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Understanding Others, Conceptual Know-How and Social World

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Abstract In contemporary philosophy of mind, understanding others is often presented as an activity of attributing mental states to agents or mindreading – the central question being then how to access their minds. The paper argues that this pervasive approach should be rejected, in favour of the view along which identifying an action comes from exercising conceptual skills acquired through being inserted into shared practices characterising a social world. Examining the conditions of their acquisition then sheds new light on the semantics of psychological concepts as well as on the roots of misunderstanding.

Keywords Wittgenstein. Understanding. Know-How. Intention. Anscombe. Common-sense Psychology.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Does Understanding Others Require Access to their Minds? – 3 Understanding Others as a Practical-conceptual Achievement. – 4 Tuning in with Others. – 5 Conclusion.



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Merely recognizing the philosophical problem as a logical one is progress. The proper attitude and the method accompany it. (LWI, § 256)

1 Introduction

In contemporary philosophy of mind, understanding others is often presented as the result of a complex activity of interpretation, consisting in the attribution to an agent of mental states that enable us to make sense of his or her behaviour.¹ In a restaurant, your neighbour gets up and walks slowly towards the door: what exactly is he doing? Does he want to leave without paying, thinking that the boss, who is busy elsewhere, will not see him? Or does he want to surprise someone sitting near the entrance, whom he believes to be an acquaintance, by arriving silently behind him? Asking and answering such questions presupposes mastery of a whole range of psychological concepts (such as intending, wanting, desiring, believing, the various concepts of emotion, etc.) that make up the paraphernalia of our so-called ‘commonsense (or folk) psychology’. From a philosophical point of view, then, the central question seems to be how to account for our ability to apply such concepts, as well as for their epistemic status.

The debates surrounding these questions (of which we will give a rough idea below) are still lively. But many authors seem to agree on one point: psychological concepts are used to refer to something that is ‘in the head’ of the agent; and the main problem is how we can gain access to it. This is why it is now common to refer to the interpretive activity that enables us to understand others as ‘mindreading’ (see for instance Spaulding 2018; 2020). Such a label might seem trivial: is it not obvious what motivates the metaphor? Understanding the meaning of a behaviour is analogous to understanding the meaning of a text. And don’t we sometimes say that someone ‘reads another’s mind like an open book’? Now, far from being just a convenient label, the metaphor actually betrays a presupposition that Constantine Sandis (2019, 241) states as follows: understanding another person implies “obtaining and decoding the information stored in their mind” (see also Hacker 2018, 380). But is the meaning of the agent’s behaviour really given by what is ‘in his mind’?

In what follows, I would like to show that these widespread semantic presuppositions regarding the use of psychological concepts are

¹ This essay has already appeared in French in the *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale*, 119(3), 2023, pp. 335-52, under the title “Compréhension, savoir-faire conceptuel et monde social”. We warmly thank the publisher of the *Revue* (Humensis) for giving permission to publish the English version here.

doubly erroneous. Firstly, it succumbs to a picture of the mind as a container or interiority, long criticised by Wittgenstein, which feeds the idea that understanding others ultimately results from knowledge of ‘mental contents’ – thus focusing debates on the question to know how we can have ‘access to’ the minds of others. Secondly, it has the effect of withdrawing our attention from a more fundamental point. Understanding what someone does is crucially manifested in our ability to *describe* their conduct, that is to say, primarily to classify it under concepts that *are not* psychological concepts, but various concepts of activity, in relation to instituted practices. In fact, the logic of psychological concepts can only be fully understood by starting from a better view of what describing someone’s action does imply. It is only by elucidating this through an examination of the conditions under which concepts of activity are learned that we become able to get the full meaning of this Wittgensteinian point: understanding others is the achievement of a sustained interaction that presupposes participation in the same background of life, in a tangle of linguistic and non-linguistic practices that characterise a social world.

