Understanding
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Contents

Introduction

A physicist tries to understand quantum mechanics. A parent tries to understand a child. A critic tries to understand a new style of painting. A historian tries to understand the movement of grain prices in ancient Rome. We may be baffled by other people, by ourselves, by life, by other societies, by the arts, and much more. A desire for understanding has seemed akin to a natural human instinct of curiosity. What we want may not be extra information but something—some form of understanding—that will make sense to us, or for us. What sort of definition or theory could possibly tie all this together? The scope of understanding is so wide that any general, unifying account may seem too ambitious.

This book is an investigation into understanding and how it is to be understood. An interest in understanding goes far beyond philosophy, but the subject should be central to philosophy, both in its origin and in its aims. Plato wrote that a sense of wonder is appropriate for a philosopher: that philosophy has no other foundation, in fact.[1] The starting point for the philosopher's inquiry can be a need for understanding. The aim of the philosopher can be to achieve not more knowledge, but better understanding.

The title of this book is reflexive because the subject is. Anyone presenting a theory about understanding must be aiming to understand it: surely a philosophical task. But there is a need to tread carefully, to avoid begging the question. To set off by trying to define understanding would be a poor start. Can we assume that a definition—or a theory—offers a route to understanding? The first chapter of the book is a wide but noncommittal survey of the many areas where understanding has some bearing, to give some measure of the subject and its variety. These areas will include people, history, societies, languages, texts, the natural world, religions, and the arts. There is no reason to begin by assuming that any of these should have primacy, or that a model that makes sense for one of them should be applicable to any others. Theorists have been tempted both by diversity and by simplification.

1

The second chapter looks at some models of understanding. "Hermeneutics" as a label was meant to cover theories of understanding, but is too unspecific to be more than a signpost. Historically, among its critics, it has provoked justified questions about whether we should be looking at a process, a method, or a definition of understanding. Again, there is some point in setting off with an open mind. There has been a great variety of theories of understanding—almost as many as its potential objects: representational, teleological, linguistic, textual, visual, mystical, scentistic, interpersonal, conceptual, aesthetic, rationalistic, pragmatic, holistic, *sub specie æternitatis,* and more. On the whole, philosophers have inclined toward simplification, reduction, and order: particularly, following Plato, in terms of ranking "higher" and "lower" forms of understanding. The attraction is obvious: to set up a model of an ideal type of understanding, of which other types may then be portrayed as inadequate attempts. The most prominent example—again, following Plato—has always been mathematical intuition, which has seemed to some mathematicians so certain and so satisfyingly clear that its optimistic extension to other fields has seemed altogether natural. The truth is seen directly. The attraction of simplifying metaphor has been far more pervasive than just Plato's use of *ascent, vision, enlightenment,* and *liberation.* We not only *see* but *grasp, place,* and *connect.* Understanding itself is hard to *place* without *imagery.* In the twentieth century a linguistic model of understanding seemed more attractive, both to hermeneutical and analytical writers.

It is not clear what a theory—or, more ambitiously, a "general theory"—of understanding could *do.* On the one hand it seems natural to hope that something can be learned by thinking about understanding. On the other, the idea of something in common, or an essence, in diverse forms of understanding can seem an antiquated philosophical myth. Once again, questions can be begged. After all, theories need to be understood. It cannot be assumed without circularity that we should look at some *concept* of understanding, still less the use of the English word "understanding." Theory-making, or the development of "explanations," can seem a natural way of producing understanding. It may be, but it is not the only way.

The first two chapters are partly descriptive, sizing up the scale of the subject and what one can expect to be said about it: why it matters. They should also be a warning against simplification. The third chapter moves from precautionary cartography to argument, in considering the priority between knowledge and understanding. Descartes placed knowledge at the head of the mainstream philosophical agenda, where it remained for three hundred years. An alternative perspective might be to start from understanding. Instead of asking what can be known about understanding, one may ask what can be understood about knowledge. In terms of linguistic understanding—and its complement in the theory of meaning—the initiation of such a reversal has been attributed to Frege. In a wider way it formed part of the project of Gadamer in *Truth and Method.*

Theories of knowledge in the modern period had an overtly critical function. Their rôle was to provide some touchstone to identify genuine, legitimate knowledge and to exclude superstition or illusion, often in a religious context. Epistemologists aimed for definitions or accounts that could be used to exclude or repudiate false or inadequate claims to knowledge. Whether or not that project was feasible, the prospects for a critical account of understanding seem extremely poor. In fact understanding seems to be unusually resistant to general theorizing, where a very general theory would be in the form: you cannot understand . . . unless. . . . If this is right, it should be bad news for comprehensive theories about language.

