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Andrew Brantingham
Macalester College

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Understanding

Andrew Brantingham

One frequently encounters the term “understanding” in philosophical literature, but analyses of the concept of understanding itself are surprisingly rare. Philosophers often tend to explore the idea for other purposes, and the consequent analyses give us a specialized picture—how to understand a particular theory or field, etc. However, the importance of a general analysis of understanding should be obvious. First, clarity regarding the general case may foster clarity in the latter more specific cases. In addition, a great deal rests on understanding itself. Claims to knowledge and their justification, practical abilities, and public discourse all are founded on the ascription of understanding to individuals and groups. To understand understanding will be to know what reasons and justifications support our beliefs and how our discourse is possible.

“Understanding” is, no doubt, a term of family resemblance. That is to say, the word is clearly used in many different ways and, unless we specifically stipulate one, a clear and concise definition is sure to be elusive. Moreover, a technical definition seems to me undesirable, for clarity would no doubt be bought at the price of the richness and broad applicability of the term as it is used naturally. However, I believe that there is a conceptual core of understanding which is approachable. I will attempt to defend three theses regarding understanding.

The first concerns a general characterization of understanding. First, what it is not (though often taken to be): understanding is not an atmosphere, or an aura, or a particular mental state like pain. Insofar as the idea of understanding is useful to us—and I take it to be so primarily in areas of epistemology, practical abilities, and justification of claims—we can make no sense of understanding as a particular and distinct state of mind, a sort of light bulb turning on in the head of the individual who is thought to understand something. Rather, I will

argue that understanding is a relation between a subject and an object—an understander and that which is understood. Furthermore, understanding is not a threshold concept, but should be understood on a continuum. It is a process, a conversation, or a set of abilities.

The second thesis is that understanding is inseparable from the criteria we use to ascribe it to subjects. It has been suggested that there must be something that distinguishes an individual who has understood from one who has not, even if the former gives no demonstration of his understanding. I will argue that insofar as we are able to make any use of the term, understanding just *is* that demonstration.

The third thesis is that understanding is a phenomenon that necessarily involves publicly intelligible language or other publicly accessible forms of expression. This is true because of the nature of the term. Whatever we take understanding to be, I will argue that at bottom it involves some concept of rightness, or accuracy of interpretation, or something else approaching truth-value. Furthermore, the picture of understanding I offer below—understanding as participation in language games—suggests that understanding requires a linguistic community. If this is correct then it makes no sense to talk of private and ineffable understanding. Any use of the word which insists on ineffability is a use of which we can make little sense.

To begin, let us explore several different uses of the term “understand” in the hope of finding some similarities that lead us to use one word for disparate cases. First, there are several senses of understanding that I will mention mostly in order to set them aside. These senses largely revolve around ideas of empathy, engagement with the object, or taking on another’s point of view. We see these uses in phrases like “I understand how you feel,” “I understand your pain,” “I understand where you’re coming from, etc.” These uses of the term are far from unimportant. Taking on the point of view of a person or group can be an integral part of understanding them in the more literal senses discussed below. In addition, it may be that understanding experiences or other

complex objects is very nearly the same thing as taking on a new point of view. In complex cases of understanding, such as understanding literature or experience, empathy likely plays a large part. I will say more about these cases below, but we ought to begin with some simpler cases.

Perhaps the simplest and most literal examples of understanding involve understanding simple rules or processes—understanding a mathematical symbol, understanding the meaning of a single word, or understanding a simple command would all be examples of this usage, which I shall call the “simple-rule” sense of understanding. It is, not surprisingly, such simple uses of “understand” that are easiest to understand. And it is perhaps this simple sense of the term that has led to the suggestion that understanding is the ability to follow a rule. Laurence Nemirow has argued just this: “To understand is to be able to implement or apply a rule. To be capable of being understood—that is, to be understandable—is to be a rule that can be followed.”¹ To understand the “plus” symbol, then, is to be able to use it according to the rules for addition. To understand the meaning of a word is to use it according to its dictionary definition or according to the rules of common usage. To understand a command is to be able to carry it out. Nemirow goes on to argue that rule following in this sense translates into practical abilities—abilities to use language, cope with data, or accomplish goals.