2 Does Understanding Others Require Access to their Minds?

Donald Davidson’s early work (Davidson 1963) did much to spread the view that understanding others consists in identifying their reasons for acting, which in turn can be analysed as a combination of mental states, namely a desire, giving a general characterisation of the desired thing, and an instrumental belief, specifying a particular means to obtain what is desired. To understand an action is then to be able to rationalise it, i.e. to see it as the conclusion of a practical reasoning of which such desire and belief are the premises. But this requires to get knowledge of the agent’s beliefs and desires. Discussions about the nature and epistemic status of folk psychology have therefore tended to focus on the question of what enables us to get such a knowledge: how does one come to have access to the content of other minds? What are the cognitive or non-cognitive capacities, or even the underlying mechanisms, through which the relevant mental content is identified?

Among the answers, two main options stand out. The first, known as the “theory theory”, asserts that the ability to understand others ultimately depends on the possession of a theory of mind (e.g. Fodor 1987). According to this approach, ‘intention’, ‘desire’ or ‘belief’ are theoretical terms, designating unobservable internal mental representations, postulated by the theory as the rational causes of observable behaviour. The connection between mind and action is based on

theoretical hypotheses or laws (roughly of the form ‘if X is in mental state M in circumstances C , then, all other things being equal, he will perform action A ’), by means of which behaviour can be predicted and explained. We attribute mental states to others by a kind of inference to the best explanation of their behaviour. While the details of the analysis are hotly disputed,² all those who embrace this approach nevertheless share the idea that understanding others is based on inferential knowledge of mental content.

The plausibility of this first approach has been vigorously challenged by proponents of the second, known as “simulation theory” (see Davies, Stone 1995). According to the latter, understanding someone consists in putting oneself in their shoes, i.e. adopting their perspective on the world in order to imagine or simulate what our own mental states would be in such a case, before projecting them onto the other person in order to predict or explain their actions. The notion of ‘simulation’, borrowed from the field of artificial intelligence, suggests that understanding others is conceived as an internal psychological modelling process, rather than as reasoning informed by a theory. This approach has thus helped to revive the old notion of empathy that Lipps, following the psychologist Karl Groos, had defined at the beginning of the twentieth century as “internal imitation” (Stueber 2018) and to which many analytical philosophers have recently turned their attention (2006). Neurological discoveries concerning “mirror neurons” have also been interpreted by some as providing a neurobiological basis for the capacity for empathy (Rizzolatti, Sinigaglia 2008; Coplan, Goldie 2011).

However diverse and conflicting these approaches may be, they nonetheless subscribe to the spontaneous image according to which thoughts or intentions are processes that take place *in* the mind of the agent and remain hidden from us, constituting the internal counterparts of behaviour that give it its meaning. Ludwig Wittgenstein, in his work on the philosophy of psychology, often drew attention to the distortions in the account of the logic of psychological concepts that arise from the philosophical use of this picture. For example:

The intention *with which* one acts does not ‘accompany’ the action any more than a thought ‘accompanies’ speech. Thought and intention are neither ‘articulated’ nor ‘non-articulated’; to be compared neither to a single note which sounds during the acting or speaking, nor to a melody. (PI, II, § 280)

² Some proponents of the idea that commonsense psychology is a theory nevertheless believe that it is obsolete and doomed to give way to a robust theory, formulated in sheer neurophysiological terms (e.g. Churchland 1981). For a recent overview, see Hutto, Ravenscroft 2021.

Let us say I am sitting at my desk and I get up to fetch the dictionary. As I stand up, I may say to myself: “I’m going to check the spelling of this word”. And it would be correct to say that these words express my intention. It would only be hidden from you insofar as I kept this to myself. But what if I said those words out loud? You would then know the ‘contents of my mind’; but you would still not know exactly what I wanted to do, since you would still ignore the word the spelling of which I wanted to check.³ However, I know what the word is and I could tell you if you asked me. Does that mean that I have already said it to myself? No. In fact, it is quite possible that I have not said anything to myself at all: in a moment of doubt, I stop writing, my eyes stare at a word on the screen for a moment, then I get up to fetch the dictionary. Or maybe the only thing ‘on my mind’ is a haunting melody that has been playing over and over since I heard it on the radio. Commenting on this, Elizabeth Anscombe writes thus:

