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# Meaning and Understanding

Edited by

Herman Parret and Jacques Bouveresse



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## Preface

In June 1979, an international conference on "Meaning and Understanding" was organised by the editors of this volume at the Château de Cerisy-la-Salle, Normandy, France. The conference served as the genesis of this book. However, not all of the contributions held at the Round Table sessions of the conference are reproduced here and, conversely, a few of the papers were written after the conference as comments on what was presented during the meetings. The main sources of funding for the conference were the *Centre national de la recherche scientifique* (Paris) and the *Fonds national belge de la recherche scientifique* (Brussels). We should like to express our gratitude to these institutions, and also to the Director and the Staff of the *Centre Culturel International de Cerisy-la-Salle*. We owe a special debt of thanks to all the participants in these particularly lively and enthusiastic debates, in which controversies did not eliminate the courtesy of interpersonal contacts and the amenities of the castle life. Thanks are also due to the authors of this volume for their high degree of cooperation in producing their manuscripts.

The philosophers, linguists, logicians and psychologists who gathered at Cerisy-la-Salle came from a variety of traditions and backgrounds. We are pleased that we could bring together people with an 'Anglo-Saxon' philosophical motivation and participants (and authors) who are tributary, in a more or less explicit way, to 'Continental' ideas and doctrines. There is, in this volume, evident disagreement, and yet at the same time the beginning of an interpenetration of traditionally separated tendencies. Still, this volume can be viewed as heterogeneous or even eclectic, but without being exhaustive. We intend above all to contribute to the continuation of the discussion of the issues addressed by the papers in this volume. The purpose of the introduction is not so much to summarise the content of individual contributions, but rather to point out the oppositions, similarities, and continuities among approaches and perspectives. Further expedient to unifying this volume, we decided to provide a single, general bibliography.

April 1980

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## Introduction

1. As Rosenberg remarks, "Understanding . . . is evidently difficult to understand" (in this volume, p. 29). At any rate, this is a conviction that seems to be held by most of those who are interested in one way or another in the problem of understanding. Do the highly varied objects that we are supposed to be able to understand have in common specific characteristics making them *possible* objects of understanding and explaining why some of them are more difficult to understand than others? If understanding itself is among the objects that we can or wish to understand, then we may ask why we spontaneously place it at such a high level on the scale of the difficulties of understanding. It is relatively easy to explain why a mathematical demonstration, a work of art, a human being or an historical event can be more difficult to understand than other objects of the same type. But if the obstacles that must be overcome in order to reach understanding differ completely as we turn from one object to another, there is no common measure allowing us to appreciate the difficulty of understanding something in general. The specific difficulty we have in understanding understanding is itself difficult to understand, because we do not have a clear idea of the nature of the obstacles that stand in the way of understanding in a case of this sort, nor do we have a point of comparison from which to measure the difficulty of the task. An object can be difficult to understand because of its particular complexity, but also because of its only too great simplicity. The difficulty may stem from its exceptional and unheard-of aspect, or equally from its excessively ordinary, mundane and familiar character. Something that has always been understood as being *selbstverständlich* can become strange and incomprehensible when we try to reach an explicit understanding of it. A classical example, discussed by Wittgenstein, is the question Augustine exposes with respect to time. As Tugendhat explains: "There seems to be here a domain of knowledge where our ignorance does not seem to be based on an insufficient experience but on the fact that it concerns aspects of our understanding which are too close to us and too evident (*selbstverständlich*) for us. We are not looking here for an explanation of an ununderstandable object in its factuality but for an elucidation of what is already understood. And this elucidation can only be obtained by reflecting on our understanding itself, not by experience" (Tugendhat, 1976, 19).

According to one classical view, philosophy consists, first of all, of an astonishment at what goes without saying, and thus of the generation of a certain type of non-understanding of those very objects that seem to be the best understood. In this sense philosophy, just as psychoanalysis, according to Kraus, is the disease of which it regards itself as the cure. The difference between scientific and philosophical astonishment is supposed to be that in philosophy we should try to understand in another mode the objects that we already understand in a certain way, whereas in science we should endeavour to explain objects we do not really understand at the outset. If we were to ask Augustine's question about our understanding of understanding itself, we could realise that the difficulty of understanding understanding may have two quite different sources. Is understanding something we do not understand, for lack of an adequate explanation, whose discovery, as Ziff anticipates, should probably be a long-winded enterprise? Or is it so difficult to understand because what is true of our understanding of time is even more true of our understanding of understanding?

There are cases where an explanation really does provide us with an effective understanding that we lacked previously; in other cases, however, the explanation simply shows us *if* and *how* we already understand something. If there are, as suggested by Augustine and Wittgenstein, fundamental things that we understand without really being able to explain them in the second sense, then it should not be surprising that understanding itself should be one of them. (This, of course, does not exclude a possible "explanation" of understanding, in another sense). It is not so difficult to accept that there may be both a philosophical and a scientific problem of understanding. But the traditional rivalry between scientific and philosophical understanding of the same object, with each characteristically tending to ignore the other and to present itself alone as really fundamental and indispensable, is in some respects the first problem we would like to be able to solve in this case as in others. Indeed, it has obstinately resisted all efforts at resolution, despite whatever progress scientists and philosophers claim to have realised with regard to what they respectively call "understanding".

According to Ziff (1972), understanding is essentially an analytic process whose difficulty is related to the structural complexity of the object concerned. But, as Rosenberg notes in his contribution to this volume, it is not evident, even in the case of the understanding of sentences, which naturally suggests this sort of conception, that the most difficult to understand is always the most complex in this sense. In all cases where the task of understanding is rendered difficult not by the peculiar complexity but by the "singularity" of the object, understanding can be achieved by the integration of the problematic element in an appropriate context that assigns to the object its "meaning". Understanding then is rather a problem of

*synthesis* than of analysis and explanation in the broad sense (ignoring for the moment the fundamental difference between natural sciences and social or “human” sciences claimed by many authors, such as Spengler who argues that the way to understand “dead” forms is by mathematical law while the way to understand “living” forms is by analogy). However, there is a third factor that could increase the difficulties of understanding: the vague or indistinct character of what we are trying to understand. To understand a concept may mean to explicate it (in Carnap’s sense) or to make it more precise. And those, like Popper, who consider that “there is no such thing as an ‘explication’, or an ‘explicated’ or ‘precise’ concept”, will hold that our effort to understand never does have to go beyond the prevention of possible misunderstanding, in so far as it is predictable and prejudicial to the solution of real problems.

There are, then, several possible reasons for the resistance of the concept of understanding to understanding. It may be that it is particularly difficult to analyse; or the problem may reside in the absolute singularity of its character (in the above-mentioned sense); or in the characteristic lack of precision or exactness of this concept. (In this last case, our difficulty is that we try in vain to get rid of the imprecision by looking for criteria of application that would constitute necessary and sufficient conditions for saying, in a general way, that someone understands something). Compare the questions “How can understanding be attained?” and “How can one win a game?” Although we must admit that there is no general and uniform answer to the latter (valid *a priori* for all games), this still will not lead to the idea that winning is especially difficult to understand. However, that seems to be the type of answer we feel obliged to give to the former question: the various “activities” that we call *to understand* should have a kind of underlying unity, resulting from the fact that they are related to the exercise of one and the same faculty, and this despite the fact that we officially have ceased to consider understanding as a faculty. But, if we are prepared to admit that there are as many ways of attaining understanding as there are of winning a game, we should also consider the possibility that the difficulty of understanding understanding has nothing to do with the impossibility of answering satisfactorily the question of what understanding, considered as a performance or an achievement of a specific type, might consist of.

The eighteen contributions to this volume are all dominated in some way by the problem of the difficulty of understanding understanding. They can all be related to one or other of the following theses: that understanding resists analysis because of its highly complex structure; or because of its absolute singularity; or because it is a fuzzy concept. Few authors pretend even to suggest an outline of a fully adequate and overall “theory of understanding”. The ordering of the contributions under the six headings may appear somewhat arbitrary: there are overlaps, and some papers could be considered to belong to two or even more sections. We decided on the

present ordering more by evaluating perspectives and accents than by identifying definite and highly finished theories.

J. Rosenberg, B. de Gelder and D. Zaslowsky introduce the *problem of the difficulty* of understanding understanding. All three try to elucidate the nature of understanding by comparing the concept of understanding with competing and better understood concepts, such as “meaning” and “knowledge”. Rosenberg goes about this in a typically “analytical” way, commented on by de Gelder, who is at the same time criticising Føllesdal’s conception of understanding as a specific type of knowledge, whereas Zaslowsky openly uses linguistic-semantic techniques. The second section of this volume is dominated by the classical opposition (or identification) between *explanation and understanding*: K. O. Apel, J. Bouveresse and D. Føllesdal take stands on the hermeneutical approach to understanding; moreover, they relate the explanation-understanding controversy to theses on rationality and communication or, rather, on rational communicative behaviour. The papers drawn together in the third section of the book have in common their development, in a highly technical and theory-dependent way, of the relationship between *understanding and interpretation*, on the one hand (with D. Holdcroft arguing in favour of a “conversationalist” embedding of interpretative understanding), and between *understanding and knowledge*, on the other (with E. Holenstein suggesting that universals of knowledge constrain understanding, while S. Schiffer elaborates on a [truth-functional] theory of thoughts that are the necessary epistemic condition for understanding). *Frege* is the starting point of the contributions brought together in the fourth section of the book. J. McDowell relates the problem of understanding to the realism-anti-realism debate, advocating “back to Frege”. In contrast, H. Parret, in a criticism of Frege’s lack of attention to the community of senses (rather than to their objectivity), suggests going “beyond Frege” towards an anthropologically-based “theory” of understanding. G. Evans tackles the local – and especially resistant – problem of demonstratives and their understanding in a Fregean theory of language; he defends the Fregean position, rejecting the claim that Frege’s sub-theory of demonstratives manifests an essential weakness. J. Proust, commenting on Evan’s defence of Frege, adds her interpretation of the status of *sense*, thus offering a reformulation into what could be an adequate Fregean “theory” of the understanding of demonstratives and language fragments in general. The fifth section contains two papers both alluding to the fact that a semantic theory of understanding has to be supplemented by, or even reshaped into, a theory of the *pragmatic functioning* of understanding. M. Dascal offers definitions and examples of the set of *strategies* of understanding (as opposed to pure semantic *rules*), and F. Jacques stresses the *dialogic* embedding of understanding, attacking by these means the very idea of an autonomous semantics of understanding. The final section of this volume contains three

papers that all have to do with, on the one hand, the relation of *formal and pragmatic understanding* and, on the other, the peculiarities of *understanding formalisms*. G. Granger concentrates on how one understands formalisms, in contrast with how one understands natural language fragments. F. Kambartel contends strongly in favour of the argumentative function of logic and, by the introduction of this argumentative function, extends the traditional logical understanding of objects towards the “pragmatic understanding” of them. P. Wason introduces psychological materials connecting the nature of understanding with the limits of formal thinking. In the following sections of this introduction, we interrelate the contributions to this volume in a more detailed fashion and bring out their central intuitions.

