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“If Some People Looked Like Elephants  
and Others Like Cats”:

Wittgenstein on Understanding Others  
and Forms of Life

**Abstract**

This essay introduces a tension between the public Wittgenstein’s optimism about knowledge of other minds and the private Wittgenstein’s pessimism about understanding others. There are three related reasons which render the tension unproblematic. First, the barriers he sought to destroy were metaphysical ones, whereas those he struggled to overcome were psychological. Second, Wittgenstein’s official view is chiefly about *knowledge* while the unofficial one is about *understanding*. Last, Wittgenstein’s official remarks on understanding themselves fall into two distinct categories that don’t match the focus of his unofficial ones. One is comprised of those remarks in the *Investigations* that challenge the thought that understanding is an inner mental process. The other consists primarily of those passages in PPF and *On Certainty* concerned with the difficulty of understanding others without immersing oneself into their form of life. In its unofficial counterpart, Wittgenstein focuses on *individuals*, rather than collectives. The official and the unofficial sets of remarks are united in assuming a distinction between understanding a *person* and understanding the meaning of their *words*. If to understand a language is to understand a *form* of life, then to understand a person is to understand a *whole* life.

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The older I get the more I realize how terribly difficult it is for people to understand each other, and I think that what misleads one is the fact that they all look so much like each other. If some people looked like elephants and others like cats, or fish, one wouldn't *expect* them to understand each other and things would look much more like what they really are.

Wittgenstein, *Letter to P. Sraffa*, 23 August, 1949

Here is a tin of ground white pepper and with no such thing as a pepper mill in the house I wonder how we could ever have hoped to understand one another when we even use different kinds of pepper.

Alan Bennett, *Cocktail Sticks*, p.80

## **Prologue**

Interpreters of different spots and stripes all agree that the later Wittgenstein is an enemy of the idea that the thoughts and feelings of other people – and by extension animals – are hidden from us in any sense that might raise a serious philosophical problem of other minds. Whatever the precise details of his view, it seems clear that Wittgenstein doesn't think there is any general epistemic worry to be had about others:

If we are using the word 'to know' as it is normally used (and how else are we to use it?), then other people very often know when I am in pain. (PI § 246)

On this view, there is no metaphysical barrier to knowledge of others, the overcoming of which would require some kind of argument from analogy à la Russell (PI §420ff. – which forms a bridge with the remarks on seeing-as in PPF- xi). In the *Philosophical Investigations* this stance is primarily expressed in related to knowledge of sensations, inner speech, beliefs, and intentions. Following Norman Malcolm (1986), we may see it as part of a much wider attack on the traditional philosophical assumption that all sorts of interesting things are systematically hidden from us (i.e. necessarily “private”), be they the essences of things, functions of words, or the minds of people (PI §§ 92, 133, 155, 293, 301, 307, 323-4, 435, & 559).

It would be natural to therefore expect Wittgenstein's remarks on *understanding* to follow the same general train of thought as those on *knowledge*, not least because the verbs "to know" and "to understand" may be used interchangeably in various contexts.<sup>1</sup> Such expectations are met to the extent that Wittgenstein sees no metaphysical obstacle to everyday cases of understanding other people. Nonetheless, his writings create two distinct moments for pause here.

First, we have the famous pair of passages – and their various cousins across the *Nachlass* – in which Wittgenstein speaks of the tribe with which we *cannot* find our feet, and the lion who we *could not* understand even if it spoke English (PPF § 327). Second, there is an extensive range of biographical material demonstrating that in his personal life Wittgenstein not only found it almost impossible to either understand *many* other people or be understood by them, but maintained that this is typical of the human condition. I shall refer to the first as his *official view* and the second as the *unofficial* one, in which I include remarks from *Culture & Value* as these "do not belong directly with his philosophical texts" (von Wright, preface to CV). In the case of the latter, I give particular focus to two letters from Wittgenstein to Sraffa as a study case of a wider phenomenon in his life.

I aim to show that although Wittgenstein is indeed marking some valuable distinctions between knowledge and understanding which analytic philosophers have neglected at their peril, we should favour interpretations of his *official view* according to which our understanding of others is as commonplace as our knowledge of their thoughts and feelings. While this is in some *prima facie* tension with his *unofficial view*, it is ultimately not only compatible with it, but a significant supplement to it. Or so I shall be arguing by suggesting that his official remarks on the role played by forms of life in our understanding of certain *groups* of people is mirrored by a concern with the relation of entire lives to our understanding of specific *individuals*.

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<sup>1</sup> For different uses of the word "understanding" and their relation to both knowledge and explanation see Hertzberg (2005).