An intention after all needn’t be [an occurring] thought, for one can intend what one is not thinking of, as when one intends over a whole period to make a certain journey, but in fact seldom thinks of it, and when one even thinks of it, one’s thoughts aren’t to the effect that one is going to make that journey. [...] We tend to think it out of a prejudice that an intention *must* be a mental phenomenon, i.e. an event in the mind. (Anscombe 1963, 59)

While it is true to say that intentions are a kind of thought, we cannot equate thought or *cogitatio* with something that presents itself to consciousness at a given moment, on the model of conscious experience, as Descartes did (Anscombe 1963, 60-1; see also Descombes 2004, 190-8). This kind of actualism let aside a logical difference between what we call the content of an intention (or the content of a belief) and the content of an experience. To report the content of my intention is to describe what I am going to do, but not to describe what is happening in my mind at the moment. Similarly, expressing the content of a belief is saying something about the world, not about my experience. On the other hand, to describe the content of an experience is to say how things appear to me at a given moment, what the (visual, auditive, etc.) appearances are. Let us suppose that when I get up to reach to the dictionary, I think I hear my phone vibrating, though it is in fact the neighbour’s intercom ringing. Realising my mistake, I could describe my experience by saying “it sounded like the faint noise my phone makes when it vibrates”. But having an intention does not imply at all that something presents itself to me in

3 Cf. PI, II, § 284: “If God had looked into our minds, he would not have been able to see there whom we were speaking of”.

this sense, nor in the way of an inner speech or a melody heard in the mind. All ‘mental content’ cannot be modelled on the content of an experience. The confusion arises as soon as we start talking about ‘mental content’ without further examination, and make a theoretical use of the metaphor of the mind as a place or container.

Why is the view that understanding others involves having access to the inner contents of their minds so attractive and why does it have such a powerful influence on us? It is partly because of well-known facts (Anscombe 2000, 9, § 4): for example, the fact that we can hide our thoughts from others or lie to them about our intentions; that we can have an intention but not carry it out; or that the intention with which an agent does something cannot be seen in what he does: in this case, we have to question him – but he does not have to make any particular observation or inference to be able to answer us, which feeds the idea that what an agent thinks or wants he knows it directly, whereas we need to manage ourselves access to his interiority and can have only indirect knowledge of it.

But seeing the problem of understanding along these lines actually leads to miss the point. First of all, it misses the point that thoughts can be expressed and that, from then on, there is nothing hidden about them. On the other hand, it is true that understanding what someone else is doing may depend on knowing more about them – knowledge that I can obtain by questioning them, or by paying attention to other features of the circumstances, or through testimonies, and so on. However, we cannot equate understanding of others with knowledge of anything, and especially not of a ‘mental content’. After all, one may have knowledge of this content and still fail to understand it. As Wittgenstein puts it:

Even if someone were to express everything that is ‘within him’, we wouldn’t necessarily understand him. (LWI, § 191)

I might still be unable to understand the reasons given to me by the agent, even though I am certain that such are his reasons for acting (because he has told me and I have no reason to doubt his sincerity) – that is, I might still be unable to understand the agent himself. Anscombe (2000, 71, § 37) notes that the agent’s mere statement of his will is not enough to make me understand what he wants. If someone says “I want a saucer of mud”, I will certainly know the object of his desire, but his conduct and his discourse will still remain obscure to me, unless I understand what is the point of wanting a saucer of mud. The answer to this question, Anscombe explains, would consist in a “desirability characterisation”, i.e. a specification of the aspect under which the thing desired is good in the agent’s eyes and makes it desirable. Now, to understand what the agent might say here requires that I myself be able to recognise the good he is pursuing. But this

presupposes much more (and much else) than the possession of knowledge or information about the agent or what is going on ‘in his mind’.

3 Understanding Others as a Practical-Conceptual Achievement

The confusions associated with the use of the metaphors of content and access should encourage us to account for understanding others from another starting point. To this effect, we should reconsider the fact that most of the time, the behaviour of those around us is immediately intelligible to us.