It may be valuable to point out here the distinction between understanding and knowing, for it is in these simple cases of understanding that the two concepts are most likely to be confused. One might argue that to understand the meaning of a word is simply to know its definition. It may also be true that understanding something more complex than a word involves knowing many true statements about it. It may be that understanding and knowing are closely related and at times analyzable in terms of each other. However, they are not always coextensive. It is clear that one can know a statement is true

¹ Nemirow, Laurence E. “Understanding Rules.” *The Journal of Philosophy*, Volume 92, Issue 1 (Jan., 1995), 28

without fully understanding it. A child might insist that it is true that $e=mc^2$ without fully understanding what the formula means. This brings us to more complex cases of understanding.

Such cases would include, for example, when a subject is said to understand a theory, or an argument, or a work of literature. This usage I shall call the “complex rule” sense of understanding. It is still a case of rule following provided we are prepared to interpret rule following in a loose sense. This is to say that understanding these complex cases is properly participating in what Wittgenstein called a “language game”, or a “form of life”. It is not immediately obvious that understanding something like a literary work is an example of following rules. It is unlikely or perhaps impossible to generate a specific list of rules for understanding Shakespeare, for example, but the activities and utterances of those who are said to understand Shakespeare are nonetheless distinctive and governed by standards of practice. There are certain, loosely defined limits to the “game” and there are certain “moves” (i.e., propositions or attitudes) that are considered valid. We can compare this example to Wittgenstein’s favorite illustration of language games: a chess match. In order for the game to go on, each player must understand how each piece is allowed to move, what constitutes winning, the general goal of the game, etc. Clearly the chess match involves rules, but there is still room for creativity—each match is unique. Understanding in the “complex-rule” sense is analogous: in order for the community to ascribe understanding, an individual must demonstrate some knowledge of how individual words are used, and the general aim and context of the theory or work in question. In addition, we expect someone who understands a work of literature to make a set of coherent “moves” in the language game, just as we expect a chess player to exhibit some general strategy. A player who makes a string of seemingly unrelated moves would be said not fully to understand the game. Analogously, in order for us to say that Jones understands Shakespeare, she must say things that fall within certain broadly-defined limits, though she

can of course still make her own “moves,” provided that they form a relatively coherent and intelligible whole.

Part of understanding in the “complex-rule” sense is simply an aggregation of many “simple-rule” cases—understanding words, etc. In addition, Nemirow insists in these cases on “computational directness and conceptual integration.”² Someone who must refer to a written table of rules for translation would not be said fully to understand a given language. Nemirow’s stipulation implies that full understanding requires reflexive practical ability to apply the rules, just as full understanding of chess requires that a player does not refer to the rule-book before every move.

Let us consider some examples of the “complex-rule” sense of understanding. In the case of understanding a theory, understanding would involve several things. First, a subject is expected to be able to apply the theory to the real world. In the case of a physical theory, this would involve carrying out calculations, generating testable predictions, etc. A student would demonstrate some understanding of Newtonian mechanics by predicting where a projectile will land. In the case of non-physical theories, application might involve interpretation according to the categories of the theory, explanation of cases, etc. Presumably there are a number of rules implied or explicitly stated by any given theory which apply wherever the theory is thought to apply. This suggests that part of understanding a theory is being able to dissect it into smaller applicable parts and knowing how these parts interact with each other and with other segments of the world.

Understanding literature seems more complex yet. We would say that Jones understands a poem, say Shakespeare’s Sonnet XXIX, when she can explain the meaning of each word and the general thrust of the piece as a whole. She must show that she understands (in the “simple-rule” sense) the particular non-standard uses of words, for example that “wealth” in the

² *ibid.*, 42

penultimate line refers not to monetary but to spiritual gain. She could demonstrate further understanding by talking about Shakespeare's social and historical context. She could make claims about his intentions and his emotions at the time of composition. These would all be "moves" within the game of talking about poetry, and moves which anyone familiar with the game would recognize as valid. In addition, the community might insist that understanding requires a certain emotional attitude or deference. Many would say that an individual who could fulfill all the above requirements and go on to claim that Shakespeare was a mediocre poet does not fully understand his work. So the rules of the game can govern not only what sorts of things one is expected to say or do in a certain context, but how one ought to feel or act. Forms of life not only govern language, but emotional and social behavior as well. Clearly the complexity of the games we play is practically unlimited; however, we can see how the linguistic practices of the community give rise to the explicit and implicit rules that govern language games.