## I. The Official View: Tribes and Lions

The later Wittgenstein's official remarks on understanding largely occur in four contexts: (a) PI §§ 138-182, (c) PPF §§ 326ff., (c) LW §§190-98, and (d) remarks in *On Certainty* about what to make of certain peculiar – often philosophical – utterances (§§ 32, 157, 526, & 563).<sup>2</sup> The stance found across these occasions is sufficiently unified to render switching back and forth between them seamless. It is nonetheless worth considering the first set of these remarks in relative isolation, as their primary focus is not on understanding others but on the relation of meaning to use. Wittgenstein is here combatting the view that understanding the meaning of a word is an inner mental process of some kind. Here is a typical passage:

What really comes before our mind when we *understand* a word? Isn't it something like a picture? Can't it *be* a picture? Well, suppose that a picture does come before your mind when you hear the word "cube", say the drawing of a cube. In what way can this picture fit or fail to fit a use of the word "cube"? Perhaps you say: "It's quite simple; if that picture occurs to me and I point to a triangular prism for instance, and say it is a cube, then this use of the word doesn't fit the picture." But doesn't it fit? I have purposely so chosen the example that it is quite easy to imagine *a method of projection* according to which the picture does fit after all. The picture of the cube did indeed *suggest* a certain use to us, but it was also possible for me to use it differently. (PI §139)

These thoughts slowly morph into his discussion of rule-following (§§140ff.), the connecting thread being that the ability to follow a rule is an ability to *understand* or *grasp* how one is meant to carry on. I do not propose to defend a particular exegetical account here, but merely to note the obvious connection between understanding a rule and knowing how to go on:

Suppose I now ask: "Has he understood the system if he continues the series to the hundredth place?" ... Perhaps you will say here: to have got the system (or again, to understand it) can't consist in continuing the series up to *this* or *that* number: *that* is only applying one's

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<sup>2</sup> *On Certainty* also continues, in the context of giving grounds and persuading, the theme of understanding other cultures, which Wittgenstein first explored in his *Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough* (e.g. OC §609-12). Danièle Moyal-Sharrock (2007:136) helpfully distinguishes here between "localized" forms of life and the single "human" form of life.

understanding. Understanding itself is a state which is the *source* of the correct use....When I say I understand the rule of a series, I'm surely not saying so on the basis of the *experience* of having applied the algebraic formula in such-and-such a way! In my own case at any rate, I surely know that I mean such-and-such a series, no matter how far I've actually developed it." So you mean that you know the application of the rule of the series quite apart from remembering actual applications to particular numbers. And you'll perhaps say: "Of course! For the series is infinite, and the bit of it that I could develop finite." ... But what does this knowledge consist in? Let me ask: *When* do you know that application? Always? Day and night? Or only while you are actually thinking of the rule of the series? Do you know it, that is, in the same way as you know the alphabet and the multiplication table? Or is what you call 'knowledge' a state of consciousness or a process say a thinking-of-something, or the like? (PI §§146-8)

Wittgenstein's reservations about the kind of knowledge that his imagined interlocutor has in mind do not preclude him from identifying the understanding of rules with a form of knowledge, namely that which Ryle baptized as "know-how".<sup>3</sup> But we should not conclude from this that he takes the words "knowledge" and "understanding" to be interchangeable. Far from it:

The criteria which we accept for 'fitting', 'being able to', 'understanding', are much more complicated than might appear at first sight. That is, the game with these words, their use in the linguistic intercourse that is carried on by their means, is more involved; the role of these words in our language is other than we are tempted to think. (PI §182)

I return to the distinction between knowledge and understanding in § IV. Before doing so I wish to first look at his more private remarks on understanding certain people (§ II), and then explore how these relate to his official remarks on the role played by forms of life in understanding collectives (§ III).

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<sup>3</sup> I remain neutral here on whether knowledge-how (or, indeed, understanding-how) is, in actual fact, always reducible to knowledge-that (or understanding-that). What interests me is Wittgenstein's own conception of the relation between different forms of understanding and knowledge (see note 24 below).