2. Rosenberg states that “the notion of understanding belongs more to the *ethics* of cognition than to an analysis or theory or articulation of its structure” (p. 41). The concept of understanding is used not in order to describe a specific performance and to attribute its realisation to someone, but “always to ascribe or indicate a position within a system of rights and responsibilities founded on diverse achievements” (p. 42). Rosenberg’s approach is decidedly non-cognitivist, and clearly has something to do with the kind of theory Geach has called *ascriptivism*: “ascriptivists”, according to Geach, “hold that to say an action *x* was voluntary on the part of an agent *A* is not to describe the act *x* as caused in a certain way, but to ascribe it to *A*, to hold *A* responsible for it”. In the same way, to say that *somebody understands* is not to describe his performance as resulting from the exercise of a certain type of ability, but to attribute to him a special normative role within a community of rights and duties.

If this is the case, it is not surprising that performances that can be classified as instances of understanding may be so diverse; for the concept of understanding then functions not as a description but as a general appreciation of a very diversified set of performances that constitute (non-compelling) reasons for ascribing a particular ethical role and status to somebody. This status can be ascribed to a person only to the degree we have succeeded, at least by extension and analogy, in integrating him in one or another way within the ethical, cultural and social community that we constitute. This then allows us, to a certain extent, to elucidate the question of the criteria according to which we attribute understanding to or deny, partly or completely, understanding in a child, an animal or a machine. Like the ascriptivists, Rosenberg considers that, just as in the case of ethical judgments, the issue here cannot literally be one of truth or falsity: regardless of what the intellectual performances of machines could be, the attribution or denial of the property of being able to understand will always involve assuming a quasi-ethical attitude towards them – it will be, in the end, a question of “moral choice”. The underdetermination of this ethical or quasi-ethical decision by the available data should probably be con-

sidered as the ultimate source and real explanation of what is improperly called the “descriptive vagueness” of the concept of understanding, in the case where we have to determine whether a being can be said to display the faculty of understanding in general as well as in the very diverse situations where we have to decide whether or not someone understands something in particular: “The person whom we acknowledge as understanding a proof, a poem, a painting, or another person is one to whom we grant the right to be listened. We undertake the obligation to take her opinion seriously” (Rosenberg, in this volume, p. 41).

Whereas Rosenberg attempts to clarify the nature of understanding by comparing the concept of understanding with concepts that are supposedly better understood, such as “moving” and “winning”, Zaslavsky suggests that we can make significant progress by establishing a meaningful contrast between two concepts that were, at the outset, equally badly understood, as seems to be the case with “meaning” and “understanding”. The method he advocates, derives from his central conviction that the basic technique of conceptual analysis consists of a search for characteristic asymmetries between concepts, using an essentially informal analysis that should be “based on semantic regularities rather than on ‘rules’ in the grammarian’s sense” (p. 62). Zaslavsky suggests that philosophers of language should free themselves completely and definitively from the domination by a kind of grammatical theorising that persists even in Strawson’s work on what he calls “perspicuous” or “essential” grammar. In contrast, they ought to take seriously certain linguistic facts, which they have a tendency to dismiss as being too “empirical” and whose relevance for conceptual analysis is in reality independent from the way in which they are treated by grammatical theory. Zaslavsky applies his method of focal analysis to the comparative study of “meaning” and “understanding”, and comes to the conclusion that *meaning*, like “writing” and “believing”, is a member of the class of active attitudes that do not presuppose a given object but “create” it in a certain way, whereas *understanding*, like “reading” or “knowing”, is a member of the class of passive attitudes, presupposing an object that can be read, known or understood. In other words, “meaning” is related rather to “active” action, and “understanding” to “passive” action. Furthermore, if the term “meaning” does not designate a mental process, it is essentially because the corresponding verb is not focussed and does not have a descriptive content, whereas “understanding”, which is normally focussed and hence descriptive, does not designate a mental process because it corresponds rather to the result of such a process. Zaslavsky concludes that “understanding is a state and not a process; whereas meaning is neither a state nor a process” (p. 75). According to him, then, the problem of understanding may be essentially psychological rather than linguistic, whereas the problem of meaning may be essentially linguistic rather than psychological. Zaslavsky’s analysis suggests that we treat “to know” and



“to understand” as verbs of the same class (the class of “achievement verbs” or “got-it verbs”). Those readers who are not completely convinced by his method will probably, on this particular issue as on many others, object that he justifies far-reaching and somewhat dogmatic philosophical conclusions by semantic intuitions, which, as he himself concedes, are “notoriously slippery” (p. 67) and which concern, in any case, differences that are only relative from the point of view of synonymy and anomaly.

The tendency to treat the concepts “knowledge” and “understanding” in the same way, even if it is encouraged by, among other things, the sorts of linguistic facts explored by Zaslavsky, becomes nevertheless quite contestable when one takes into consideration facts of another type. De Gelder states that knowledge and understanding should be conceived of “as basically heterogeneous and, consequently, should occupy different positions in the conceptual framework of empirical research on natural cognition, acquisition of cognitive and linguistic competences, interaction, and the explanation of behaviour in general” (p. 45). The position she adopts is, therefore, strongly opposed to one defended by, among other contributors, Føllesdal, who holds that “as I see it, understanding is a subspecies of knowledge” (in this volume, p. 156), or the knowledge of a certain kind of objects, namely those that can be considered to *express* something. To say that understanding is a particular species of knowledge is to say that the problem of understanding is that of the formation of a certain type of justified true belief. Rejecting the traditional distinction between explanation and understanding, Føllesdal adopts a unitary conception of *justification*, considered as the integration of the object concerned “into a comprehensive pattern of beliefs which, taken as a whole, *explain* what we seek to understand” (p. 156). The method of interpretation would then, in fact, be a subspecies of the hypothetico-deductive method: “Interpreting is similar to theory-building, where we form hypotheses about something we do not yet understand in order to fit it in with what we do understand” (p. 157–158). Understanding and interpretation are therefore, like explanation in natural sciences, hypothetical and underdetermined by available data.

Just as he denies the dualism of explanation and understanding, so Føllesdal also denies that of the explanation by *causes* and the explanation by *reasons*. This opposition is, on his view, largely illusory, not because of the fact that causes can be assimilated directly to reasons, but in the sense that “causal explanation, like explanation by reason, makes use of a whole intricate theory and not a single simple causal law” (p. 160). The role of the normative theory of decision-making in the explanation of action is as follows: if an action conforms to the theory, it is explained by it; if it does not, its deviation from what is predicted by the theory should be explained by the intervention of various empirical factors that account for the difference between the observed behaviour and that of an ideally rational subject.

The action is normally the final result of a process consisting in the first place of consideration of a specific "space" of open possibilities in a given situation, and subsequently of realisation of the choice that maximises the expected utility. Certainly, there is the question of how we can have at our disposal the required information on the beliefs, desires, fears, personal preferences, etc., of the actor, in order to understand his action. Føllesdal himself characterises his own answer to this question as "empiricist", in a moderate sense corresponding to the point that an hypothetical element is already implied in the simple fact of "noticing" ("observing") the action to be explained. Føllesdal remarks that the information we get from a person by asking him questions is itself actually founded on his behaviour, in particular his linguistic behaviour. The circularity contained in the fact that "we explain a person's behavior in terms of his values and beliefs, which in turn are attributed to him only on the basis of his behavior" (163) allows a margin of indeterminacy, which can be compared with that of radical translation. Fortunately, however, there are a number of restrictions, of which the most evident is the necessity of integrating, within the same system of beliefs, those beliefs that we ascribe to the person in order to explain his actions and those we ascribe to him in order to interpret what he says.

The presumption of rationality, essential for the interpretation of a person's behaviour, in Føllesdal, has the same role as the principle of charity has in Quine in the case of radical translation. De Gelder argues that the tendency to identify the understanding of action with its explanation, in Føllesdal's sense, leads to erroneous transformation of an element that is a part of the explanatory strategy, or of the effort of explaining, into a characteristic that is intrinsic to the actors themselves. Against this "naturalistic" conception, she advocates an interpretation close to Rosenberg's, consisting of the thesis that understanding an action as a manifestation of rationality should be seen as the ascription of a certain status to the agent by a transition effected "from the cognitive level to something altogether different" (51). De Gelder rejects the principle stating that "the more we know about the action, the more we understand about it", particularly because the idea that the faculty of understanding does not transcend the possibilities of knowing reduces wrongly "the domain of possible successful understanding" and "the field of possible cooperation". Against Føllesdal, and against Rosenberg too, she holds that understanding is a conversational attitude (the word 'conversation' being used for "the cognitive transactions between partners, in no sense limited to exchanges in natural language") and that the ascription of a conversational status should be essentially reciprocal. In order to make intelligible the transmission of knowledge in asymmetrical situations, such as that of master and pupil, we must suppose that "cognitive transactions that eventually lead to qualitative and quantitative modifications of cognitive systems, are embedded in reciprocal

understanding of actions, more specifically, understanding by an audience and cooperative understanding" (p. 53); and that, generally, we ascribe to a conversational partner so much more understanding as we can presuppose in him insufficient knowledge.