As Dan Hutto (2004) points out, following Shaun Gallagher and other proponents of embodied cognition, those who believe that understanding others is based primarily on the use of commonsense psychology in order to ascribe mental states to others tend to think of the problem as arising from the third person, from the point of view of a more or less detached spectator. In so doing, they do not pay enough attention to interaction situations, or to the basic abilities that enable us to attune naturally with the expressive responses of others (such as facial and motor imitation, the phenomena of emotional contagion, etc.). This leads them to give an over-intellectualised account of understanding. Against this tendency, writes Hutto:

I promote the idea that in the basic cases we are able to ‘read’ others reliably and *vice versa* and that when we are in our historically normal environments this is no accident. For, like all creatures, due to long periods of tinkering and adjustment, we have been shaped precisely to respond to such environments, be they biological or social. Taking this idea to heart makes the alternative claim that our basic social interactions are made possible by means of the tacit predictions and explanations of commonsense psychology deeply suspect. (2004, 554)

Elucidating understanding requires clarifying the nature of this adjustment. But Hutto goes further and also argues that in most cases, and not just “basic cases”, understanding others does not depend *at all* on an attribution of reasons in the third person – such an activity being, at best, “peripheral” (558). For the intelligibility of actions derives from the fact that they conform to common norms of conduct. That we are legible to each other in our ordinary interactions is not the result of a specific interpretation activity, explicit or implicit, but results from the fact that we share the same set of “norms and routines that structure these interactions” (558-9). This shared practical background is what our common sense does consist in, on the basis of which others’ behaviours are identifiable.

Hutto (as well as those who agree with him) is certainly right to insist that this is the starting point for elucidating the ordinariness of mutual understanding. But we must guard at the same time against the temptation to conceive of this “embodied practice” (550) as a set of adjustment mechanisms divorced from any conceptual or symbolic dimension. In what follows, I would like to argue that understanding means exercising a kind of conceptual know-how – which insists on the fact that a concept is something more akin to the possession of a technique than a product of representational mental activity.

In her masterpiece *Intention*, Anscombe asks how we go about telling someone’s intentions: what kind of true statements might we give about someone’s intentions and how do we know that they are true? Having suggested that it would be enough to state “what he actually did or is doing”, she adds:

I’m referring to the sort of things you would say in a law court if you were a witness and were asked what a man was doing when you saw him. [...] [I]n a very large number of cases, your selection from the immense variety of true statements about him which you might make would coincide with what he could say he was doing [...]. I am sitting in a chair writing, and anyone grown to the age of reason in the same world would know this as soon as he saw me, and in general it would be his first account of what I was doing; if this were something he arrived at with difficulty, and what he knew straight off were precisely how I was affecting the acoustic properties of the room (to me a very recondite piece of information), then communication between us would be rather severely impaired. (Anscombe 2000, 8, § 4)

It is indeed a remarkable feat that even a fairly young child entering a room can usually give a description such as “she is sitting and writing” with ease, description which identifies an action performed intentionally. Of course, such a description is very rough and may raise a number of questions: what is she writing, to whom, and what for? But it is already a correct answer to the question “what is she doing?”. The questions designed to enrich the scenario thus sketched out could not be asked if the child did not first recognise that the person is writing. His ability to correctly describe what the other is doing expresses his understanding of that action; but, like his understanding, it depends on whether or not he possesses some concepts, such as ‘writing’.

What does it mean to possess a concept? For a whole tradition born of modernity, to possess a concept of something is to be able to form a representation or idea of it (in the Cartesian or Lockean sense) having a general or archetypal character. But in Wittgenstein’s perspective, “a concept is the technique of using a word” (LPP, 50). To learn

such a technique is to be initiated into a kind of know-how – which certainly concerns itself with words, but is also intertwined with a whole range of other activities. Explaining this perspective, Anscombe writes thus:

The competent use of language is *a* criterion for the possession of the concepts symbolized in it, and so we are at liberty to say: to have such-and-such linguistic practices is to have such-and-such concepts. “Linguistic practice” here does not mean merely the production of words properly arranged into sentences on occasions which we vaguely call ‘suitable’. It is important that it includes activities *other* than the production of language, into which a use of language is interwoven. For example, activities of measuring, of weighing, of giving and receiving and putting into special places, of moving about in a huge variety of ways, of consulting tables and calendars and signs and acting in a way which is connected with that consultation. It is plausible to say that we would have no concept of *length* apart from some activity of measuring, and no concept of precise comparative length of distant objects if the activity of measuring had not a quite elaborate use of words interwoven into it. (Anscombe 1976, 117)

In order to know what “writing” means and use the term correctly in describing someone else’s action or your own, you need to have been introduced to handling certain objects (pencil and paper, chalk and slate), to have learnt to imitate letter shapes and name them, to form words and read them, etc., and then to have been introduced to the uses of writing (making a list, signing, writing a postcard...). Writing does not simply mean drawing, nor leaving a trace on a surface, even if it is with an ink pen, nor simply tracing shapes that look like letters. To understand what it means to “write”, you need to have been admitted into a whole tangle of shared practices – a social world – that form a way of life in which writing occupies a certain place and is of some interest for people.

Generally speaking, by being educated in a human form of life, we learn to identify and name various activities, their characteristic ends and results, and the elements of the world necessary for their accomplishment: baking bread, cooking, driving a bus, taking a tram, thanking or greeting someone, nursing someone, buying and selling... At the same time, we learn to identify the role or status of the agents who perform those activities (the baker, the driver, the doctor, the shop assistant, and so on) and to recognise the patterns of actions and reactions that fit together in them. But we also learn to act on our own in accordance with some of these roles and motives. The ordinary intelligibility of actions comes not from something in the mind of the agent, a kind of mental (inner) supplement to his conduct, but

from the fact that these actions implement instituted ways of doing things, i.e. ways that are both received and authoritative, which we learn to recognise and apply ourselves as agents (Descombes 2014, 295-313). This helps us to understand why the active search for an agent's reasons for acting is not central to ordinary situations, but 'peripheral': most of the time, other people's reasons are obvious to me. If the baker opens his till after I have handed her a note, it is to give me the change for the bread I am buying; if the waiter at the restaurant hands me a menu, it is for me to choose my dish because I am coming for lunch; and so on. The lack of understanding and the need for explanations arise when an incident interrupts the normal course of events. For example, a man suddenly gets up from the table in the middle of lunch and leaves the restaurant; we naturally wonder what has bitten him, but we don't wonder why the other diners stay eating at their table.

How then can we understand the role and use of psychological concepts such as 'believe', 'want' or 'intend', if understanding others does not necessarily require their projection? A complete answer to this question actually involves a whole philosophy of psychology, of the kind Wittgenstein developed in his later writings. It is beyond the scope of this article to set out all the details. But I can at least indicate a few elements here.

First of all, let us emphasise once again that the content of an intention or a belief cannot but refer to the world of the agent: they can only have a content that the agent is able to think or express, through his language or his conduct, because he participates in this normative practical background made up of institutions and customs (PI, I, § 337). As it has been said, it requires both practical and conceptual training. This suggests an important point: psychological concepts like 'intending' or 'believing' are logically dependent in their use on those by which we identify things, facts, activities and events.

How do attributions of intention work indeed, and what purpose do they serve? To find this out, we need to retrace the language game and its roots. A child gradually learns to say what he is doing - and this, because the adults around him talk to him, telling him what he is doing, asking him things, encouraging him, teaching him thereby how is called what he is doing. In this way, he becomes able to answer questions about his current activity: "I'm playing", "I'm drawing a little man", etc., as well as to use the question "What are you doing?" himself. In his answers, he indicates the point of his current activity, possibly associated with a criterion of its achievement. A further stage consists in being able to say what he is about to do: "I'm going to ride my bike", "I'm writing a postcard to Grandma", as well as being able to describe what others are up to. He also progressively learns to articulate the complexity of what he is doing ("I'm writing to thank her for her present") while learning to answer the question

“Why?”, which he also applies to others. Following these lines, the language of attributing intention to others (“She intends to do A”) can be seen as an extension of the possibilities for describing other people’s actions, logically based on their possible or actual first-person expression. Attributing an intention involves mastering a particular linguistic technique, that of indirect style discourse, which makes it possible to report to an addressee the words by which an agent expressing himself, as the child of my former example does, could declare what he is doing or intends to do (see Descombes 2004, 38). Of course, it is not necessary for the agent to have uttered the words, either to someone or for himself. On the other hand, as we have seen, he must have the necessary conceptual resources to be attributed the corresponding intention.