## ***II. The Unofficial View: Endless Personal Misunderstandings***

What we might reasonably refer to as Wittgenstein's pessimism regarding the possibility of understanding others manifests itself in his private correspondence, as in this typical letter to C.L. Stevenson, dated 22 December 1933:

Really to understand other peoples [sic] thoughts or to learn from their confusions is *enormously* difficult, especially if they lived long ago and talked a philosophical language which isn't your own. The only thing to do is to tell *yourself that you don't understand what exactly they were at*. If you've ever had a real thought yourself you'll know that it is difficult for you to understand other peoples [sic] thoughts. I know that, as a professor of philosophy, you've got to profess to understand what everyone meant when they said...But you aren't a professor, and so just enjoy your freedom! (McGuinness 2012: 67, p.103)

The above is very explicitly phrased in terms of understanding other people's *thoughts* and *words*. How Wittgenstein takes this to both relate to – and differ from – understanding other people *themselves* (*qua* people, as it were) is part of what I wish to explore in this essay. What is clear is that he was privately pessimistic about both possibilities. This attitude culminates in the second of two consecutive letters to Sraffa, written on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of August 1949. I quote it at some length, though not in full, and shall momentarily return to the social context in which it was written:<sup>4</sup>

I have *very slowly* in my life come to the conviction that some people *cannot make themselves understood to each other*, or at least only in a very narrowly circumscribed field. If this happens each is inclined to think that the other doesn't want to understand, and there are ENDLESS misunderstandings. This of course doesn't improve the friendliness of

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<sup>4</sup> Sraffa's mother had died on 25 June and upon hearing that Wittgenstein hadn't sent Sraffa his condolences von Wright urged him to immediately call him, only to hear Wittgenstein say "I did not write because what happened didn't mean anything to me" – whereas (he claims in the letter that von Wright may have subsequently advised him to write) what he had "very clumsily" said "I did not not write because what happened didn't mean anything to me". In this first letter (dated 11/7/49; McGuinness (2012: 409, p.449).) Wittgenstein optimistically tells Sraffa "you knew exactly how I felt". This adds poignancy to the deep pessimism of his next letter, a reply to a letter by Sraffa that Wittgenstein characterizes as not really calling for a reply.

the intercourse. I could go into details about *us*, but I don't want to. The general situation however is often this that one man thinks that the other could understand if he only wanted to, hence he gets rude, or nasty (according to the temperament) and thinks that he is only kicking back, and so it starts. –

In order to understand why it's impossible, or almost impossible, for certain people to understand each other, one has to think *not* of the few occasions on which they meet, but of the differences of their *whole lives*; and there can be nothing more different than your interests and mine, and your movements of thought and mine. Only by a real tour de force was it possible for us to talk to each other years ago when we were younger. And if I were to compare you to a mine in which I worked to get some precious ore, I must say that my labour was *extremely* hard; though also that what I got out of it was well worth the labour. But later, when we no longer could give each other anything (which does *not* mean that each of us had got all the other had), it was natural that only an almost complete lack of understanding should remain; and, at least on my part, for a long time a wish that an understanding should again be possible (McGuinness 2012: 410, p.450).

The letter is followed by a striking postscript, quoted in its entirety at the outset of this essay. In both the letter's main body and his postscript to it, Wittgenstein is not making a general claim about understanding others, but a qualified one about understanding *certain* others. The word *certain* here is itself ambiguous as it could refer to either *certain types* of individual or to *specific* individuals, be they considered as being *sui generis* or *qua* falling under a type. The following remark, written just over a year earlier, favours the thought that what he has in mind are specific people that fall under recognizable types:

It's important for our view of things that someone may feel concerning certain people that their inner life [*was in ihnen vorgeht*] will always be a mystery to him. That he will never understand them. (Englishwomen in the eyes Europeans.) (CV, p.74e [July 9, 1948]).

The idea resembles the commonplace one that people with different backgrounds have greater difficulty in understanding one another than those who share a certain culture, mindset, and experiences. What is odd is the incongruity of the remark with Wittgenstein's philosophies of mind and knowledge e.g. as expressed in PI §§ 138-182, discussed in § I above. In particular,

the feeling that one might never understand what is *going on inside* (viz. the inner life of) another person is one naturally attributed to Wittgenstein's interlocutor. Of course Wittgenstein is not here endorsing such feelings, merely reporting their occurrence.

It is of utmost importance the lives of others are not metaphysically hidden from us. In his *Last Writings on the Philosophy of Psychology*, Wittgenstein warns against the error of thinking that people we find mysterious would become crystal clear to us if only we could see their hidden thoughts:

Even if someone were to express everything that is 'within him', we wouldn't necessarily understand him [...] Think of how puzzling a dream is. Such a riddle doesn't *have* to have a solution. It intrigues us. It is *as if* there were a riddle here. This could be a primitive reaction. It is as if there were a riddle here; but it doesn't have to be a riddle [...] He behaves like a man in whom complicated thought processes are taking place; and if only I understand them I would understand him.-- Let us *imagine* this case; and now he is reciting his thoughts to himself, and in a certain sense I understand his actions. That is, I see the trains of thought and I know how they lead to his actions. In this way he would cease being a riddle to me. (LW § 191ff<sup>5</sup>)

As with philosophical problems, we must accept that there need not be a hidden truth waiting to be discovered. And when there is, it is not to be gotten by peering inside another person's mind (or soul), for this really wouldn't get one far at all:

If God had looked into our minds he would not have been able to see there whom we were speaking of (PPF §278).