We can also begin to see here that understanding involves not just learning the rules of a theory or other object of understanding, but also placing it in its proper context—i.e., applying rules of interpretation from outside the theory. Surely a subject who knows the whole internal structure of special relativity but not how it relates to the bigger picture is missing something. R. L. Franklin writes:

Our understanding involves both some relatively wider context and something relatively specific within it. However, our interest or concern will vary. If we consider something as a whole without knowing its internal structure, to understand it will be to distinguish and relate its parts...If we consider it as an element in a larger pattern, to understand it will be to connect it with its context.³

³ Franklin, R. L. "On Understanding." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Volume 43, Issue 3 (Mar., 1983), 310

Many things said to be understood are, of course, both a whole and an element of a greater whole at once. Franklin offers the example of a gearbox; one can understand its internal structure entirely without understanding what it does for the automobile. To understand it fully is to understand both its structure and its context. It is worth noting here as well that what constitutes a whole often depends on the purposes of the game being played. Certainly a bacteriologist can be said to understand the bubonic plague without telling the whole story of its effects on world history. The ascription of understanding thus largely depends on what is expected of the subject said to understand, for understanding can only take place within the context of a game with a particular goal. Understanding something in the game of history is different from understanding the same thing in the game of biology. However, these considerations also suggest that no game is wholly isolated. Instead, the language games we play overlap and influence each other. Thus a development in game of history can affect the rules of the game of interpreting literature. The rules are fluid and constantly interacting, and are only held in place by the practices of those who play them.

Franklin's comments also go a long way in explaining the feeling we often have of not completely understanding something. We sometimes find that we are capable of applying a theory, using all its terms in the proper ways, etc. But perhaps we do not see it in its complete context. Or perhaps we know where a theory fits in the bigger picture but do not understand all its working parts. Complete understanding in the sense of understanding internal structure as well as context can indeed be very elusive, and the feeling of "not quite getting it" may simply point to a neglected area rather than suggesting that there is some mental switch that has yet to be thrown. Again, understanding is a continuum concept, and "complete understanding" may sometimes be impossible.

A more complex use of understanding than the "simple rule" and "complex rule" senses discussed so far is that in which someone is said to understand a situation or an experience. The

complexity of this use arises from the fact that there are many ways to talk about—and consequently to understand—any given situation or experience; there is no set “game” into which the individual can easily fall. Consider a man robbing a convenience store. We could understand the situation causally: certain socio-economic factors combined with a particular disposition have led him to do it. We could understand the situation morally by passing or withholding judgment for various reasons. The clerk in the store might understand the situation strategically, that is, how to get out of it with the least harm to himself.

Any one of these ways of interpreting and understanding can be seen as complete, as telling a whole intelligible story about the experience. And these different ways of understanding can largely be viewed as applications of the “complex rule” sense discussed above. Each provides us with a set of rules to apply, a way of viewing and interpreting an experience, a certain game to play. The most important thing to notice about understanding an experience or situation is that hermeneutic schemes are practically unlimited. There can be no complete and exhaustive understanding of any given experience because we can tell so many different stories about everything that happens. The completeness of a subject’s understanding of her own or someone else’s experience depends only on the language games she wishes to play.

In some cases, talk of understanding an experience (or of understanding literature, which often involves talking about an experience) can come very close to the senses of understanding I set aside above—those involving empathy, etc. Sometimes we think of understanding an experience simply in terms of being able to imagine it, or placing ourselves in the shoes of those who did experience it. We might insist that someone who was not traumatized by war didn’t really understand it, just as we insist on a certain emotional deference to Shakespeare. I would like to emphasize here that emotion can play a practically unlimited role in understanding. Much of what we take to be deep meaning in life involves powerful emotional responses to experience,

literature, art, etc. In some cases emotional response may play a greater part in understanding than does explanation.

