens in nature (the Igbo proverb, says: “the toad does not run in the day time for nothing”). Explanations of strange and humanly unexplainable occurrences are shifted to the spirit world, the gods must have a reason. Oracles are consulted in search of explanations from the gods. African philosophy shares the anti-positivists position that the social and physical sciences should have their peculiar methods. Quite aware that diversity in culture, religion and social milieu significantly colour the philosophy of a people, it opts for the understanding of a people’s philosophy taking cognizance of their socio-cultural milieu, their lived experience and their peculiar problems and challenges. These are significant ingredients to an understanding and explaining of a people’s philosophy. It will be wrong to use the same standard of valuation to judge people of all cultures .a phenomenon or behaviour immediately intelligible and understandable in Owerri, Nigeria may be very strange and in dire need of explanation in Sokoto, Nigeria.

The relevance of the Erklären-Verstehen controversy for African philosophy is also corroborated by the fact that most of the models of Explanation outlined above are locatable in the framework of African philosophy. In talking of explanation with Reason, though some reasons held may be religious or questionable, the fact remains that reasons are presented in explaining events, processes or actions.

#### **CONCLUSION:**

Though the Erklären-Verstehen controversy has universal relevance to philosophical enterprise. It is not without its special relevance for African philosophy. As a written philosophy African philosophy (with apology to the African origin of Greek philosophy) is relatively young and need to conceptualize and articulate its thought in universally comprehensible and acceptable manner. It cannot achieve this without proper understanding and explanation of its standpoint, its novelty and its pragmatic relevance. On this note the relevance of this controversy to its development and progress cannot be over-emphasized. Explanation and understanding will surely save it from its tag of mythology and irrationality. The revival of this controversy by African philosopher will not be out of place for it will bring out the critical theoretical aspect of African philosophy.

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