The connection Wittgenstein is in fact interested in is that between the near-impossibility of understanding certain others and significant differences between entire lives. His realization that this is not only true of "other others" but equally so of those closest to us did not fall out of any philosophical picture, it was a personal truth which Wittgenstein reluctantly came to accept over the years. This could explain why he eventually trusted his philosophical ideas to those friends and lovers whom he shared his *life* with much more than to his academic peers.

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<sup>5</sup> Thanks to Ian Ground for bringing these remarks to my attention.

Part of Wittgenstein's disappointment with Sraffa and others could be that he took himself to share a great number of things (e.g. a certain intellectual disposition) with them, only to discover that it wasn't enough. It is not too far-fetched to think that his friendships with Sraffa and Russell ended, from Wittgenstein's point of view at least, not because of intellectual differences of opinion, but because of the complete inability of each of the two parties to understand the other. Whatever the personal truth, presumably one could replace "Englishwomen" and "Europeans" with any number of nouns referring to non-geographical communities such as "Catholics", "intellectuals", "scientists", "builders", "nurses", "schoolchildren", "botanists", "addicts", "Wittgensteinians", or whatever. And in each case various qualifications and further distinctions will need to be made.<sup>6</sup>

So we might take the message of his postscript to be something like this: if only members of each different groups of like-minded people who could understand each other (be they "Catholics", "Europeans", or a considerably more complex grouping akin to the hybrid creatures of Greek mythology) resembled one-another but looked strikingly different from the members of other groups (so some would look like elephants and some like fish) then we would have a better idea of who is more likely to understand us and vice versa. So understood, it is not that each and every one of us would look substantially different but that certain *sorts* of people would. Of course this may already be true to some extent (e.g. Mediterraneans are as a rule of thumb much shorter and darker than Scandinavians), but Wittgenstein has far more radical physical differences and spiritual similarities in mind. "Don't judge a book by its cover" warns the cliché. "People need better covers", Wittgenstein effectively retorts.

The Persian philosopher and historian Ibn Miskawayh, writing about the "science" of physiognomy, states that "[i]f a person's temperament and physical build have an affinity to ... a rabbit, one judges [or concludes] that he possesses its character, and if they

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<sup>6</sup> In Sandis 2012 I tried to show how this all sheds an interesting light on the "we" in the lion remark. Could this "we" refer to a collective of people who would be better represented by different kinds of heads?

have an affinity to a lion, one judges [or concludes] that he possesses its character” (Al-Tawhidi & Miskawayh 1951: 170).<sup>7</sup> This may seem silly to us, and perhaps it is, but it is worth recalling here the instructive parallels Alasdair MacIntyre (1972) has set between the methodology and findings of the far more ludicrous pseudoscience of phrenology and those of neuroscience.

At a slightly more intuitive level, many Southern Africans traditionally use totems to identify the various clans which make up the historical dynasties of their civilization. The Shona people of Zimbabwe, for example, use animal and body-part “mitupo” such as those of Monkey (Soko), Antelope (Mhara), Lion (Shumba), Zebra (Mbizi/Tembo), Leopard (Nhewa/Ingwe), Fish (Hove), Eagle (Shiri/Hungwe), Hippo (dziva), Buffalo (Nyati), Python (SHyto), Elephant (Nzou), Heart (moyo), Lung (Bepe), Male Genitalia (Tsiwo), and Eland (Mhofu).<sup>8</sup> Importantly, for our purposes, totems are also meant to serve as indication of character traits associated with each clan, such as bravery or kindness. This may still seem very “primitive”, since clearly one can exhibit character traits that are not prevalent in one’s social group. But it is no more primitive than talking of British politeness and stiff upper lip, Germany efficiency, French elegance, and so on. And let us also not forget that people who live together – share lives - for long periods of time end up looking like each other, if only because they adopt one another’s mannerisms and facial gestures.

There is some truth in such generalisations, even if it cannot be extracted to fit each particular example. Since one’s character is very much influenced by that of the society one is brought up in, it’s no wonder that we understand others without some understanding of their whole life. Here it is prudent to note that not only does understanding come in degrees but that one can also fully understand another in one respect, and not at all in some other. I may, for example, fully get your politics but be left

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<sup>7</sup> I owe this reference and translation to Sophia Vasalou.