This does not mean that an individual who does not have the expected emotional response does not understand the experience, though he may not “empathize.” So long as he knows the depth and nature of the expected response, he can still be said to understand. I take this to be true because even those to whom no one would deny understanding—the veteran, for example—cannot be expected to have the same emotional response every time they recall their experience. Certainly the veteran understands the trauma of war even if he is not emotionally crippled every time he remembers it. Analogously, a committed observer can understand the trauma of war so long as he knows the ways in which those who actually have experienced it have been affected emotionally.

In these three primary senses of understanding—the “simple rule” sense, the “complex rule” sense, and the sense of understanding experience—understanding always seems to involve following a rule or a set of rules. These might include rules for categorization, rules for calculation, rules for the use of words, or rules or methods for effecting goals. No doubt they are not always explicit but make up what Wittgenstein called “forms of life.” Full understanding is accomplished by getting “inside” a form of life or a language game in the sense of speaking, behaving, and exhibiting skills in accordance with the speech, behavior, and skills of others who are said to understand the object in question. Furthermore, language games or forms of life require a linguistic and behavioral community. There must be a set of practices with which one can align and a set of standards (though not necessarily explicit) according to which understanding can be ascribed; without other players, there is no language game.

As the object or scope of understanding broadens, so does the language game or linguistic community involved. There is a sense in which the entirety of life takes place within a language game or set of games, and the rules to it are naturally fluid and nebulous. Habermas sees personal interactions as taking place

within such a context, against a background of shared knowledge and linguistic practice—he calls this broad context ‘the lifeworld:’

The lifeworld constitutes a totality with a center and indeterminate, porous borders that recede rather than permit themselves to be transcended....The common speech situation constitutes the center—and not, for instance, my body, as an anthropologizing phenomenology has claimed—in which social spaces (staggered concentrically according to depth and width) and historical times (arranged three-dimensionally) converge prior to any objectivation through measuring operations....I, in my body, and I, as my body, find myself always already occupying an intersubjectively shared world, whereby these collectively inhabited lifeworlds telescope into each other, overlap, and entwine like text and context.⁴

The lifeworld, then, is a fluid and organic whole—a social and linguistic context which surrounds us always and everywhere—and it is through our natural interactions with it and others, our natural grasp of the game, that understanding takes place.

These suggestions bring us to my first thesis. First, in all the examples considered, understanding is a relation between a subject and an object, an understander and that understood. We understand languages, theories, arguments, etc. Even when we are said to understand ourselves it is from a certain standpoint. If I understand why I did something it is because in some sense I have become subject and object. It is perhaps even more accurate to say that one never understands oneself as such; instead one understands one’s emotions, actions, motivations, relationships, etc.

This much may be obvious but it is important because it begins to suggest my further claim that understanding must be seen as a continuum concept and not as a state of the individual. Certainly in the most simple cases a subject either does or does not understand a word or a command. But as the complexity of the

⁴ Habermas, Jurgen. *On the Pragmatics of Communication*, ed. Maeve Cook. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998, 244

object understood increases, so does the length of the continuum. Insofar as understanding involves a relationship with the object—taking on the form of life the object involves—understanding cannot be seen as either present or absent but must instead be seen as a process. Consider Wittgenstein's remarks on learning to read:

Take the case of a pupil who has so far not taken part in the training [for reading]: if he is shewn a written word he will sometimes produce some sort of sound, and here and there it happens 'accidentally' to be roughly right. A third person hears this pupil on such occasion and says: "He is reading". But the teacher says: "No, he isn't reading; that was just an accident".—But let us suppose that this pupil continues to react correctly to further words that are put before him. After a while the teacher says: "Now he can read!"...When did he begin to read? Which was the first word that he *read*?⁵

Certainly there is a point at which we can say that the subject understands how to read or understands English, but that point is not given. We must choose it according to our purposes. Furthermore, it seems likely that there will always be different ways of understanding any given object, new ways of describing it. This is why I say that understanding is a relationship and a process, but not a particular mental state.