From this point of view, (reciprocal) understanding constitutes the fundamental concept of conversational exchange, and makes possible the equalisation of levels of knowledge in cases of asymmetry – indeed, it is not the simultaneous mastery of the same cognitive repertoire that constitutes a prerequisite for mutual understanding. De Gelder suspects that Føllesdal's and to a lesser degree Rosenberg's theories lead to "something we could call *practical solipsism*, or solipsism in matters of cooperative action and interaction" (p. 50). According to her, "what looks as an asymmetrical attribution of status should go back to a symmetrical granting of status" (p. 53). And it is the context of the conversational situation, not that of a unilateral moral option, that should be used in order to understand understanding. Theories of understanding (cognitivist as well as ascriptivist), in general, do not sufficiently take into account the fact that "understanding and being understood are . . . part of the *realisation of the action*, and an action cannot be said to be realised when that part of it is not realised, and when, consequently, the action is not understood" (p. 58). In other words, the meaning of an action is, to use the author's terms, neither pre- nor post-actional or interactional: it is simply not intelligible independently of a positive contribution from the audience, or the participants of the conversational transaction in general, to the expression of the intention or the effectuation of the action themselves.

3. In contrast with the preceding contributors, Karl-Otto Apel, one of whose major interests has for a long time been to point out angles where two traditions, which remain separated by tenacious misunderstandings and prejudices, could meet, treats in his paper only the linguistic aspect of the problem of understanding, "the semiotically central area of understanding the meaning of linguistic signs", which, for him, "makes up a broad field or zone of possible meeting and mutual illumination of *hermeneutics* and *analytic philosophy* of meaning" (p. 82). As the hermeneutic tradition has certainly departed from psychologism, and the analytic tradition from the model of the ideal language which has been gradually superseded by a pragmatic approach to natural language, it seems now inevitable and indispensable that they should be brought together to some extent. However, this convergence of problems and this initiation of a dialogue between the two tendencies should not conceal the fact that hermeneutics has always distinguished itself by the central importance it gives to a type of understanding that remains, even today, almost completely neglected by its rival: ". . . The primary concern of hermeneutics was not understanding the *communicative* understanding of the texts by the contemporaries. It was rather understanding how the meaning of the texts can be understood by

people of a later epoch by way of their historical understanding of the normal or typical understanding of the texts by the contemporaries" (p. 84). What interests hermeneutics thus is not ordinary understanding within a given linguistic and conceptual community, but rather "second order" understanding of an understanding that is accessible only through historical research.

More generally, hermeneutics pays specific attention to the type of understanding that seems to require a sort of "self-transcendence" of our own faculty of understanding, in so far as it seems to be intrinsically limited by the context of the language game that we play and of the "form of life" wherein we participate. It is clearly impossible to maintain the Wittgensteinian (or quasi-Wittgensteinian) thesis of the "incommensurability" of language games and of forms of life, and yet to state that we can understand from within the paradigms of signifying and understanding of an alien society, which are supposed to be in principle inaccessible to us. Whatever we are able to understand in the end *should* have been understandable in principle; and there is no *a priori* denotable limit to the possibilities a specific language game and form of life have for integrating, by understanding, elements of "alien" meanings.

The problem Apel formulates in this context is that of precise appreciation of the intuitions of Heideggerian and post-Heideggerian hermeneutics with regard to the intrinsically temporal and historical character of meaning, while at the same time avoiding the traps of neo-historicism, relativism and scepticism threatening any hermeneutical theory that has given up any kind of regulative and normative viewpoint on meaning and truth. As Apel remarks, one of the most fertile, but at the same time most controversial, methodological abstractions of analytic philosophy, even in its pragmatic and intentionalist version, is to have set aside the historical dimension of meaning and to have ignored the quasi-communication or quasi-dialogue that takes place between different historical periods; this quasi-communication and quasi-dialogue can only be understood, in the last resort, in the perspective of the progressive realisation of a universal community of argumentation and understanding, to which all participants in the dialogue in an empirically-determined cultural and linguistic community implicitly address themselves. Any speech act, even though it is historically conditioned, therefore implies at the same time a constitutive claim to transcend the limits of its own historicity and to reach a future audience whose possible extensions in time as well as in space are unlimited. Traditional hermeneutical thought tries to reconcile and to combine three diverse elements of understanding: "psychological" understanding of subjective intentions, "grammatical" understanding of linguistic conventions, and understanding in terms of implicit reference to things. It is essentially neglect of the third dimension that leads to the absence of any hermeneutical normative *prise de position*. Moreover, it also leads to the abstraction of

the fact that the historical “dialogue” about a specific subject, which is supposed to be really or potentially common to the participants in the exchange, necessarily appeals to the question (more or less ignored by Gadamer) of the justifiability of the claims of material validity or truth that constitute a characteristic feature of discourses and texts.

Although he agrees with Grice, in opposition to Searle, that “communicative competence” transcends “linguistic competence”, Apel argues that it is only with regard to the non-temporal and non-personal meaning resulting from the acceptance of linguistic conventions “that *we* may conceive of meaning at all and thus far also of meaning in pre-linguistic communication” (p. 94). Grice’s approach could easily encourage a return to “methodological solipsism”, according to Apel, and even to “psychologism”, i.e. the pre-Fregean doctrine, which should be considered, from the point of view of transcendental semiotics, to have certainly been left behind. The apparent counterexamples discussed by Searle and Grice, among others, cannot call into question the fundamental fact that non-literal meaning depends on literal meaning and that “successful communications by conventionally incorrect uses of utterance-types must be considered . . . as presupposing, in principle, and hence parasitic upon, genuine linguistic conventions” (p. 104). Public meanings are not reducible to individual intentions, as suggested by the intentionalist approach. But, in so far as they depend not only on linguistic conventions but also on reference to things (in the broad sense), a strict conventionalist approach would itself be a victim of a unilateral and abusively reductionist approach to understanding.

Apel concludes that the three dimensions of subjective intention, linguistic convention and reference to things are fundamentally irreducible to each other and are equally important to the understanding of meaning. Whereas psychologism, conventionalism, and objectivism gives privilege, respectively, to the first, the second and the third, transcendental semiotics, in contrast, including transcendental pragmatics and hermeneutics, treats the three corresponding notions as unavoidable and complementary, each of them being able to play the role of a normative instance and a regulative principle with regard to the others, along the lines of the hermeneutical process of seeking for, and deepening, meaning. In fact, the choice of one or another of these possible “entries” in the *hermeneutical circle* determines the methodological difference among, for example, a purely linguistic understanding, a purely philological understanding and a normative-critical understanding of a text, without changing in any way the fact that, even in this case, the three dimensions of understanding play their own roles and limit their respective contributions reciprocally.

Jacques Bouveresse, in agreement with Apel, likewise considers that the positivity of the historical interval – one of the central themes of Gadamerian hermeneutics – implies that the notion of a simply “different”

understanding, when one goes from one periode to another, should be replaced by the idea of a progressive deepening of meaning. Bouveresse states that, from the point of view of Gadamer himself, "a 'regulative idea' (Kant) of possible progress in hermeneutic truth", as Apel calls it (p. 90), should be reintroduced in one or another form. The tendency to rehabilitate prejudice and tradition in general as preconditions of understanding prevents Gadamer from devoting sufficient attention to a pre-conception that plays a crucial role in a normative-critical understanding of texts and permits evaluation of their truth claim, namely that of "the ideal norm of possible true knowledge of the subject-matter in question" (p. 111). The general tendency of Gadamer is to consider not only that historical texts should be presumed to carry an otherwise inaccessible truth (an assumption that, at least as a reaction against the prejudices of some modernistic critics, constitutes a perfectly defensible heuristic principle), but also that the intended truth probably lies beyond, not within, our faculty of understanding and of verification. One must, it is true, take into account the fact that, as he remarks in his discussion of the understanding of philosophical texts and works of art, the truth he speaks of is less truth to be discovered than truth in which one should *take part*.

The problem of understanding, in the properly hermeneutical sense of the term, is raised, in principle, only in circumstances where difficulties or absence of understanding must be overcome by an "exegetic" process of some kind. Contemporary hermeneutics, however, seems to have some difficulty in resisting the temptation just to identify understanding and interpretation, or to recognise only a difference in degree (rather than in nature) between the understanding of a language one speaks and the interpretation of an alien language. Yet, as McDowell notes, "A good interpretation of a foreign language would equip its possessor to put a construction on what he hears, in such a way as to arrive at a position which cognitively matches that of those who simply understand utterances in the language. But the difference is essential" (p. 240, n. 26). In other words, we should reject, as being related to psychologism, the idea "that understanding utterances is putting a construction on what one hears" (Ibid.). In the same way, a good translation of a text provides us with an understanding more or less close to that of someone who speaks the language concerned. However, it is certainly not possible to maintain, as George Steiner does, that all inter- and intralinguistic communication amounts to a translation. To generalise the hermeneutical concepts of interpretation and translation to all cases of understanding goes together with a more or less explicit reluctance to grant to immediate and ordinary understanding the status of authentic understanding, the result being, in the end, considered less important than the way it has been obtained. It is certainly more reasonable to consider, as Wittgenstein did, the concept of interpretation normally to be correlated with that of a plurality of possible interpretations,

thus stating that we do not interpret, in general, what we understand. It is only when we take a kind of *reflexive* attitude towards it that understanding can be seen to consist in all cases of a superposition of a more or less hypothetical interpretative construction on an acoustic or graphic material that we perceive immediately – on the contrary, what we “perceive immediately” when we *know* the language is in normal cases, as McDowell remarks, the *meaning* itself.