<sup>8</sup> These are often further broken down into gendered names which may also serve as family names; people of the same totem are descendants of one common ancestor and as such forbidden to have any intimate relationship, thereby preventing clanism (but creating serious difficulties for orphans of unknown origin).

completely cold by your appreciation of a certain musical artist. (There is a difference between not understanding something specific about a person and not understanding them *period*.)

Wittgenstein seems uninterested in such subtleties here, but we should not infer from this that he would not be open to them. He implies, for instance, that someone can only be an enigma if there are others that I can understand:

He is incomprehensible to me means that I cannot relate to him as to others. (LW §198)<sup>9</sup>

Moreover, Wittgenstein's general stance on mutual understanding in keep with our practice of finding the lowest common denominator (hunger, thirst, bus timetables, the weather) when conversing with people that are completely unlike us in other respects.<sup>10</sup> And even then, approaches to food and so on can be so different from our own that the gulf is much larger than the common ground. This brings us to the concept of a shared form of life. Wittgenstein adopted the term "form of life" (which only occurs six times in his published output) to refer to "the intertwining of culture, world-view, and language", including "patterns of behavior" (Glock 1996: 124-5).<sup>11</sup> Failure to understand another, it might therefore seem, results from the lack of a shared form of life.

### ***III. Collective and Individual Forms of Life***

As P.M.S. Hacker notes in his essay in this volume, the widespread use of the phrase "form of life" in 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century literature had become "humdrum" by the time of the *Investigations*.

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<sup>9</sup> I spare the reader the usual rehearsal of possible isolation scenarios, from Mowgli to Robinson Crusoe.

<sup>10</sup> With non-human animals we share such things as birth, death, sexual relations, hunger, and thirst, but not marriage, religion, and so on (cf. Vico 1725: 77, Berlin 1974: 344, Winch 1964:43 & 47). Whether animals have language is a moot point, but Wittgenstein's lion remark demonstrates that it is not a crucial one. Rhees claims that between animals "there is no question of understanding here, any more than there is a question of discussion" (2006: 148). This seems to me to be utterly wrong.

<sup>11</sup> The full list, considered in detail by Hacker (2015), is PI §§19, 23, & 241; MS 160, 51; PPF §§ 1 & 345.

One early use noted by Wittgenstein scholars is found in Eduard Spranger's book *Lebensformen*, whose title refers to types of individual character; indeed the book is translated as *Types of Men* and not *Forms of Life*. These types are very crudely defined in ways which wouldn't help members of group understand each other at all,<sup>12</sup> but I nonetheless wish to suggest that there is a connection between Spranger's use of "form of life" and Wittgenstein's private writings on understanding *certain people*.<sup>13</sup>

While the official Wittgenstein's remarks about forms of life are about understanding entire communities of *people*, his personal remarks on understanding are about *individuals*. Wittgenstein uses "forms of life" to refer to *regular* forms of living (Hacker 2015: § 3), but we may wish to extend the concept to cover a particular individual's unique – perhaps even *irregular* – way of living. So conceived, a form of life need not be an entire community's way of living, but simply that of an individual. Inquiries into what makes another person tick are often highly personal. This is not to deny a continuum between certain difficulties we have in understanding individuals that are reasonably close to us, and people in other cultures (thus, I may have difficulty understanding the humour of a particular colleague or an entire community).<sup>14</sup>

I'm not concerned here with whether Wittgenstein ever used the expression this way as with introducing a new – but not unrelated – use of the phrase to indicate connections between his thoughts on understanding others in relation to (a) their communities and (b) their personal biographies. Understanding what Sraffa says, for example, is not just a matter of understanding how the words he speaks are used by other Italians. If "to imagine a language is to imagine a form of life" (PI §§19), does this not also apply to the language of a particular person? Not a *private* language

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<sup>12</sup> They are: (i) the Theoretical (who most values truth); (ii) the economic (who most values pragmatism); (iii) the Aesthetic (who most values harmony); (iv) the Social (who most values people people); (v) the Political (who most values power); (vi) The Religious (who most values unity).

<sup>13</sup> It is worth noting here that forms of life primarily lead to types of character, and not the other way round.

<sup>14</sup> I owe this point and example to Lars Hertzberg; see also Winch (1997).

in Wittgenstein's technical sense, but the language of a particular person nonetheless.<sup>15</sup>

Wittgenstein's more personal remarks seem to suggest that different forms of life lead to different types of people to the point where it would be helpful if each type had a different animal head assigned to it.<sup>16</sup> The much less plausible alternative understanding of Wittgenstein's forms of life as "part of our inflexible biological human nature"<sup>17</sup> sits uneasily with all the evidence we have been discussing so far. This is not to say that biological differences cannot underlie or enable cultural ones, but only that the everyday difficulty of understanding others is not based on biology any more than the lack of a philosophical problem of knowing other minds is due to biological sameness.