If it is true that understanding must be seen as a process and not a particular state then it is also true that understanding as we generally use the term is inseparable from the criteria we use to ascribe it. What else would the process of understanding be than the different rules one follows in understanding—the actions and modes of description and ascription which demonstrate understanding. To be able to play chess is simply to play chess. Again, Wittgenstein sheds light on the question:

⁵Wittgenstein, L. *Philosophical Investigations*. trans. G.E.M Anscombe. New York: Macmillan, 1958, section 157

We are trying to get hold of the mental process of understanding which seems to be hidden behind those coarser and therefore more readily visible accompaniments. But we do not succeed; or, rather, it does not get as far as a real attempt. For even supposing I had found something that happened in all those cases of understanding,--why should *it* be understanding?⁶

If, as I have said, understanding involves following rules and “getting inside” a form of life, then understanding just *is* acting out that form of life. What do we say of Wittgenstien’s student who exclaims, “Now I can go on!” but fails to do so? Certainly he does not understand. Understanding a word simply means using it in the same way that other people do, and likewise for a mathematical rule. Understanding a theory means using the rules of interpretation, explanation, and calculation it posits to generate propositions about the world. Understanding a piece of literature means talking about it in meaningful ways (i.e., saying things other readers understand and can agree or disagree with), or perhaps “living out its message,” acting according to the ideas the piece posits.

None of this is to say that understanding is necessarily external—that the mathematician only understands his field insofar as he constantly does calculations or that the philosopher only understands insofar as he goes around telling people about Kant. For certainly we can to some extent test our own understanding—we can explain things to ourselves or carry out some mental calculations. Also, I do not mean to say that understanding is somehow “there” whenever one talks about the object understood and it disappears when one stops. We often think of understanding as an ability, and we ascribe this ability based on past experience. Certainly we would all say that an expert mathematician understands arithmetic even if he has long since moved into higher realms. However, I take this to be an inductive proposition. We ascribe understanding because the

⁶ *ibid.*, section 153

subject has repeatedly demonstrated his ability and it is likely that he retains it. We trust that the mathematician will be able to do some simple addition if he has to, and we have good reason to do so. But, there is always the chance that our mathematician will fail, and then where has his understanding gone?

I will offer one further observation from which follows my third thesis. In all of the senses of understanding mentioned here (with the possible exception of those more properly seen as cases of empathy), understanding involves some notion of accuracy or correctness. This is very easily seen in the “simple rule” cases. And, while there might of course be disagreement about the implications of a theory or the proper interpretation of a piece of literature, there are always blatantly wrong interpretations—cases in which we should say someone has not understood at all. The language games have certain boundaries. The important point is that in all cases of understanding, there is a community of interpretation involved and understanding is ascribed to the degree that the subject’s actions and language agree with those of other members of the community or are intelligible to them.⁷ In this sense understanding rests wholly on language and meanings that are publicly accessible. Any subject who claims to understand something but cannot explain his understanding simply misunderstands the use of the word “understanding.”

This claim rests in part on Wittgenstein’s comments on private language. I will not attempt to spell out the entire argument, but only those parts which are particularly pertinent to

⁷ Keep in mind here that this view of understanding still allows for the most radical disagreements within interpretive communities. One who claims that the world is flat and one who disagrees are at least both using the words “flat,” “round,” and “not” in the same ways and are consequently intelligible to each other. They are simply making different moves within the game. Rivals may of course claim that the other does not understand the evidence or even the question posed—that the opponent is no longer playing the same game. Understanding is clearly much more than strict agreement with the community.

the question at hand. Wittgenstein imagines a case in which a subject privately christens some sensation and attempts to keep track of its occurrence by marking down a symbol in a diary:

But what is this ceremony for? For that is all it seems to be! A definition certainly serves to establish the meaning of a sign. —Well, that is done precisely by the concentration of my attention; for in this way I impress on myself the connexion between the sign and the sensation.—But “I impress it on myself” can only mean: this process brings it about that I remember the connexion *right* in the future. But in the present case I have no criterion of correctness. One would like to say: whatever is going to seem right to me is right. And that only means that we can’t talk about ‘right’.⁸

Without the public criteria of correctness, we can no longer get any grasp on the notion of meaning. We know what a word like “table” means because other people consistently use it in the same way we do. But if we try to make sense of a term that has no use in the community but an association wholly private to an individual, meaning seems to escape us. If there is no community usage to agree or disagree with, there are no longer correct and incorrect uses of words and thus no meaning.