Understanding differs in one other important way from knowledge. Descartes was able to launch his inquiries by asking himself: What do *I* know? The question: What do I understand? seems to lack any comparable interest. In fact it seems wholly puzzling. Why care? Why might it matter? Knowledge looks as though it might in some sense be *mine*. What can be understood by me may be of importance to me personally, but it is not easy to see how it could lead to any fruitful philosophical or scientific consequences. Nor is it easy to see how any systematic answers could be given. The slippery nature of understanding as a subject may be one reason why it has received much less attention than knowledge. And yet the fact that it is hard to nail down does not make it unimportant.

Chapter 4 is about intelligibility. Platonic, visual metaphor is compelling: we see with our eyes and understand with our psyche. The seeable is visible and the understandable is intelligible. And what sort of quality is intelligibility? Is it a (primary) property intrinsic to things or events, or is it (secondary) relative to those who understand? Obviously the latter in the most general sense. Even the inscriptions on *Voyagers* I and II, dispatched into outer space, are supposed to be intelligible *to* someone or something out there. What matters is what *we*—whoever we are—can understand. Yet it also seems reasonable to say that one situation is more intelligible than another intrinsically or in itself—apparently meaning intelligible by anyone in general. There must be some link with explanation—explanation in general, not explanation to a particular person or group. But yet again, a notion of intelligibility "in principle" is one that seems tied irremovably to its religious roots: what God could understand, from some absolutely objective standpoint.

Feelings or intuitions about intelligibility seem inconsistent. This may have an historical explanation. It is appealing to contrast an enlightenment ambition to understand the whole of nature ("rationally") with a romantic feeling for mystery, ineffability, or opacity. In less historical terms, people may feel at the same time that they understand each other well and that they are mysterious to each other (*and* that this is not a problem). We may want to understand others but might not want to be totally transparent ourselves. There is also a religious angle in that gods have been held to be intelligible to

some degree but unintelligible in others. What we *want* to be intelligible is not so clear. The hiddenness of some gods has been significant.

Chapter 4 will argue that discussions about "the intelligibility of nature" have something badly wrong with them. It is not evident what might be meant by a suggestion that some or all of nature might be unintelligible. On the other hand, this need not imply some rationalist attribution of an objective property of intelligibility.

The next chapter looks at failures and breakdowns in understanding. There have been many differing versions of the thought that understanding may be blocked or limited in some way. Philosophical skepticism was a general theory along such lines. Its earliest modern versions rested on the belief that our minds were not made by God to grasp everything (or, more radically, anything) about nature. Such incapacity could have been a consequence of original sin: of a general human failing in contrast with the angelic and the divine. There have been many modernized versions: for example, the idea that the intention behind an utterance or a text can never be entirely reconstructed in a purely objective way. There are other possible barriers: the space between one person and another, for example, might be seen as interestingly fundamental, as might the difference between genders. There is also the perpetually elusive suggestion of relativism, that differing societies or cultures or sects cannot understand something of each others' ways of life in some radical way. It is simple enough to see how intelligibility can be used by definition to insulate contexts, cultures, or theoretical frameworks. "They just can't understand each other" often seems to offer a convincing barrier. And yet the implied relativism appears almost indefensible.

Notions of what *cannot* be understood are connected in an important way to concepts of possibility and necessity. The basic project of Descartes made use of the idea that there may be ways of understanding that you could not understand, as it were, in principle. An evil genius, whose workings you *cannot* understand *might* be subverting your understanding at this very moment. We need to ask what senses of *cannot* and *might* these could be.