Indeed, McDowell argues that “the idea that a theory of meaning for a language is an object of implicit knowledge of speakers whereby they guide their linguistic behavior, [and that of] inward consultation of a recipe for correct speech [are already in themselves] profoundly psychologistic” (p. 239, n. 25). This is certainly the case for Chomsky, who considers a semantic theory of the language to be a hypothesis about the psychological mechanism of understanding, and it could implicitly be the case for Dummett who does not seem prepared to attribute a role of the same kind to the theory of meaning, as he understands it. But even if we accept that ordinary understanding of a sentence is an “interpretation” obtained by the unconscious application of semantic (and possibly pragmatic) rules, this certainly does not mean that there is any reason to declare all understanding to result from, and to be equal to, an at least implicit interpretation. Just as the hermeneutical concept of *translation* is relevant only in cases where an exact translation is not immediately available, the hermeneutical concept of *interpretation* does not apply to cases where interpretation results automatically from knowledge of language as it would be characterised by a systematic theory of meaning *à la* Dummett or even, more generally, from the exercise of a shareable and shared communicative competence, in so far as competence of that kind can be described as implicit knowledge of a system of determined rules. Typical hermeneutical situations are those where understanding seems more or less to transcend the limits of any competence (as the term is commonly used by linguists and philosophers of language today). Thus hermeneutics cannot maintain its claim to universality without the risk of finally negating what it recognises as a presupposition of all hermeneutical understanding, namely the existence of a language and of an immediate and non-interpretative understanding of that language by those who use it.

The main reproach formulated by contemporary hermeneutics with regard to Wittgenstein is that he has not sufficiently taken into account the intrinsic ability of language games to transcend themselves *reflexively* (by the production of metalinguistic concepts enabling one to describe them “from the outside”), *dynamically* (by their historical development), and “*hermeneutically*” (through their ability to transgress the limits the game in principle imposes on the possibilities of the player’s understanding, by partly or totally integrating elements of meaning borrowed from foreign-language games). In one of the few places where he explicitly asks this kind

of question (*Philosophische Grammatik*, 114), Wittgenstein notes that a shift of the demarcation lines that have been fixed by "grammar" between sense and non-sense – though always theoretically possible (once one has agreed that, as stated in the *Blue Book*, words have the meaning somebody has given to them) – cannot be anticipated by grammatical description itself without contradiction. In other words, using a formula close to that of the *Tractatus*, what we cannot understand, we *really* cannot understand. If we can describe now – and, as Wittgenstein remarks, "the word 'now' means 'here': 'in this calculus', or 'the words being used according to *these* grammatical rules'" – some transformations, or possible and desirable extensions of our language game, this description does not really lead us "out of" the language game. And if we cannot leave the game directly, nor can we surreptitiously (*hinterrücks*) in a round about way (*auf Schleichwegen*).

It would, then, be inadequate to characterise the opposition between Wittgenstein's view and that of Gadamer and Apel as one of a *static* theory versus a *dynamic* theory of language games. It is, in fact, precisely the autonomy of grammar, and the unpredictability of language games resulting from it, that prevents Wittgenstein from adopting a historico-transcendental perspective like Apel's. Apel suggests that the historicity of language games should be understood as corresponding to the gradual setting-up of a universal language game of human history, of which the community of understanding and "dialogue" realised by philosophers through time already constitutes a tangible anticipation. Wittgenstein tends to conceive of the historicity of language games as a direct expression of their lack of foundation and as the manifestation of their resistance to the claims of reflexive philosophy rather than as the privileged dimension wherein the problem of the foundation or the justification should find its solution by a process which preeminently takes place in the exemplary "language game" of the history of philosophy. This exemplariness of philosophical discourse with regard to ordinary linguistic activity, and of philosophical understanding with regard to usual understanding, is the first philosophical prejudice denounced – rightly or wrongly – by Wittgenstein.

A language game, in Wittgenstein's sense, is basically the product of instinct and natural spontaneity. And it would be an error to believe that what was such originally can be transformed gradually by reflection into a rational and deliberate product. Just as language games are part of our "natural history", so their evolution is, in an essential part, a natural development; and it cannot acquire the transparency of a history in Apel's sense. Language is, as Wittgenstein says, "a refinement" (*eine Verfeinerung*): the origin and the primitive form of the language game is a reaction, from which more complicated forms develop. But the history of language games cannot be conceived of as a process of rationalisation and self-foundation



gradually doing away with the intrinsic contingency and opacity of their natural basis and evolution. Philosophical reflection must acknowledge their fundamental *Grundlosigkeit* and resign itself to treat them as something that, sooner or later, will have to be “accepted” without any justification and without being evaluated against the (philosophical) ideal of an ultimate language game of which it could be said that it is the one we must necessarily play.

In so far as the kind of understanding we look for in philosophy is, for Wittgenstein, *philosophical* understanding, in the sense described at the outset, Bouveresse considers Dummett’s appreciation of Wittgenstein’s position to be of no real relevance. Indeed, Dummett thinks that Wittgenstein might have taken a deplorable step backwards with regard to Frege in formulating, or at least suggesting, essential objections against the possibility of constructing a systematic theory of meaning of a language as a whole. On the contrary, the construction of a theory of that kind, despite the considerable uncertainties and difficulties it faces, still remains the primordial task to which philosophers must at present devote themselves without having to have hope before trying, and without having to succeed before persevering. Dummett’s “heroic” conception is clearly in overall contradiction with the idea Wittgenstein has of philosophy and of the kind of immediate results one has a right to expect from its practice.

There can be doubts over the question of whether Wittgenstein believed a theoretical enterprise of the kind Frege advocated to be possible, but not over the kind of contribution he thinks a theory of meaning constructed along Fregean lines could afford for the solution of the *philosophical* problem of meaning and understanding. Wittgenstein’s view on this point is perfectly clear: what linguists and philosophers of language regularly perceive as the manifestation of an unjustified theoretical scepticism or negativism is simply that which, according to Wittgenstein, determines the specificity of the philosophical approach of the problem. One might regret that Wittgenstein did not give sufficient attention to a programme such as that to which Dummett would like to give priority in the philosophy of language. However, one cannot ignore his reasons for considering the existence, especially in the cases of concepts like “meaning” and “understanding”, of difficulties of understanding that cannot be solved by the construction of an explanatory theory, and whose solution can, in principle, already be obtained by another method. Indeed, Dummett admits that his position “expresses a mood rather than a settled opinion” (1978, Preface, p. L) and also that perhaps he did not “sufficiently recognise the strength of at least certain Wittgensteinian arguments” against explaining how a language works by means of a systematic theory of meaning. But, according to Bouveresse, the disagreement is, in fact, a much deeper one.

4. The shift to the third section of this volume does not absolve us from the problems met in former contributions. Three of them will still be

central in the set of papers by E. Holenstein, D. Holdcroft and S. Schiffer. *First*, the debate of universalism versus relativism, especially in connection with the possibility of interlinguistic and intercultural translation, is at the heart of Holenstein's concern; however, the "vertical" dimension of understanding and the translateability of languages and cultures through time – accounted for in hermeneutics, especially in Gadamer's version of it – is not at stake here, the debate of universalism versus relativism being kept "synchronically". Holenstein argues with empirical evidence in favour of cognitive universals, which are considered to be constraints on understanding. Although there is no formulation explicitly in terms of universals, one could discern a universalist tendency in both Holdcroft's and Schiffer's papers as well. Indeed, Holdcroft stresses the community of rationality as a precondition for understanding, whereas Schiffer posits generality in the functional role of thoughts. A *second* line of force, already dominating almost all the contributions discussed so far, is that of the relation among, and (partial) identity of, understanding, interpretation and translation. Holdcroft's treatment of Davidson – and through Davidson, of Quine – offers a "conversationalist" version of "radical interpretation", while at the same time avoiding definitions of understanding couched in terms of the translateability of its object. Schiffer's "flirtation with the indeterminacy of semantical content" (p. 206) is equivalent to flirtation with the indeterminacy of radical translation. But, in Schiffer's view, this indeterminacy does not imply the impossibility of either understanding or interpretation. Holenstein takes seriously the help rendered by translation and paraphrasing in the understanding of linguistic expressions. Translation offers a step-by-step elimination of alternative meanings that allows one to overcome the inscrutability of reference ("too many sentences are true under the same perceptual conditions" [p. 172]). However, no identity of understanding and translation is premised; translation is merely a heuristics only partly capable of realising understanding, which rests more essentially on cognitive universals. The *third* prominent theme of this section is that of the contribution of contents, be they "psychological", cognitive or mental, to understanding. Schiffer makes the strong claim that a theory of content for public language reduces completely to a theory of content for thought, suggesting that an adequate theory of understanding should be based on a theory of content for thought. His reductionist programme forces him to assume that understanding can be reached without recourse to the semantical properties of public language items. A similar mistrust for linguistic categories as a base for understanding can be revealed in Holenstein's paper: cognitive universals are "natural", not linguistic, and surely not conventional. What is different about Schiffer's anti-linguistic position, then, may be that in Holenstein the bases for understanding are "natural" (paralogical) *forms*, whereas in Schiffer they are *contents* of psychological states. Holdcroft's point is that, even when it

is true that evidence for a theory of understanding does not contain *fine-grained* descriptions of psychological states of speakers, one cannot rule out *a priori* the possibility that there are some simple beliefs, called “communicative beliefs”, for which there is non-linguistic evidence. In this respect, his reconstruction of understanding is based not on meaning and linguistic semantics, but rather on the community of communicative beliefs among speakers/interpreters. Indeed, no matter how different their orientations and their final solutions may be, all three authors defend the asymmetry of meaning and understanding, and the necessity of introducing into the theory of understanding some non-linguistic base of generality.