By using descriptions that the agent himself might give of his action (“I am doing A”), this technique makes it possible to identify a complex action from its end, and to articulate the observer’s and the agent’s points of view when they diverge. We generally identify an action by its intended result, in the same way that we describe processes by reference to their end (Anscombe 2000, 39, § 2). But sometimes the agent’s intended result is not the one that actually takes place and which the others are able to observe directly. Suppose someone takes some eggs from a box but clumsily drops them on the floor; it is true to say that he has broken some eggs, but false to say that he has made an omelette, even though ‘making an omelette’ is the description under which he intended to act, an action which then appears to have failed. The technique of indirect discourse opens up the possibility of distinguishing, in relation to the same action, between a description under which the agent thinks what he is doing or going to do, and a description of what he is doing that is not linked to what he could have said about his own action – a distinction that opens up the possibility of talking about the degree of accomplishment of the action and its failure (see Thompson 2008, 122-8).

The preceding remarks, without exhausting the topic, should suffice here to make plausible the idea that the functioning and the descriptive use of psychological concepts like ‘intention’ or ‘belief’ must be grasped, not from the picture of the mind as interiority, interpreted literally, but in relation to situations of interaction between agents and to phenomena of first-person expression. Whatever the full elucidation of their logic, understanding others depends above all on the fact that we have a common conceptual repertoire, both practical and linguistic. It is this conceptual know-how that enables us to identify the actions of others (according to their degree of achievement) and to interact with them.

4 Tuning in with Others

A question arises, however: how is it that, while having the same historical background, both conceptual and practical, is not always enough to understand others? Why is there misunderstanding? And what does it show us about what understanding is?

There are a number of different situations that must be taken into account here. Firstly, ‘misunderstanding’ can refer to the lack of understanding coming from the ignorance of some important elements of context; for example, if a man sitting at a table in a restaurant suddenly gets up and leaves, we will not understand his behaviour until we know more about the circumstances and his state of mind (has he just remembered an important appointment? Or has someone insulted him? Etc.). The word can also refer to the simple fact of being mistaken about what someone is doing or saying. A mistake or misunderstanding is a kind of hitch in the interaction, a failure, which can nevertheless be repaired. But misunderstanding might be of a more radical nature and mark the failure of the interaction or even its impossibility; this is the situation Wittgenstein refers to when he writes:

It is important for our approach, that someone may feel concerning certain people, that he will never know what goes on inside them. He will never understand them. (Englishwomen for Europeans.) (CV, 84)⁴

We also say of a person that he is transparent to us. It is, however, important as regards our considerations that one human being can be a complete enigma to another. One learns this when one comes into a strange country with entirely strange traditions; and, what is more, even though one has mastered the country’s language. One does not *understand* the people. (And not because of not knowing what they are saying to themselves.) We can’t find our feet with them. (PI, II, § 325)

Our reaction does not stem from the fact that something is hidden from us, even if this picture sometimes comes to us spontaneously to express our confusion. It stems from the fact that we can’t really relate to someone. Such an experience, however, is not specific to finding ourselves in a foreign society, whose concepts and ways of life are at odds with our own; it also occurs within our own society. As Peter Winch (1997, 202) has pointed out, we can feel completely alienated by our contemporaries’ interest in football, say; Winch also mentions the British philosopher Robin Collingwood who, in his autobiography,

⁴ For a complete elucidation of this remark, see Schroeder 2019.

describes the feeling of being out of step with the kind of philosophy practised by his Oxford colleagues. The boundary between what is and what is not ‘alien’ is actually rather fluid.