Alleged barriers or blockages to understanding raise once again the question of the standard that may be assumed. Someone who tells me that I can never understand another person as I understand myself—as if this is meant to suggest some sort of limitation—has an obviously partial perspective that can be questioned with good reason. Why, for example, not say that I can never understand myself like I can understand other people (or even as they understand me)? What difference is implied by the changed order of priority? I may never understand another culture as I understand my own, but is that a problem, a failing, or perhaps an advantage?

One special barrier in understanding is provided by the asymmetry of time. Features of understanding noted in the platonic *Seventh Letter* included its suddenness and its irreversibility. "Now I understand!" would have been a

characteristic feeling to Plato the geometer. It is common to *see* a proof suddenly. Once it has been seen, you can't see how you could not see it. This may be impressive, as it was to Plato and as it has been to mathematically inclined thinkers more recently; or it might just be a quirk of mathematical understanding that we would do well not to generalize. You do not suddenly understand a foreign language, and that sort of understanding is easily enough forgotten.

Another special barrier to understanding is the subject of chapter 6: *Beyond understanding*. A unique failing in understanding would be implied by the notion of being *unintelligible in principle*. Critically minded thinkers have hoped that some limit can be drawn to understanding, beyond which must lie nonsense or ineffability (both, in the case of the early Wittgenstein). Once more, religious models from the past have had a powerful influence. Job's problem, he came to see, as he said, was that "I spoke without understanding of things beyond me, which I did not know."[2] As late as the eighteenth century, human understanding may have seemed partial or finite in contrast with the infinite understanding of God. A barrier between the finite and the infinite or the ineffable may have remained attractive even after the religious framework had ceased to be attractive.

The final chapter, *Wisdom,* looks at understanding as an aim. These days, philosophers, despite the etymology of the title of their subject, tend to be embarrassed by any suggestion that they might be searching for wisdom, still less offering it. On the other hand, philosophy does seem to deal in achieving insights, making connections, attaining clarity, and providing general explanations rather than in ("merely") acquiring information. This may be a further reflection of a contrast between understanding and knowledge, reframed as an opposition between *Geistes-* and *Naturwissenschaft*. But if philosophy is supposed to be about understanding, there seems to be some sense of paradox if philosophers do not theorize with much success about it themselves. One might imagine that there might be some general understanding of what understanding is, how and when it might be attained, what its value was, and so on: but no, these are scarcely to be found.

The rhetoric that surrounds wisdom—depth, proportion, penetration, vision—may sound suspiciously vague to hardboiled thinkers. Yet the thought that there might be *only* knowledge is also disconcerting: a recollection of positivism. The thought that understanding might be different or even (in some way) *better* than just knowledge is disconcerting as well. One of the reasons why philosophers have had a lot to say about knowledge is that perhaps a good deal can be said about what it is like, where it comes from, and how to get it. Understanding, regrettably, is far more elusive. One modern strategy for deferring discussion of wisdom has been the thought that, philosophically, it may be as useful to travel as to arrive. But what is gained along the way, and what would be attained at the destination if we ever reached it? Illumination?

Too much was written on methodology in the twentieth century. This may have been the last gasp of a tradition begun three hundred years before, when it seemed to Descartes and his successors that the right method could light the way on the search for truth. That itself was a view about the place and nature of understanding: it had to be methodical to deliver the goods. The way to understand was to follow the approved method: in that case, a geometric, mechanical one. Styles of philosophy defined themselves in terms of their characteristic method: criticism, analysis, linguistic description, hermeneutic investigation, deconstruction. The extent to which practice matched such characterizations was much less clear.

No particular method is adopted or implied in this book. Any study of understanding could (by one definition) be called hermeneutic; but that label has come to be used to cover a specific tradition that cannot be taken for granted. History must not be ignored. It would be foolish to ignore the fact that different models or styles of understanding have seemed appealing at different periods—geometrical in the seventeenth century, aesthetic in the nineteenth century, linguistic in the twentieth—but of course the idea that the understanding of understanding can *only* be historical is itself from a particular period, presupposing a particular relativism. It may be an unconvincing pretense, but the socratic assumption that we know nothing at all may well be the best starting-point.