Without meaning, understanding surely cannot occur. Understanding grounds out in the meanings of language and behavior, which in turn rely on the standard of correctness provided by a community and a form of life. Thus there can be no private understanding, accessible only to the subject alleged to understand. Understanding is a phenomenon that rests on agreement (or at least comparison) and thus necessarily involves publicly accessible language. Meaning, forms of life, and understanding necessarily involve communities.

It might be objected here that there is certainly something going on called understanding even if a subject gives no sign of her understanding. Paul Ziff writes:

⁸ *Investigations*, section 258

The difference between one who understood and one who did not need not have been a difference in actual overt behavior, verbal or nonverbal.

If each heard what was said even if neither gave any indication, neither responded in any way, possibly one did and the other did not understand. If this were so perhaps we would not know that one did and one did not understand. But that possibility would remain: such is our common conception of understanding.⁹

Ziff here insists on the distinction between the phenomenon of understanding itself and the criteria by which we know it has taken place. The former is thought to be the essential occurrence and the latter simply signs which point to it. My answer to this assertion is twofold. First, I would argue that even if no outward sign of understanding is given, the subject's understanding still takes the form of publicly accessible language. She might envision carrying out the command given (a describable or demonstrable phenomenon), explain the idea to herself, etc. We could certainly imagine the subject simply thinking "I understand" or not thinking anything in particular, not having any internal explanation (certainly we don't say "I understand" to ourselves every time we hear a sentence in our mother language). However, I would compare these cases to Wittgenstein's student who says "Now I can go on!" There is certainly a feeling that accompanies understanding, a belief—often founded on past experience—that we have got the idea and can go on. But this feeling should not itself be equated with understanding and there is always the possibility that when the issue is pressed, no explanation or action is forthcoming; the subject did not understand after all.

Second, I would argue that whatever private, inward phenomena are associated with understanding, they have little to do with understanding as it is primarily useful and interesting.

⁹ Ziff, Paul. *Understanding Understanding*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1972, 1

That is, if my comments about the necessity to understanding of communities and forms of life are true, then the real value of understanding is public. Why, after all, do we ever say that an individual understands something? Reasons to do so would include fostering discussion, trusting claims the individual makes, or explaining why an individual talks and acts in certain ways. All of these are public phenomena; to ascribe understanding to an individual who never demonstrates it may be possible, but seems pointless. I said above that understanding involves claims to knowledge, justification, and practical abilities; if this is true, then the public demonstration of understanding is important above all.

I hope as well that these comments will dispel the shadow of behaviorism that might be perceived to hang over this piece as a whole. As I have largely followed Wittgenstein into this problem, I will follow him out as well:

“And yet you again and again reach the conclusion that the sensation itself is a *nothing*.”—Not at all. It is not a *something*, but not a *nothing* either! The conclusion was only that a nothing would serve just as well as a something about which nothing could be said. We have only rejected the grammar that tries to force itself on us here.¹⁰

The idea is not to deny sensations, for to do so would be to countenance the debate in the first place; Wittgenstein rather insists that the debate over internal sensations is misguided from the start. Sensations, mental entities, etc. seem to be implied or “forced on us” by our grammar. Wittgenstein’s point here is merely that language has created an illusion—he wants to dispel the grammatical illusion but he does not wish to debate whether something else might be there.

Similarly, I do not mean to deny mental states or the sensation of understanding. I simply want to turn our attention to those pieces of the puzzle that we can firmly grasp, and which I believe form a coherent and complete picture so long as we allow

¹⁰ *Investigations*, section 304

them to. Whatever private phenomena may be involved in understanding have nothing to do with the rich and complete use of the term that can be made within the publicly accessible sphere. If an individual insists on some form of ineffable understanding, I should not argue, though I should be at a loss as to what ought to be done with the claim.

I have attempted here not to give a strict definition of understanding but instead to offer a general view of, and general approach to the idea. I have most certainly not said everything that can be said about understanding, but I believe I have said several things that are true of the concept. The picture I have offered should be seen above all as placing understanding firmly in the public sphere. We ascribe understanding to each other and to ourselves because we are all engaged in a continual conversation—an exercise of description and interpretation of, and interaction with, our world. Understanding is above all a measure or display of the individual's abilities to do these things within the various forms of life in which she finds herself and, as such, rests as much upon the common game played as upon the individual herself.