But even when we have succeeded in disrupting the relation between meaning and understanding, the centrality of psychological states such as desires and especially beliefs (simple or “communicative” beliefs; Holdcroft), and of contents (Schiffer), forces us to consider the tight relation, or even the homology, between understanding and “grasping the truth”. Holdcroft’s introduction of a set of general communicative beliefs, and of the assumptions an interpreter must make about them, transcends the truth theory of understanding. Understanding, as “radical interpretation” (in Davidson’s sense), is not *full* understanding; to turn the theory of radical translation into a fully adequate theory of understanding, a number of constraints have to be placed on it. The supplementation should be realised along the lines of Grice’s proposals, especially his suggestions centered around the Cooperative Principle. Against Davidson (and against his formulation of the Principle of Charity), Holdcroft argues convincingly that the degree of agreement among speakers belonging to the same linguistic community about the *truth* of their utterances is *appropriate* in the light of assumptions about the co-textual and con-textual embedding of these utterances. Moreover, the interpreter forms hypotheses about the relevance and purposes of these utterances, and about the degree of the convergence of interests among speakers — all these aspects co-operate when the interpreter ascribes to the speaker the attitude of *holding* a sentence *true*. As a consequence, Holdcroft supposes that a Davidsonian theory of radical interpretation (and thus a truth theory of understanding) should be constrainable by principles that are neither semantical (or linguistic) nor “psychological” (in the sense that fine-grained descriptions of their contents can be given).

Schiffer struggles with the equation of the determination of the truth conditions of sentences with the specification of their conceptual role within the “language of thought”. He stresses that truth plays an essential role in the *psychological* explanation of behaviour. For Schiffer, what is important is precise knowledge of the position from which one can justify the employment of a Tarski-predicate on the internal system of representation, filling the gap between the truth conditions of sentences and the truth conditions of contents of psychological states. This justification, according to Schiffer, must lie in “head-world” *reliability correlations*; and the

psychological explanation of behaviour – and its understanding – will rely on the systematic exploitation of these reliability correlations.

5. The section entitled *Beyond Frege* is naturally and obviously dominated by the problem of the adequacy of a truth theory of understanding. We concede that the heading of the section is rather tendentious, since the “Back to Frege” movement is represented as well as the “Beyond Frege” one. The debate is continued at the general philosophical level in contributions by J. McDowell and H. Parret, and at the local level by G. Evans and J. Proust on the specific topic of Frege’s view on demonstratives. None of these authors evades Dummett’s presentation and interpretation of Frege (Dummett, 1973); they all have to decide on their attitude with regard to Dummett’s Fregeanism. This is particularly true in McDowell’s comments on Dummett’s position in the realism-anti-realism debate, and also on the fact that Dummett accepts that acknowledgements of the truth of sentences are available in the behavioural foundations of a theory of meaning (p. 227). McDowell offers a subtle defence of realism against Dummett. In fact, he *does not exclude* a kind of realism – as do Dummett and verificationists in general. However, McDowell’s realism will not be the one “which [conceives] psychologism as the only alternative to behaviorism” (p. 226). The strategic motive underlying McDowell’s contribution is not so much “to speak in favor of realism, but to question the cogency of Dummett’s arguments against it” (p. 231). But still a kind of realism results from his strategic position: one offering “a description of linguistic competence which makes central use of the idea that speakers have a knowledge of conditions which they are not, in general, capable of recognising whenever they obtain” (p. 231). McDowell defends the truly Fregean idea that a complete theory of meaning for a language should contain an autonomous subtheory which is to serve to specify (truth-functionally) the contents of assertions made in the language’s indicative sentences. Dummett’s view is mistaken, according to McDowell, on the grounds that in his theory of meaning this subtheory (which is the core of the overall theory) should have a behavioural manifestation of its own, independent of the behavioural evidence for the accuracy of the other part of the full-fledged theory, namely the supplementary theory of force. Within the Dummett framework, there should be direct correlations between specific propositions of the core theory and specific practical abilities possessed by speakers of the language. This is precisely what McDowell calls a psychologically conceived core, and his preference is for a truth theory of understanding that is *realistically* based, i.e., where the truth functions of the core are not affected by either behavioural or psychological manifestations.

H. Parret questions the adequacy of the “Back to Frege” (obviously, that is, the Fregean orthodoxy, not the Frege mediated by the Wittgensteinian “meaning does not transcend use” slogan to which Dummett

refers). Parret fears that a completely autonomous core theory, determined by a realistic conception of truth-in-language, automatically implies that the overall theory of understanding should be split into two heterogeneous components hierarchically ordered by a weak paratactical relation. His sympathy, as a consequence, lies more with Dummett's *Hineininterpretierung* of Frege than with McDowell's "orthodox" Fregean position. Parret takes for granted three "options": the heuristic orientation of the theory of language (understanding as a constraint on meaning-in-language), the pragmatic orientation of the theory of understanding (understanding as a practical ability, that of the interpretation of contexts), and the epistemological orientation of the theory of language (understanding resting on the interpreter's competential knowledge of strategies of justification). The idea of "perspectival understanding" is introduced in the following way. In the Fregean paradigm, the understanding of sense is equivalent to the understanding of the *objectivity* of senses, "revealing" and identifying the ontology "without any loss"; whereas in the alternative paradigm, understanding is equivalent to understanding the *community* of senses, hence identifying the ontology "perspectivally" (p. 261). "The avoidance of private senses, the transgression of idiolects, the account of public senses and, in the end, the idea of "common sense" as anthropologically based, are effects of theories constructed within the alternative paradigm where, indeed, the problem of the community of sense governs all theoretical effort" (p. 261). In this alternative framework, to understand an expression is to understand a rationality-mood-content structure. Indeed, in Parret's view, it is evident that the theory of understanding should appeal to broad anthropological concepts such as rationality and the interplay of the essential faculties of judging and wanting. The reconstruction of what one understands when understanding shows – against all types of paratactic analysis of {force, sense} – that there is no *autonomous* propositional content to be understood, propositional contents being hierarchically embedded in rationality-mood-content structures. Thus Parret argues strongly in favour of a "Beyond Frege" move, as a liberation fight against the father – without, of course, denying the highly cathartic value of the Fregean position in the philosophy of language.

In contrast, the "Back to Frege" orientation is well represented in G. Evans' paper on demonstratives. Evans believes that a Fregean approach to demonstratives is essentially correct, and that recent claims that demonstratives resist incorporation into the Fregean theory of meaning rest upon an erroneous interpretation of the notions of sense and reference. Re-examination of some passages in Frege shows that Frege is willing to ascribe *sense* to empty singular terms and, in any case, that nowhere does Frege insist that singular terms *must* have an existence-independent sense (288). The view is a mistaken one when *sense* is seen as necessarily *intermediary* between a speaker and a referent. Evans presents an "extension" of

a Fregean theory of demonstratives, assigning them *sense* but without presupposing that their sense is the sense of some definite description. In his detailed analysis of the problem of demonstratives, Evans shows that, in the case of a *dynamic* Fregean thought, the mode of presentation of the referent or the way of thinking of it – to which the general Fregean conception of sense directs us – is nothing but a *way of keeping track of the referent* (time and space, in the case of indexicals). This is a plausible, although minimal, interpretation of the *role* of a demonstrative, which should be a constant function from context of utterance to referents. By ascribing this role to demonstratives,\*it remains possible to secure the Fregean sense-reference construction for all language fragments, including those containing demonstratives. Evans' close examination of some less apparent Fregean intuitions makes the Fregean monument more coherent, if not more attractive. This securing of Frege's coherence and its general applicability, however, does not eliminate the essential objection formulated by Parret against the Fregean paradigm: Evans himself concedes that what is saved by his interpretation of Frege's view of demonstratives is their *objectivity*, not their *sharability*. As he says, "it [is] clear that it is the inference from sharability to objectivity which is of paramount importance to Frege, rather than sharability itself. Since an *unsharable* thought can be perfectly objective – can exist and have a truth value independently of anyone's entertaining it – there is no clash between what Frege says about 'I'-thoughts and this undeniably central aspect of his philosophy" (p. 296–297).

The discussion on *sense* – with its central importance for the theory of understanding – is pursued in J. Proust's paper offering still another Frege interpretation and at the same time a critical look at Evans' defence of Frege on demonstratives. Proust applies the term "transcendental" to *sense*, which may seem surprising, particularly in view of the fact that Frege himself never explicitly used the notion. The concept of sense, for Proust, has the transcendental status of a *possibility condition* of communication. However, if one specifies this possibility condition as a condition of grasping *by a subject* (a speaker, an interpreter), one moves into an *empirical* domain, that of the production and interpretation of expressions, or that of the coming-into-being of beliefs. Sense as a *way of keeping track of the referent* – as it is explained by Evans – still functions empirically, and this cannot be the "essential" sense of sense. Having recognised the "transcendental" function of sense, one can then locate in Frege a radically anti-Kantian transcendentalism; i. e., it is not the *subject* that renders sense possible by synthesis of the given diversity, but rather the sphere *antecedent* to sense that should be seen as the possibility condition of discourse – and again, the antecedent ontology is conceived of by Frege as *objectivity* without pretending at the existence of its items. This approach becomes truly effective once the "essential" sense is applied in the domain of indexical and "egocentric" expressions. The unsharable "I" is *more* than the object of reference of a

thought bearing on "I": it is the indispensable (transcendental) presupposition of communication itself. Thus a distinction should be made between the primitive sense of "I", as the foundation of the denotative unity of all thoughts, and the various empirical senses of "I". Proust argues in favour of an "egocentric" hierarchy of all demonstratives, i. e., that time and space indices should be explained in terms of their relation to "I" in its non-empirical and transcendental functioning. To understand linguistic fragments, then, is to understand primarily the workings of "I" as their objective but uncommunicable (unsharable) ground.