Chapter One

What we understand

What is it that we understand, or hope to understand? This first chapter contains an outline map, showing the objects of understanding, not its methods or styles. The listing is not meant to be either exclusive or exhaustive—only to take as wide a view as possible. Some of the territories surveyed may overlap, but it would make a bad start to assume any order of priorities or importance. Some carry a long history of argument or interpretation. Others have attracted much less interest.

(a) I may feel sure, or not, that I understand *myself*, though I may be uncertain about what this means. I may believe that my motives and intentions are directly or infallibly accessible to myself, possibly as their owner, and possibly in some unique way. The exact object of my understanding will itself have intricate ramifications. It might be natural for me to assume that this will depend on my *philosophy of mind* which, presumably, would include my understanding of the nature of people: myself or others.[1] "There are some philosophers," wrote Hume, "who imagine we are every moment intimately conscious of what we call our SELF; that we feel its existence and its continuance in existence; and are certain, beyond the evidence of a demonstration, both of its perfect identity and simplicity"[2]—and there is no need to take up a position on that. To believe that I understand myself is definitely not to assume that I possess some object called a self that I understand (or that understands itself).

There must be few areas where historical intuitions have varied so widely. On one side, my sight of myself could be taken as the most direct, unmediated perception, a benchmark for other types of understanding (or knowledge). This might be taken either as a starting-point or as a desirable ambition. On the

other hand, self-understanding might be taken as strenuous or impossible, in a Socratic or Freudian sense. Again, opinions have varied on whether perfect self-understanding is admirable or not. In one way it might be seen as a form of integrity or wisdom. In another it might be shallowness or simplicity.

So what I have when I have an understanding of myself remains elusive. It could be framed in narrative terms—a coherent, orderly story about my aims and position—or in terms of vision—a true vision. An overtly linguistic model would seem less promising. To understand myself is surely not the same as understanding some set of statements about myself, at least in some purely linguistic sense. And, as with other objects of understanding, understanding myself would seem to be something that, in some important way, I have to do for myself. It is easy to imagine a sense in which someone else could understand me better than I do myself, and even explain myself to me, to my surprise. Nevertheless, I not only have to understand the explanation for myself, but recognize and understand myself in terms of it.

It would be reasonable to complain that understanding "myself" sounds overly simple. Understanding my capacities or limitations, physical or intellectual, may be wholly different from understanding my wishes, fears, or dreams. Again, there might be implications for any supposed "structure" of the personality or the self, and the degrees of expected success may be completely different in differing areas. How, and how far, I can understand myself will take me immediately into imagery of transparency and depth, as well as murkier metaphors of *levels* or *structures*.

The priority given to self-understanding is important. "I know plainly that I can achieve an easier and more evident perception of my own mind than of anything else": Descartes started by regarding knowledge as *his* knowledge.[3] Equally, to understand others as well as I understand myself may seem a reasonable aspiration; but it presupposes that I do understand myself to some degree.

(b) Understanding *other people* shares many of the difficulties in understanding myself. There is the same uncertainty about how far we *want* our understanding to be successful, or complete. There may be the same conflicting intuitions about how well I understand another person.[4] That may be a feature of this personal understanding and its corollary misunderstandings. "I thought I understood her until . . . and then I realized. . . ." Everything, it seems, can change suddenly. More than with self-understanding, there can be a temptation to absorb the understanding of other people into a form of *judgment*, or, still more coldly, into the acceptance of assertions or propositions: "I thought that she was truthful until she told me a brazen lie and then I realized that she was dishonest." So first I believed (the proposition) that she was truthful and then I believed (the proposition) that she was dishonest? Then there might be some wish to understand the understanding of other people in terms of the acceptance of lists of judgments about them. That could be sen-

One conclusion might be that if understanding is related to wonder or curiosity, then these in turn must have some connection with unfamiliarity, and this may be haphazardly subjective. The most unbridgeable-looking cultural chasms may be unworrying in practice for those who are culturally or literally bilingual.