It is wrong to think that we are forced to choose between a difference of forms of life that is *purely* biological and one that is *merely* cultural or ethnological. The criteria for the possibility of understanding are behavioural:

[...] he [the explorer in the foreign land] can come to understand it [the foreign language] only through its connections with the rest of the life of the natives. What we call 'instructions', for example, or 'orders', 'questions', 'answers', 'describing', etc. is all bound up with very specific human actions and an order is only distinguishable as an order by means of the circumstances preceding or following // accompanying it // (MS 165, pp. 97ff.; as quoted in Baker and Hacker 1985:191 & 2009:177).

Suppose you came as an explorer to an unknown country with a language quite unknown to you. In what circumstances would you say that the people there gave orders, understood them, obeyed them, rebelled against them, and so on? Shared human behaviour [Die

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<sup>15</sup> Do Wittgenstein and Sraffa share a "localized" form of life? Only to some extent. This highlights the limit of the concept, which needs considerable stretching before it can do any real philosophical work. At this point we may wonder whether the expression is more of a hindrance than a help, if we need to appeal to things we already get to explain it.

<sup>16</sup> Wittgenstein refers to "human types" in CV (p. 84e), remarking that Shakespeare doesn't portray them "*true to life*" (emphasis in original).

<sup>17</sup> The phrase - but not the interpretation - is that of Glock (1996: 124-5).

gemeinsame menschliche Handlungsweise<sup>18</sup>] is the system of reference by means of which we interpret an unknown language. (PI § 206)

All this includes both natural and nurtured behaviour. Moreover, as Glock and Baker & Hacker hold, even the cultural-specific is ultimately rooted in biology:

[...] understanding an alien language presupposes convergence not of beliefs, but of patterns of behaviour, which presuppose common perceptual capacities, needs and emotions [...] we “could not find our feet” with a community of human beings who give no expression or feeling of any kind, and we would presumably be at a loss with spherical Martians (Glock 1996: 128).

Shared human behaviour provides the essential leverage for understanding mankind. This “shared behaviour” is not only the common behaviour of mankind which manifests our animal nature, our natural needs for food, drink, warmth, our sexual drives, our physical vulnerability, etc. It also includes the culturally specific forms of behaviour shared by members of the tribe – their specific forms of social behaviour – observation of which and interaction with which enables us to interpret their language [...] any “form of life” accessible to lions, given their natural repertoire of behaviour and their behavioural dispositions, is too far removed from ours for any noises they might emit to count as speech (Baker and Hacker 2009:173, inc. n. 1; see also 218ff.)<sup>19</sup>

In PI § 241, Wittgenstein writes:

it is in their *language* that human beings agree. This is agreement not in opinions but in forms of life.

There is an instructing parallel between what Wittgenstein is saying here and what Rush Rhees writes about understanding in his notes on Wittgenstein:

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<sup>18</sup> See von Savigny (1991:113–14) for an account of why Anscombe’s rendition of this phrase as “the common behaviour of mankind” is problematic.

<sup>19</sup> In this revised version of Baker and Hacker (1985:186–187), “shared behavior” has substituted what was previously “common behavior” throughout, thereby making it clearer that the common behaviour of humanity does not completely exhaust our shared behaviour, which also includes behaviour that is “culturally specific” (the term helpfully replaces what was previously described as “the diverse species-specific forms which such behaviour may naturally take for human beings”).

The misunderstandings of human beings are not simply fights or antipathies, and falling out in that sense (2006: 148-9).

Just as to share a language is not to agree in the thoughts one expresses in it, so to have a shared understanding is not to agree in matters of fact. A friendship or professional relationship might end because the parties involved understand one another *only too well*. By the same token, two people may completely fail to understand each other despite a deep agreement in opinions, as in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* which nicely illustrates that one's failure to understand is not always free from ethical judgement.<sup>20</sup> Understanding cannot be achieved through the mere acquisition of information. Rhees continues:

If they were, there would be no problem. Criticisms and questions and objections [...] that is not the sort of bewilderment that comes into misunderstandings between friends. As though there were something which somebody could tell you, although he has not. Or as though the want of understanding came from a want of intelligence [...] They cannot understand what is being said: they cannot understand one another. Those two are pretty well equivalent here. (*Ibid*)<sup>21</sup>