6. As Proust remarks, Frege mentions the notion of understanding in a sense broader than that of the correct identification of the reference of names and descriptions, and also broader than that of judging the truth or "grasping" the sense of an expression (p. 319). In fact, understanding – as Frege uses the term – concerns the pragmatic domain of discourse acts, stylistic effects, emotional interaction; and this is, of course, a dimension that is neglected or "set in parentheses" in his search for a logico-grammatical theory. The two papers brought together in the section *Semantic Theory and Pragmatic Functioning of Understanding* question just this dichotomy between grasping (or entertaining) propositional contents as a kind of "semantic" understanding, and understanding interactional, stylistic and perlocutionary side-aspects of the meaning of expressions as a kind of "pragmatic" understanding. It looks as if Jacques's undermining of the autonomy of a semantic theory of understanding by stressing necessary *dialogic* conditions on it is more radical than Dascal's presentation of the problem. Both react against the dependency of a theory of understanding on a truth theory of meaning. According to Jacques, it is a radical "swing-over" to declare, as did Parret in his opening section, the theory of language to be heuristically oriented ("it is a necessary condition for L to be a language that sentences of L are *understood* by the members of a community") rather than semantically oriented ("it is a necessary condition for L to be a language that sentences of L have *meaning*").

In the same vein, Dascal reacts against Dummett's equation of a theory of meaning with a theory of understanding: for Dascal, "understanding an expression E" is not the same as "knowing/grasping the meaning of E". But how then to formulate the relation between truth-functional semantics and the theory of understanding? Putnam's (1979) recent proposal that there should be a dichotomic separation between semantics (at least the core part of it, the theory of reference) and the theory of understanding is criticised by Dummett (1979) on the grounds that in this case a semantic theory loses all interest, being not even a *possible* theory of understanding, far less an *incomplete* theory of understanding. Neither dichotomising nor equating them offers us an adequate solution, according to Dascal. For him, it is sufficient that the theory of meaning be *homogeneous* with other theories relevant to an account of understanding, such as, among others, the "philosophical

sophical account of propositional attitudes, inference, evidence and similar epistemic and epistemological notions, but also a fairly complete psychological theory of man's cognitive abilities" (p. 350). Dascal is aware of psychologism looming here, but he declares explicitly that understanding as knowledge and as a practical ability of interpretation cannot be reduced to purely psychological notions. His view is tolerant, in the sense that the theory of contextual and cognitive factors should be only a subtheory of a full-fledged theory of understanding. This tolerance and prudence in Dascal's conclusions is not a theoretical *apriori*: a detailed typology of understanding as a means of understanding understanding precedes these conclusions as a matter of empirical evidence in support of a complex reconstruction of complementary strategies of understanding.

A similar concreteness and descriptive-phenomenological attitude is to be found in Jacques' suggestive arguments on dialogic conditions of understanding. Understanding rests upon interaction between speakers/interpreters within a linguistic community – it is an interdiscursive and argumentative practice. Jacques convincingly questions the possibility of a *semantic* theory of the pragmatic functioning of language: what should be understood is not reference (or the referent) but the act of referring-in-dialogue, and this type of understanding can be seen as a process of double-sided contextualisation (p. 367–373). This general viewpoint generates an interesting theory of *mis*understanding and *mis*interpretation. Jacques's criticisms of the Davidson-type truth theory of understanding results from the idea that pragmatics forms the integrating base of linguistic theory. Understanding, in this pragmaticist perspective, is *never* fully realised: it is an ideal end-point, and the movement of double-sided contextualisation strives after a unitary pragmatic context. Such a context, of course, cannot be indexical (as it is conceived in formal semantics), but is intersubjective, dynamic and generated by discursive interaction.

7. In contrast with propositions requiring hermeneutical understanding, scientific propositions seem to appeal to what Habermas calls a "monologic understanding of meaning", in the sense both that they form elements of a "pure" language – i.e. whose meaning is exhausted by their membership of a language that has determined syntactic and semantic rules – and that they are apparently not constrained by what F. Jacques calls the "dialogic conditions of understanding", be it the dialogue in its usual sense or the "hermeneutical" dialogue with a tradition. However, understanding, in the case of what Habermas calls a "pure" language, is evidently not an "all or nothing" ability – indeed, understanding objects is in almost all instances "more" or "less" understanding them. It is trivial to note that the meaning of a work of art or of a philosophy is, so to speak, inexhaustible. But what can be said of the understanding of a mathematical formula, which can be considered as the mastery of a simple technique, but may also be part of what Russell calls "mathematical philosophy" as opposed to pure mathe-



matics? Granger distinguishes three degrees of the understanding of a formula like " $2 + 2 = 4$ ": the ability to give an empirical exemplification, the ability to deduce from it some logical consequences, and the ability to prove it (from more or less "first" principles). Granger's main thesis is that "any understanding relates to signs" (p. 389). There can only be a gradual difference – and not an essential one – between the understanding of objects that, as in the case of mathematical expressions, are part of a language governed by perfectly explicit and determined rules, and the understanding of objects that, as a mechanism, a natural phenomenon or a human being, do not reveal themselves immediately as signs of constellations of signs. The fact that all understanding is symbolic brings with it the triumph of Leibnizian "blind thought", even in social sciences where understanding is necessarily mediated by systems of signs that have, however, the disadvantage of being reducible to formal systems only with difficulty, and incompletely. The essential difference between the problems of the understanding of a formula of a formal system and that of a sentence of a natural language is that recognition of what constitutes a *complete utterance* depends, in the second case, not only on syntactic and semantic rules, but also on pragmatic factors. However, instead of trying to describe the understanding of a complete utterance in terms of the usual distinction among syntax, semantics and pragmatics, Granger asks the question of whether understanding is not subject, anterior to this classical distinction, to a fundamental condition that could be said to be the deepest *universal* discoverable in language.

According to Granger, the concept that should introduce at least a minimum of clarity and unity into the "galaxy" that at present constitutes our notion of understanding is that of *duality*: "Understanding a symbolic expression, whatever the level and degree of formalisation of the language where it belongs may be after all, should be, essentially, to locate it within two *dual* systems which are inseparately associated" (p. 398). To understand an expression is always in the first place to "grasp the reciprocity of relations between objects and combinations of operators, i.e. the ability of shifting from one to the other" (p. 401). The search for traces of this primary duality in the functioning conditions of all kinds of symbolisms, from the most formal to the most natural, would thus coincide with the attempt to constitute a *proto-logic*, making possible a transcendental analysis of language as a possibility condition for a genuine philosophy of symbolism.

If the explanation of sense normally explains what we understand, it does not necessarily explain how this understanding could have been acquired. It is impossible to assume, for example, that the meaning of quantifiers could be learned from "semantic" definitions such as are usually given, using metalinguistic quantifiers whose functioning is supposed to be already understood. As Kambartel remarks, a semantic analysis *à la* Tarski

"works only on the presupposition, that we have already acquired all the relevant lexical and categorical competence" (p. 403). The usual pragmatic approach, however, in most cases realises nothing but an illusory progress, in so far as it accepts traditional semantic categories and thinks it sufficient merely to invent, for its purposes, corresponding speech acts. Kambartel proposes as a remedy a radicalisation of this pseudo-pragmatic conception, "which (re)constructs language as a rational system of acts without 'semantic' rests at its basis" (p. 404), and which one could call *constructive pragmatics*.

In a way, one might say that Kambartel sets in opposition to the usual practice of logicians and semanticists the Wittgensteinian precept according to which the best way of enquiring into the meaning of an expression is to ask how it has been or could have been acquired. This is for him, in fact, the *only* way of reaching a really fundamental understanding "of what we do when we use language, especially when we use logical expressions and symbols" (p. 403). The meaning of connectives and quantifiers should be capable of being acquired by a practical learning, whose result does not depend upon the possibility of giving a *description* of the learning situation, which uses the very symbols whose understanding is in question. Kambartel's approach is rigorously constructivistic and opposed to platonism as well as to formalism. As he writes, "Obviously no logical platonism or axiomatic formalism is necessary to understand the meaning of the logical words and symbols and to judge on logical validity. What one has to do is simply to reconstruct their rational pragmatic place in our lives, i.e., one has to understand them as part of rational action, namely in this case of argumentation" (p. 408). Kambartel objects to Lorenzen's and Lorenz's dialogic logic on the grounds that it is itself incapable of entirely avoiding the distortions produced by the mathematical treatment of logic, a defect that is manifested, in particular, in its transformation of the problem of the adequacy of the rules of argumentation into a problem of completeness, which can be treated only at the purely formal level. To find a satisfactory solution to the question of the justification and the rationality of dialogic rules, one should adopt a completely different viewpoint: that of a theory of *action* engaging not merely in a step by step construction of actions themselves, but placing them in a teleological perspective of the adjustment of means to ends, i.e., the realisation of a mode of rational existence.

From the point of view of the psychology of understanding, the most interesting cases to consider could be the ones, as is expounded by Wason, that correspond not to trivial errors of understanding, but rather to typical resistances to understanding, sometimes truly difficult to overcome by methods of rational persuasion. Psychologists have examined various problems designed to test the analytical abilities of subjects. These problems typically lead to the formulation of erroneous solutions by most people, with the particularity that an explicit indication of the mistake committed in the course of reasoning or analysis is generally not sufficient,

as it is in ordinary cases, to produce unreserved correction and agreement. These are situations where an erroneous interpretation spontaneously and persistently prevails over the correct interpretation, as a result of the fact that it is impossible to eliminate particularly restrictive habits of thinking in the presence of new situations. "It is", writes Wason, "in this conflict between habit and novelty that we may observe the practical limits of formal thinking" (p. 420). There are intellectual tasks that challenge understanding not because of a particular structural complexity, but because of their newness. Maybe it is true, as proposed by hermeneutics, that the possibility of understanding depends, in all cases, on some revisable anticipations of meaning. But then this remarkable resistance, which some erroneous anticipation opposes to the refutation given in a correct understanding, should be regarded as a phenomenon worthy of special attention.

