



Towards a Philosophy of Understanding

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If some people looked like elephants and others like cats, or fish, one wouldn't expect them to understand each other and things would look much more like what they really are.

Human beings regularly have great trouble understanding each other, let alone members of other species. How can we come to better understand ourselves and others? My current research seeks to demonstrate that without a philosophy of understanding we cannot properly address human concerns as diverse as those of conflict between different cultures and faiths, ethical and political debate, mental illness, and our inheritance of the past.

The English word 'understand' first appears in early theological texts and is etymologically related to comprehending, apprehending, and grasping. The notion of understanding played a central role in Early Modern philosophical systems such as Locke's *Essay on Human Understanding* and Hume's *Enquiry on Human Understanding* as well as in the late modern sociologies of Dilthey and Croce. Despite a recent revival of interest in empathy, spurred by scientific studies of mirror-neurons and simulation, contemporary philosophy leaves little space for a theory of understanding that is distinct from the theories of knowledge and explanation. This is largely due to the assumption, found in Locke among others, that understanding another is a matter of obtaining information about their mind.

But is this true? It is helpful to here compare the understanding of others to self-understanding. The traditional view that understanding oneself is a matter of acquiring information or knowledge via some kind of privileged introspective access to the 'contents' of our own minds is deeply implausible. This is because self-understanding is inseparable from our relationships to the people, objects, and institutions that make up our world. Accordingly, one typically comes to understand oneself better when one loses something that was an integral part of one's life e.g. one's job, child, reputation, abilities, property, dreams, etc.

As with self-understanding, the understanding of others comes from a shared communion which cannot be reduced to propositional knowledge. We might be able to correctly cite another's reasons for acting as she did, but this is not the same as understanding why the reasons in question motivate her to so act. Principles of charity can only get one so far here, not least when

we are trying to understand people who suffer from autism or psychopathy. Whatever causal explanations are available cannot provide us with the sort of understanding that is in question here.

Eleanor Stump has argued that the experiential knowledge of persons is transmitted through stories. We must, however, remain sceptical about the truth value of the narratives we deliver. Autobiography reveals how our attempts to understand are inextricably tied to the desire to conceive of our lives as having purpose and direction. While these may produce the feeling of understanding, we have good reason to mistrust the tales we spin to ourselves, which is not to deny that we may comprehend ourselves better by reading old letters, diaries, etc.

I have been arguing against the Lockean idea that the prime aim of communication is to decode and transfer information from one mind to another. This view has recently resurged in popular accounts of empathy as a kind of emotional tool which provides one with an access-pass to otherwise hidden 'mental contents'. I urge that this radically distorted account of what it takes to understand another should be replaced by a stance which places priority on public phenomena such as cultural practice and shared behaviour. What we need is not a more efficient Information and Communications Technology but to better ourselves in the art of communicating.

This is not a matter of developing a perfectly precise and unambiguous 'ideal language', which Russell held could eliminate all vagueness and ambiguity in communication. Rather, understanding others involves being at one with their emotional, conceptual, motivational, and cognitive framework. In his supervision of the Voyager gold records that were propelled into space in 1977, Cal Sagan sought to include inscriptions that could be deciphered by conscious creatures whose nature was as far removed as possible from our own. In so doing, he attempted to create a language that was purely formal as opposed to one that could only make sense to creatures with a certain range of sentiments. This included basic symbols such as arrows which he assumed would be understood as pointing in the direction of their heads. Yet Wittgenstein has shown that symbols are conventions that cannot contain the key to their own meaning, for the latter is dependent upon the use we make of them.

The understanding of others, then, involves an awareness of their aims and intentions. Language alone cannot inform us of these,

for being acquaintance with them is pre-requisite to understanding any given language in the first place. To paraphrase Wittgenstein, understanding others requires emergence into their forms of life so that we may find our feet with them. While language can help with this, words often fail us. Indeed, as Weil and Murdoch have shown, it frequently hinders understanding. Is understanding what someone says the same as understanding the person who says or does this? Not unless this already entails understanding why they did so.

What about cultures that are no longer present? Collingwood famously suggested that historical understanding involves the re-enactment of the practical reasoning of past figures. I propose a moderate account of such e-enactment which strikes a balance

between detached (rationalistic) and attached (empathetic) accounts of understanding. Museum-goers and site-visitors are often given historical information in order to understand the objects or monuments they are attempting to engage with. Yet we could not have understood the people in the first place without some awareness of the uses that these things played in their lives.

The above sketch of what a philosophy of understanding might look like emphasizes that understanding is not a matter of skill or information acquisition, but of shared communion. A more poetic expression of this outlook may be found in the Ojibwa belief that they understand animals better than the white man because their ancestors married them and learned all their ways.