The fact is that, as Winch says, a culture in the anthropological sense of the word is not a “seamless web” (1997, 198). In the course of our education, all of us are not introduced exactly to the same ways of living. We are exposed to different facets of the same culture and, in so doing, we are led to take different things for fundamental and important.⁵ Hence, I may not understand the distress of people who are unable to attend a football tournament, say. Their expressions of despair seem completely incongruous to me, because I don’t understand their relation to football, the place it occupies in their way of life taken as a whole, or, as Winch puts it, the “point” of their passion for football.⁶ Winch however suggests that it is sometimes possible to overcome this misunderstanding: to that effect, I need to find connections between their way of life and mine, by means of which I can find my own an analogue of the interest they attach to this activity and the role it plays in theirs. If I play a sport myself, I might have an idea of the passion it can arouse – but the analogy might not be enough to understand the importance of attending matches in person, getting together with others to talk about it, or even the feeling that one’s own life might be deprived of value if one’s favourite team lost the tournament. Someone who, on the other hand, doesn’t particularly like football but passionately follows his basketball team’s championships would probably have a better understanding of these aspects than I do. Generally speaking, the possibility of understanding others will depend on the way in which our lifestyles overlap and lend themselves to the building of enlightening analogies. We are far from a theoretical inference or from an effort at simulation.

However, the divergence of lifestyles is not the only cause at stake. This is sometimes overlooked by sociologists or anthropologists who tend to describe acculturation as a simple process of “internalising norms” (Winch 1997, 198). Here, Winch’s thoughts echo those of Wittgenstein on the importance of individual spontaneity and “primitive reactions” in learning to follow a rule.⁷ For instance, imagine two people, *A* and *B*, such that *A* teaches *B* to write a sequence of signs in a given order, such as the sequence of natural numbers. *A* writes

⁵ See also Z, §§ 387-8.

⁶ On the use of this expression, see Le Du 2013. On the example of football, see also Lyas 1999, 74-5.

⁷ Cf. CV, 36: “The origin and the primitive form of the language game is a reaction; *only* from this can the more complicated forms grow. Language – I want to say – is a refinement, ‘in the beginning was the deed’”.

the sequence from 0 to 9 for *B*'s attention, and *B* has to copy it down. Wittgenstein declares:

At first, perhaps, we guide his hand in writing out the series 0 to 9; but then the *possibility of communication* [*die Möglichkeit der Verständigung*] will depend on his going on to write it down by himself. (PI, I, § 143)

And the same applies throughout the learning process: “[T]he effect of any further *explanation* depends on his *reaction*” (PI, I, § 145).

Sharing common concepts, mastering a technique for using words, generally presupposes a certain regularity in reactions to learning. But this also applies to their projection into new uses and their application to new situations. The rules for using a word are not like rails on which we would set off once and for all, and which would determine all its possible projections; the possibilities of meaning change and expand with our practice itself. The intelligibility of a new projection will therefore also depend on the similarity of people's reactions. So it is when we introduce a new metaphor, a witty remark or a line of humour: they will be intelligible to others only if they are able to see what the person uttering them sees in them which gives this use of words its “point”, i.e. both its meaning and its value. And this variety of possible individual reactions extends its effects to existing cultural forms: some will elicit no significant response from us, and we will therefore be in great difficulty to find any meaning in them. What is more, the divergence of our reactions can lead us into conflict – a conflict, says Winch (1997, 198), which is even characteristic of certain areas of life: morality, politics, religion.

As Severin Schroeder (2019, 183-4) points out, there is therefore a non-intellectual dimension to understanding others which is rooted in individual spontaneity; understanding others is also a matter of affinities, of sharing dispositions that are both moral and aesthetic, i.e. that concern what is valuable and what is not. (It should be noted, however, that understanding does not presuppose agreement or unison: we can very well get along in a conflictual mode, like those couples who share a taste for quarrelling, for example, according to an eroticised perception of confrontation.) The emphasis placed on the diversity of individual agreements, so to speak, allows us to see that misunderstanding cannot be apprehended solely as a case of failure of our cognitive capacities or of missing knowledge, but that it is an irreducible possibility, immanent to human relations, the flip side of the plasticity and indefinite nature of our practices and concepts (see also Hacker 2023, 96-8). For all that, incomprehension can be overcome – sometimes, at least, when we are able to find the right analogies and if we are also inclined to show goodwill. But there is no guarantee that it will be, nor even that it can be.