Wason himself offers no philosophical conclusion for the analysis of situations of that kind, considering that the experiments of psychologists "provide the material upon which the philosopher can exercise his conceptual powers" (p. 420). However, presumably there are only a few philosophers who would be willing to consider such empirical material as directly relevant to the construction of a theory of understanding. As in the case of Chomskyan linguistics, an approach that tackles the subject from the other side, i.e. by asking for the form that such a theory should adopt, seems more appropriate and promising to most of them than does a direct analysis of performance phenomena. Moreover, there are those like Wittgenstein who think that no solution to the philosophical problem could really come from either direction. In the very last lines of the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein attributes the "confusion and barrenness of psychology" to the existence of experimental methods combined with some conceptual confusion: "The existence of the experimental method makes us think we have the means of solving the problems which trouble us, though problem and method pass one another by" (1953, p. 232).

Readers of this volume will, no doubt, hardly fail to get the impression that, in the case of meaning and understanding, we have a profusion of problems and diverse methods more or less adapted to treat them, but certainly nothing corresponding to a global task of such a kind as is intended by Ziff. A pessimist might be tempted to state, in parody of Einstein, that it should be doubly ununderstandable that understanding itself be understandable. Let it suffice to note, more modestly, that there can be nothing *surprising* in the fact that understanding itself be not understandable. This is due to a lesson given by the history of sciences which is, according to Kreisel (1976, 187), "often ignored by philosophers, particularly by philosophers of so-called natural language, who actually say (out loud) that there 'ought' to be a theory of natural language just because we know so much about our own language; thereby overlooking that this knowledge need not be theoretically manageable. It was much easier to find a theory of celestial than of terrestrial mechanics".



I.

How to Understand Understanding



JAY F. ROSENBERG

## On Understanding the Difficulty in Understanding Understanding

At the end of his essay "Understanding" (which appears as the first chapter of his book *Understanding Understanding*), Paul Ziff arrives at what he calls a "dismal conclusion" – "that to understand understanding is a task to be attempted and not to be achieved today, or even tomorrow" (1972, 20).<sup>1</sup> Understanding, then, is evidently very difficult to understand. I suspect that most philosophers, psychologists, linguists, literary scholars, computer theorists, historians, and others who concern themselves with understanding would be willing to endorse that claim. Few, if any, would be prepared strongly to deny it. It occurs to me now to be curious as to why this should be so. How might we explain the *difficulty* in understanding understanding?

Once upon a time – in the 17th and 18th centuries, for example – understanding was a faculty. *An* understanding was something which, *caeteris paribus*, each of us had. It was one of our possessions, along with a will and, perhaps, a sensibility. The having of it set us apart from "mere brutes" who, however well-supplied with such surrogates as "animal cunning", lacked, so to speak, a crucial piece of *apparatus* which was part of the original factory-issue equipment of all authentic persons, that is, of all human beings.

Today, in contrast, understanding appears to be primarily an achievement, something which some of us are sometimes able to *do*. It is one among our accomplishments. And today, "mere brutes" – or at least some of them – are typically thought to be able to do it too, although only in a limited fashion. The general consensus is that machines can't do it – yet. But there is hardly any unanimity on the question of whether they will ever be able to do it, and enough people are convinced of the possibility, at least, to support a thriving little research community in the new field of "Artificial Intelligence".

<sup>1</sup> This essay was written during the author's tenure as a guest of the Zentrum für interdisziplinäre Forschung der Universität Bielefeld (West Germany), to whom thanks are gratefully extended.

Understanding is something which some of us are sometimes able to do. So, for example, is running, but understanding is not like running. Running has a subject but no object. Understanding, in contrast, has an object. 'To understand' is a transitive verb. One understands *something*, or fails to understand it. Understanding, then, is more like moving than like running. One moves something (even if only oneself or a part of oneself), or fails to move it. And understanding is like moving in another way, as well. One can *try* to understand something, just as one can try to move something. One can make an effort in both cases, and in both cases one's achievements are often, in part, a function of one's efforts.

One can make an effort, but often one need not make an effort. Understanding is like moving in this way, too. Just as some things are simply *easy* to move, some things are simply easy to understand – or, at least, much easier to understand than other things. Understanding, itself, however, is evidently not one of those things. Understanding is evidently very difficult to understand. How might we explain this?

One can move fish and feathers, ice cubes, needles, and automobiles. One cannot move colors or concepts, ideas, numbers, or attitudes. The things that can be moved, we say, have something in common. They are all objects with *mass*. One sort of explanation of why it is easier to move one thing than another is in terms of this common feature itself. Mass is a matter of degree. The more mass an object has, the more difficult it is to move. To increase the mass of an object is also to increase the *intrinsic* difficulty of moving it, what we call its *inertia*.

One can understand sentences, arguments, proofs, road signs, jokes, works of art, persons, purposes, intentions, and events. One apparently cannot understand stones, slabs, mountains, the color cerise, the number four, or a piece of chocolate. At least, we do not customarily speak of understanding such things. Do the things that can be understood have anything in common in terms of which we might explain why it is easier to understand one thing than another?

Paul Ziff thinks so. "Understanding," he writes, "is essentially a matter of analytical data processing" (1972, 18). With somewhat more precision, understanding is the "culmination" (op. cit., 20) or "resultant" (op. cit., 19) of a successful bit of analytical data processing. To understand an utterance uttered, for example, is "in effect [to perform] a morphological analysis of the utterance; the utterance is segmented, decomposed into its morphological constituents. The data processing that can culminate in understanding has a specific character: it is an analytic process. Understanding, not surprisingly, is akin to figuring out, deciphering, decoding, and the like" (op. cit., 19).

It follows that "only that which is composite, complex, and thus capable of analysis, is capable of being understood" (op. cit., 19). What things that can be understood have in common, then, on Ziff's view, is *structure*. They



are all objects with structure. This explains, he claims, why we do not customarily speak of understanding stones, slabs, mountains, *et al.*

Even though a slab may in fact be something composite, complex to speak of it as "a slab" is to speak of it as something uncomplex, unitary. . . .

If one is to speak sensibly of "understanding" something, that which is to be understood must be characterized in such a way as to indicate that it is capable of the requisite sort analytical data processing (Ziff, 1972, 19).

Structure, like mass, is a matter of degree. And so one sort of explanation of why it is easier to understand one thing than another might be in terms of this proposed common feature of objects of understanding. The more (complex a) structure something has, the more difficult it is to understand. To increase (the complexity of) the structure of something is also to increase the intrinsic difficulty of understanding it, what we might call its *intricacy*.

This is the sort of story which appeals to the "logical approach" to understanding understanding (of which Ziff himself is surely a representative). And there is, of course, something right about it. Difficulty of understanding is often a question of intricacy. That is certainly why Gödel's proof of the incompleteness of elementary arithmetic (to use a bit of shorthand) is more difficult to understand than Pythagoras' proof of the irrationality of the square root of two; why the prose of, say, Henry James is more difficult to understand than that, for example, of Ernest Hemingway; and why a symphony is more difficult to understand than the folk tunes upon which it may be based. Syntactic intricacy is obviously what accounts for our difficulty in understanding

The cook that the maid that the nurse met saw heard the butler;

semantic intricacy, for the difficulty in understanding

I couldn't fail to agree with you less.

To increase the intricacy of something, the complexity of its structure, is *caeteris paribus* to render it more difficult to understand. Perhaps, then, that is why understanding is itself so difficult to understand. On this view, to understand understanding would be to subject it to some sort of "analytical data processing". What is wanted is an *analysis* of the achievement which is understanding, an account in which understanding is "segmented" or "decomposed" into "parts" or "constituents" which are correctly "identified" or "classified" (Ziff, 1972, 16). And what renders such an analysis difficult is the complexity, the convolutedness, the intricacy of understanding. It has, for example, too many parts to be readily enumerated or their interrelationships are too involved to be easily grasped at once. Before we assent to this proposal, however, let us consider whether there are alternative possibilities which we should take into account.

Sometimes it is easier to move a more massive object than one which is less massive. My chair is more massive than the book on my desk, but when I move my chair to the desk and reach for the book, I find that I cannot move *it* at all. As a practical joke, my daughter has glued it down. I can easily move a needle, but I cannot move *this* needle. It is in the grip of a strong magnetic field. Sometimes what is *intrinsically* not difficult to move is nevertheless difficult to move. In this case, we will not explain our difficulty in terms of the object's inertia. Rather, we will refer to what stands in the way of moving the object, to something extrinsic to the object itself, to an *impediment*.

Is it sometimes easier to understand the more intricate than the less intricate? Sometimes. The paintings of Andrew Wyeth are certainly more intricate than those of Joseph Albers or Piet Mondrian. They have more structure and a more complex structure. But they are also, I think, much easier to understand. Mathematician X's proof of a theorem may be more elegant and less intricate than that offered by mathematician Y and yet (even for that very reason) more difficult to understand. Japanese *haiku* are simpler in structure than Shakespearean sonnets. For most Occidentals, they are also more difficult to understand.

But sometimes it is not a question of more or less intricacy at all. Sometimes intricacy is simply irrelevant to the difficulty in understanding something. The structure of the sentence

Seven days without food make one weak

is surely no more complicated when the sentence is spoken aloud than when it is written, but it is more difficult to understand a spoken request to paraphrase the sentence than a written one. Fidel Castro may or may not be a more intricate person than Nelson Rockefeller, and Maoism is Maoism, but it would be easier to understand Castro's declaration that he had decided to become a Maoist than Rockefeller's.

In such cases, it is natural to speak of something standing in the way of understanding, of impediments to understanding. In the case of Rockefeller, it is his notorious capitalism which stands in the way of our understanding his hypothetical declaration. The homonymy of 'weak' and 'week' is an impediment to understanding the spoken request for a paraphrase, as *ambiguity* may, in general, be an impediment to understanding a variety of sentences. (Try: "I see!" said the blind carpenter, as he picked up his hammer and saw.) Our lack of familiarity with Japanese culture is the obvious impediment to our understanding their *haiku*. And, contrary to the proposal suggested by Ziff's account, sometimes – as in the case of Albers, Mondrian, and our surpassingly elegant mathematical proof – it is the utter simplicity of a thing which stands in the way of our understanding it.