(e) A central type of understanding—or rather non-understanding—has always been seen to apply to *religions*. A set of practices and beliefs can be immunized against understanding within a code of mutually reinforcing terminology and symbolism. Religions may seem to offer archetypal frameworks of rationality and explanation that may be inaccessible to each other. There may even be intimations of obstacles to understanding that may only be surmounted by participation or initiation: *credo ut intelligam*. It has not always been obvious to thinkers from Christian backgrounds how far such problems may be specific to Christianity, or rather to a religion that has been exhaustively defined in terms of specified and overt tenets that its adherents are supposed to accept. Understanding against such a background can be understood more readily, to some extent, in linguistic or propositional terms. What you do or do not understand may be *doctrines* that have been formulated with some specific care to exclude misinterpretations or alternatives. These doctrines may embody some element of mystery, but not too much to make them accessible to some degree. This may well be a predicament entirely unique to Christianity, but it is one that has been massively influential on thinking about belief and understanding. Understanding is meant—up to a point—to be modeled on a certain lucidity. Where there is opaqueness its scope is to be defined and contained. Few, if any, other religions embody practices that are buttressed by elaborate systems of explicit beliefs which are meant to serve to some degree as justifying reasons.

It might appear attractive to regard this situation as specifically religious, and to regard the understanding of other kinds of rituals or practices as (merely) anthropological in contrast. But the threat of a vicious circle is evident. There is a dilemma about how far religions can or should be understood in particularly religious terms. The view that they should seems self-defeating, leading to relativism or ineffability. The view that they should not seems reductionist.

(f) One of the first fields to interest hermeneutically minded philosophers was *law*. The interpretation of legal codes and precedents provides a clear, self-contained model for vaguer objects of understanding. It shares with personal and social understanding a reading of hidden or lost intentions and meanings, and also a characteristic indeterminacy about correctness. Not only is a right interpretation often uncertain, but the criteria for deciding and accepting a right interpretation may also be negotiable. Law offers a useful model because there can always be a reasonable presumption that *something*—and usually something clear and specific—had been intended in the past. It is

usually known who—legislators or judges—meant it. The only problem is to understand or interpret what it was, in a situation where some answer has to be given, for pragmatic reasons. Law is not a field in which a philosophical view about the indeterminacy of meaning could cut much ice. It might well be that all meanings are indeterminate, but courts have to produce rulings or verdicts anyway. This can be so even where interpretations seem to be genuinely endless, as with rabbinical law, where commentaries on commentaries on commentaries are commonplace and where the historical deposit of accumulated understanding is itself recognized as only a foundation for further efforts in the future.

The simplicity of a legal model is tempting. (Gadamer went as far to write that legal hermeneutics offers "the model for the relationship between past and present that we are seeking.")[7] Understanding appears to be almost measurable in terms of practice. So a pragmatic understanding of understanding might take law as a paradigm. A court may reach a view that legislation is so badly drafted as to be senseless, or that precedents are entirely inconsistent, but may still need to conclude a case one way or another, crystallizing an understanding for the time being. There is also the practical notion of *an* understanding, in an apparently objective sense. The way in which a court reads the law *is* how it is understood, despite any differences of opinion or sentiment among those in the courtroom. *The meaning* is unambiguously *there*, even if overturned immediately by another ruling. It is in no sense subjective. To say that there is a difference in understandings is not to say that lawyers think differently in a subjective sense—which is true though irrelevant—but that different readings may be advocated and accepted. Further, although debates and appeals are the essence of law, it is hard to imagine a legal system that did not contain some procedure for reaching final decisions, however temporarily and however controversially. Cases may be left open or not proven, but these too are specifiable outcomes reached as decisions. Legal understanding must be attainable.

(g) A more popular target in the twentieth century was the understanding of *texts,* either in one's own or in another language. Interest in understanding began from the study of the interpretation of the bible as an archetypally controversial historic text (possibly with Augustine's *On Christian Teaching*). Extreme claims can be made in opposite directions. One way, the understanding of (say) pre-Socratic fragments is contentious enough to make anyone accept that a retrieval of an author's intended meaning can be a hopeless task. That experience can be generalized to a wider skepticism about understanding. But, in another way, a written text may be a paradigm of objective clarity. The whole aim of the style of scientific reports is to minimize ambiguities, subjectivities, and cultural distortions, letting the content speak, as it were, as much as possible for itself. Neither extreme is ultimately defensible, though the former proved surprisingly fashionable in fin de siècle literary circles.