5 Conclusion

When the meaning of an agent's conduct eludes us, we are prone to think that we might find it 'in his mind'. This inclination still more or less implicitly governs much philosophical thinking about understanding others, by focusing attention on the idea that we should be able to account for 'the access' we have to the mind of another. To understand someone, it is assumed, is, first and foremost to be able to rationalise his behaviour, which implies discovering the content of his desires and beliefs. But by what process? Some believe it is an inference based on the possession of a theory, others a form of simulation through which we find these contents within ourselves before projecting them onto others. Yet interpersonal understanding is not the result of access to content, as if it were a matter of discovering something fundamentally hidden. What's more, this way of looking at the problem reduces understanding to a mere question of knowing someone else's reasons, what they want and what they believe; but this overlooks the fact that reasons for action, even if they are explicit and therefore known, may not be understood.

In a sense, the emphasis in the debates on identifying the content of an agent's reasons and the operations that make this possible, has contributed to obscure a more fundamental point: understanding others is not a specific cognitive achievement, but the manifestation of a shared know-how. In his masterwork *The Concept of Mind*, Ryle (2000, 53) had already taken a step towards an elucidation of this kind:

Understanding is a part of knowing *how*. The knowledge that is required for understanding intelligent performances of a specific kind is some degree of competence in performances of that kind. The competent critic of prose-style, experimental technique, or embroidery, must at least know how to write, experiment or sew. [...] Of course, to execute an operation intelligently is not exactly the same thing as to follow its execution intelligently. The agent is originating, the spectator is only contemplating. But the rules which the agent observes and the criteria which he applies are one with those which govern the spectator's applause and jeers.

In his formulation, Ryle put the emphasis on technical operations: if I can see myself in what someone is doing, it is because I myself know how to do part of what he is doing. But does all behaviour boil down to the application of a technique? In this article, I have tried to show that Wittgenstein's philosophy provides the means to give a proper formulation to this intuition in a much broader way: understanding others depends in the first place on conceptual know-how, on the possession of concepts that enable the agent to think about and describe

his own action – but they enable him to do so because they structure the action itself, because they are nothing other than the rational order the agent is able to give to his conduct by virtue of his insertion into some social world, made up of norms, roles, rules and practices. To be able to describe your own action by saying “I’m writing”, you need to know how to write: mastery of language is thus interwoven with non-linguistic activities, in a huge diversity of ways. And such an action is intelligible to another (interacting with the agent or in the position of an observer) insofar as this other participates in the same social world and is himself, as a result, familiar with its practices.

Such a perspective leads us to re-consider the logical functioning of concepts (such as intention, desire or belief), the mastery of which is at the heart of commonsense psychology. From this point of view, the psychological concepts used to articulate an agent’s attitude towards what he holds to be reasons (the end he pursues, the things he holds to be true and on the ground of which he acts) play an auxiliary role in extending descriptions: they make it possible to enrich the minimal scenario suggested by the description that an observer is immediately able to give about what is going on (“she writes”, “he takes the tram”...) by crediting the agent with thoughts that he could himself express if questioned; but this in no way implies that psychological concepts are intended to designate ‘mental contents’, in the sense of objects of knowledge inaccessible for the observer. The logic of psychological concepts does, of course, call for careful study; but to consider that the understanding of others can be elucidated on the basis of their use alone simply misses the point.

However, participation in the same social world is not enough to bring about understanding of another. There is a non-intellectual dimension to understanding which is rooted in individual spontaneity, that can get in the way when we are not sensitive to the same things. But above all, as Winch emphasised in the wake of Wittgenstein, incomprehension remains an irreducible possibility, immanent in human relations; for participation in a common world presupposes a sufficient convergence of reactions in the learning and subsequent application of words and concepts, which nothing can absolutely guarantee.

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