The “what is said” at issue here is not the “what is said” of expression (or even of utterance) meaning but that of speaker meaning. I may understand your words perfectly well but completely fail to get what you are saying. This need not be a (mere) failure to grasp the intended conversational implicatures, as opposed to the conventional meaning.<sup>22</sup> Deeper failures to understand occur when the very spirit of what one is saying is missed. Whether or not this can be explained with additional information depends on how much else in life is already shared.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> See Hertzberg (2005: 8ff.) for cases where “[m]y not understanding is bound up with my finding the activity abhorrent.” Hertzberg concludes that “In saying that I find someone’s behaviour incomprehensible, what I am saying, roughly, is that an appropriate attitude towards it is impossible to find” (*ibid.*:14).

<sup>21</sup> For more on the distinction between understanding and agreement see Klagge (2011: 41ff.).

<sup>22</sup> Jennifer Saul helpfully distinguishes between “constrained” (overt) and “unconstrained” (contextualist) understandings of what is said (2012:27ff.).

<sup>23</sup> The *tone* in which one says something is important here: try telling a dog “good boy” in a harsh voice or “bad boy” in a pleasant one and see the confusion that ensues. This is

*Pari passu*, one cannot fully understand what one has said if one doesn't understand *why* she said it (cf. Collingwood 1946: 177 & Anscombe 1957: §46) and not in the sense which can be easily addressed with a statement about one's reasons, or causal generalisations which might enable future predictions:

So he gets angry, when we see no reason for it; what excites us leaves him unmoved.--Is the essential difference that we can't foresee his reactions? Couldn't it be that after some experience we might know them, but still not be able to follow him? (LW § 192)

Hence the idea, common in relationship breakdowns such as that between Wittgenstein and Sraffa, that if it turns out that the other person never understood something that mattered deeply to oneself, all other communication must have ultimately been illusory, or at best skin deep. This can be true of even the most mundane things, such as the example Alan Bennett gives of his father not caring about good pepper.

The understanding we have of another person's life cannot be reduced to propositional knowledge that can be understood by someone who doesn't already have enough in common with the person in question. My "getting" you may enable me to pass on knowledge about you in propositional form, but the information I pass on won't on its own lead others to also understand you.<sup>24</sup> Our understanding of another cannot be fully captured in propositional form (see Beardsmore 1996: 54), no more than our understanding of jazz could.<sup>25</sup> The failure to understand another is not a failure to reach consensus on some factual or moral matter, any more than understanding is a matter of agreement. What is missing, it would seem, is forms of life. (Wittgenstein's lion remark provides a

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why the philosophical enterprise of reducing meaning to "propositional content" is doomed to fail.

<sup>24</sup> It would be a mistake to think that if understanding is some kind of non-propositional knowledge then it is a form of *know-how* à la Ryle. In many cases it is a know *what*, know *what*, or know *why* (see also note 3 above).

<sup>25</sup> A similar point is made by Tilghman (1983). I consider Wittgenstein's views on understanding art in Sandis (forthcoming).

limiting case of a more general difficulty). The barrier to sharing forms of life is not metaphysical or even biological but *biographical*.<sup>26</sup>

It is tempting to conclude from all this that communication is made possible, perhaps even results from, the prior existence of shared forms of life. Rhees denies this outright:

[...] you cannot say that it is because they have a common life that they are able to engage in conversation ... It is because of its connexion with the rest of the language that any of their utterances is connected with what they are doing. (Rhees 2006: 130)

Rhees' point is that forms of life don't function as part of a linear explanation for how conversation and understanding (what is said) is possible. By the same token, a failure to understand cannot simply be attributed (as Wittgenstein seems to do in his letter to Sraffa) to a lack of shared lives. For the two-way act of attempting to understand the other and be understood is an attempt to bring the other into one's life and/or to enter the life of another. This is no more than to make a start, of course, and some starts can be false. But it would be most bizarre if one couldn't even *begin* to understand another unless there already existed a shared form of life in the strong cultural sense (Wittgenstein is hardly denying that he and Sraffa shared certain biological needs). There must surely exist points of entrance.<sup>27</sup>

In his book *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation* Jonathan Lear describes the reluctance of Frank B. Linderman to say that he knows much about "the Indian" despite the fact that he had "studied him" for more than forty years and had been told by his own subject that he had "felt his heart" (Lear 2006: 2). Lear's book centres around the possibility that when Indian chief Plenty Coups stated that "nothing happened" after the buffalo went away he meant this in a literal way that we (non Indians) cannot begin to comprehend. Lear writes:

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<sup>26</sup> Of course biographical knowledge in no way guarantees understanding. If it were otherwise, self-understanding would be relatively easy to achieve, and autobiographies would be a testament to this.