What is called for in such cases is not, I think, "some sort of analytical data processing". Here understanding appears to be a matter not of analysis

but rather of *interpretation*. An ambiguous sentence – whether the ambiguity be phonetic, syntactic, or semantic – stands in need of a *reading*. Rockefeller's supposed declaration needs a sort of "reading" as well. There is something incoherent about his conduct. What he says "doesn't fit" with what he does. To understand his announcement, we would need to resolve tensions within his overall conduct, to bring his sayings and his doings into a new relation to each other.

The pattern which emerges from these examples is, in many ways, the reverse of that which Ziff proposes. Understanding, in such cases, seems to be a matter of finding a context for what is otherwise somehow anomalous. It is not a question of "segmenting" or "decomposing" something into "parts" or constituents", but rather of bringing things into relation, of *building up* a network of connections, interdependencies, and affinities. An ambiguous sentence is disambiguated by embedding it in a larger discursive setting, by relating it to other sentences. Albers' and Mondrian's paintings are understood by connecting them with artistic aims, motives, purposes, and values other than those which animate Wyeth's work. We learn to understand *haiku* by deepening our acquaintance with and appreciation of the culture which gives rise to them. And our efforts to understand Rockefeller's shocking announcement are gropings for a "third term" which would weld his words and his deeds into a coherent unitary whole.

Understanding in such cases is thus not a matter of analysis but of synthesis or, what is the same thing, of *explanation*, for to explain a phenomenon is precisely to bring it into systematic connection with other phenomena – to "subsume it under laws", as the tradition has it – that is, to give it a "reading" in terms of which it "fits" into a larger, coherent, unitary picture of the world.

As the presence of an opposing force is what, in general, constitutes an impediment to moving some object, so it is the lack of a coherent context which, in general, will be what stands extrinsically in the way of understanding something, which makes it difficult to understand. This is the sort of story about understanding which appeals to the "hermeneutic approach" to understanding understanding (although its proponents, I think, would be shocked to find their textual interpretations thus epistemologically continuous with the explanations of natural science). As we have seen, there is also something right about *it*. Difficulty in understanding is often a question of inexplicability, of a missing context. Perhaps that is why understanding is itself so difficult to understand. On this view, to understand understanding would be to explain it. What is wanted is a *theory* of the achievement which is understanding, an account in which understanding is "put into context", in which the "rules" or "laws" or "principles" which govern understanding are set out, and (to take up a theme from hermeneutic studies) in which its relations to "meaning" and "value" and "purpose" are made explicit. What renders the formation of such a theory difficult will be

ambiguities, tensions, and incoherences between understanding and its surroundings. It is an achievement too isolated, too disconnected from any determinate, coherent, unitary context. It resists being integrated into any larger systematic picture. Here, then, is a proposal which stands as an alternative possibility to the earlier suggestion of exceptional intricacy. Are there any others?

Sometimes the difficulty in moving an object is neither a matter of inertia nor a matter of impediments. Sometimes it is just a question of getting a grip on the thing. Like a bit of quicksilver or a greased pig, an object may be too slippery, too motile, too yielding, too *elusive* to afford a proper purchase for exerting even the minimal efforts which would be adequate to move it. Is difficulty in understanding ever anything like that?

Sometimes. A person who mumbles, who mutters, who slurs his words and drops his voice is often difficult to understand. His speech is *indistinct*. It lacks sharpness, precision, auditory focus. Here we may, of course, speak with the logicist tradition of the need for analysis, for "segmentation" or "decomposition" or, again, with the hermeneutic tradition of an impediment, of the need for an "interpretation" or a "coherent reading". But we can also see the difficulty here in another way. His utterances, we can say, require not so much analysis or explanation but *articulation*. They do not need to be "decomposed" or "put into a context" — or, if they do, there is, in any case, something which needs to be done with them first. They need, so to speak, *tuning* or "bringing into focus". The difficulty in understanding here arises neither from intrinsic complexity nor contextual isolation but from blurriness. Where the linguistic paradigm for our first sort of difficulty was intricacy and sophistication and that for our second ambiguity or incoherence, for this sort of difficulty the paradigm will be vagueness or indefiniteness.

Perhaps, then, the difficulty in understanding understanding is more like this sort of difficulty. When we turn to the task of describing what counts as a *manifestation* of understanding, for example, or of specifying an object of understanding (just *what* is understood), it certainly begins to look that way.

Ziff poses the question, for example: What is the difference (there and then) between a person who hears what is said to him and understands it and one who, on the same occasion, hears the same thing said to him but does *not* understand it? (1972, 1) And he concludes that the difference "is not a difference in overt behavior, actual or potential; neither is it a difference in an ability to make inferences; neither is it a difference in an ability to provide paraphrases." (op. cit., 14, tense adjusted) The situation here is perhaps clearer when what is at issue is the understanding not of something said but of a work of art — a painting or a piece of music, for example — for here the themes of paraphrase and inference simply drop out of the picture as irrelevant, and we are left searching for actual or potential

differences in behavior which, of course, we may utterly fail to find. The difference between a person who understands a pointillist landscape or a cubist portrait, a composition by Varèse or an Indian *raga*, and one who does not, may manifest itself only in their differential capacities to enjoy or appreciate or “follow” the work – which is to say that it may not *manifest* itself at all.

Again, Dennett poses the question: “What are the conditions that would suffice to show that a child understood his own statement: ‘Daddy is a doctor’?” (1969, 183) And he continues,

Must the child be able to produce paraphrases or expand on the subject by saying his father cures sick people? Or is it enough if the child knows that Daddy’s being a doctor precludes his being a butcher, a baker, a candlestick maker? Does the child know what a doctor is if he lacks the concept of a fake doctor, a quack, an unlicensed practitioner? Surely the child’s understanding of what it is to be a doctor (as well as to be a father, etc.) will grow through the years, and hence his understanding of the sentence ‘Daddy is a doctor’ will grow. Can we specify what the child knows when he tells us his Daddy is a doctor? It may seem simple: what the child knows is that his daddy is a doctor – that is, the object or content of his knowledge in this case is the proposition, ‘that Daddy is a doctor’. But does the child *really* know this?

This and similar examples are what lead Dennett, at least, to conclude that “we *cannot* draw a limit so that understanding a statement involves understanding just so much.” (op. cit., 185, my emphasis)

Perhaps, then, understanding is itself difficult to understand because it is blurry, indistinct, or vague. What is wanted in that case is neither an analysis of understanding nor a theory of understanding, but what we might call an *elucidation* of understanding, a “sharpening up”, an articulation of *criteria of application* which traces the boundaries, maps the vaguenesses, and clarifies the limits of what is or can be understood and of what is or can be the understanding of it.

We now have three sorts of difficulties in understanding before us. Something may be difficult to understand because it is intricate, or because it is incoherent (in the broad sense of being anomalous, of failing to cohere with any readily available larger unitary context), or because it is indistinct. And, correspondingly, we have three sorts of *activities* to which these difficulties give rise, three sorts of “efforts to understand”. We may seek an analysis through “decomposition” and “segmentation”; or we may seek an explanation (a theory or an interpretation) by resolving incoherence, supplying missing context, and synthetically building up a network of connections and relations; or we may seek an elucidation through a tracing of boundaries and an articulation of criteria of inclusion, exclusion, and application within the range of what is to be understood.

And now, what about the difficulty in understanding understanding itself? Is understanding itself intricate or incoherent or indistinct? Should we devote ourselves to analysis or to explanation or to elucidation? What, come to think of it, is our *problem* here?

We want to understand understanding. And understanding, I have noted, appears today primarily to be an achievement, something which some of us are sometimes able to do. What is it, then, to understand an achievement? Well, for an achievement such as moving an object, we might specify, for example, *what* is achieved (the object is caused to change position) and *how* it is achieved (by a direct or indirect application of force).

But what is achieved when something is understood? We have, it seems, *three* answers: it is analyzed or it is explained or it is elucidated. And how is this achieved? Again, *three* answers: by decomposition and segmentation, or by contextual embedding and the synthetic development of connections, or by the tracing of boundaries and articulation of criteria. Moving an object is concerned with its position. But with what is understanding something concerned? *Three* answers: with its structure or with its relationships or with its limits.

And there is something right about each of these answers. Of course there is. Perhaps that is why understanding is itself so difficult to understand. Or perhaps we have just been looking at things in the wrong way.

Suppose our grammatical analogy had not been *moving*. Suppose that it had been *winning*. Winning is also an achievement, something which some of us are sometimes able to do. One wins *something* — a game of chess or checkers, for example — or fails to win it. And one can try to win. One can make an effort, and one's achievements are often, in part, a function of one's efforts. So winning is similar to understanding at least in these ways.

Winning is similar to understanding, too, in being sometimes difficult and sometimes easy to achieve. Here, too, we may seek accounts of the difficulties in winning some game or games, and here, too, a variety of intrinsic and extrinsic factors will present themselves. Some games of patience, for example, are *simply* more difficult to win than others. Their winning positions are such that, given the constraints of play, they will be arrived at only if the cards initially fall into groupings and sequences which are *a priori* highly improbable. Some competitive games, like noughts and crosses, demonstrably have no winning strategy. Some, like certain variants of Nim, can demonstrably always be won by the player who moves first, or, for other variants, by the player who does not. Sometimes the sheer complexity of the game plays a role. Some games, like chess, are so intricate as to defeat any global strategic analysis. Sometimes there is an impediment to winning — a handicap, for example, or (all too often) a more skillful opponent. And sometimes, although games are designed to avoid this contingency, the difficulty in winning may result from a certain indistinctness or vagueness about the characterization of winning itself, about