<sup>27</sup> Hence the following remark by Rhees: "'Learning to speak' and 'learning to understand people' – those seem to go together" (*Ibid.*: 139).

I cannot pretend to say with confidence what Plenty Coups really meant. His remark is enigmatic in part because it is compatible with so many different interpretations. Some of them are superficial; others delve to the heart of the human condition. (*Ibid.*: 5)

An even more radical example may be found in Matt Groening's *Futurama*. Two aliens from the planet Omicron Persei 8 watch an episode of the human television series *Friends*, laughing at all the jokes. When it is over, one of them says to the other, in English: “Why does Ross, the largest friend, not simply eat the other five?” This particular joke focuses on a collective species, but it also holds true of both sub-species collectives and individuals that we may – up to a point – understand their bodily and speech acts with limited knowledge of how these fit into their wider lives.

#### ***IV. Knowledge and Understanding***

Writing about her friendship with Wittgenstein, Elizabeth Anscombe makes the following contrast between knowledge and understanding:

I must confess that I feel deeply suspicious of anyone’s claim to have understood Wittgenstein. That is perhaps because, although I had a very strong and deep affection for him, and, I suppose, knew him well, I am very sure that I did not understand him. (Anscombe, in Engelmann 1967: xiv)

This might have been what the young Wittgenstein had in mind, for example, when at the end of his 1929 PhD Viva in Cambridge he allegedly told Bertrand Russell and G.E. Moore “I know you’ll *never* understand it”, a suspicion which strengthened as his work became more popular. This leads him to announce in the Preface to the *Investigations* that he “could not help noticing that the results of [his own] work ... were ... frequently misunderstood”,<sup>28</sup> and he has also been quoted as having maintained that Ryle was one of just two philosophers who understood his work (Monk 1991:436). In a similar vein, he told Russell that Frege “doesn’t understand a

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<sup>28</sup> If understanding the expression meaning of what anybody says were always sufficient for understanding the person there would be minimal need for exegesis.

single word of my work” (letter dated 6 Oct 1919; McGuinness 2012: 67, p.103), and a few years later:

I must confess that the number of people to whom I can talk is constantly diminishing. (letter c. April 1922; McGuinness 2012: 94, pp.132-3)

It is a mistake to think of these as instances of arrogance, for Wittgenstein’s insistence that others cannot understand him is accompanied by a similar pessimism about his ability to understand others. This manifests itself in the fear that it only *seems* to him that he understands things and people precisely because he doesn’t in fact understand much at all:

Is my understanding [Verständnis] only blindness to my own lack of understanding [Unverständnis]? It often seems so to me (OC 418).

James C. Klagge (2011) explains this phenomenon by arguing that Wittgenstein was simply out of place (and in some sense exiled from an earlier era) in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

It is in the light of all this, that we must take note of fact that he says ‘me’ rather than ‘my work’ at the crucial moment of the *Tractatus*:

My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: he who understands me eventually recognizes them as nonsensical, when he has used them – as steps – to climb up beyond them. (TLP 6.54)

In what way might the inability to understand a speaking lion differ from the inability to understand Wittgenstein when he speaks? “[I]t is very unlikely that we will understand and appreciate Wittgenstein’s work”, Klagge writes, “unless we have the right temperament and sensibility” (2011: 39).

Understanding comes in degrees, but we have already seen that the private Wittgenstein is working with a relatively demanding notion of understanding. This is further evidenced by his incredibly high personal standards for every aspect of life (see Monk 1991). Of course feeling that we will never understand some people is compatible with in principle being able to do so (even if we never come to manage it). A well-known philosopher once confessed to me that Russell does not *speak* to him. By this he did not mean that he could not understand any individual sentence but, rather, that he

doesn't share the sort of interests required to find his feet with what Russell was generally trying to get it. Such reactions need not be negative ones:

I could only stare in wonder at Shakespeare; never do anything with him. (CV, p. 84/94e; 1950)

Perhaps this was the situation that Wittgenstein eventually felt he found himself in with Sraffa.

## ***Epilogue***

I have tried to show that the tension between the public Wittgenstein's optimism about knowledge of other minds and the private Wittgenstein's pessimism about understanding (and being understood by) others, including those closest to him, is not a problematic one. There are three related reasons for this. First, the barriers he sought to destroy were metaphysical (allegedly necessary) ones, whereas those he struggled to overcome were psychological (presumably contingent). Second, Wittgenstein's official "nothing is hidden" view is chiefly about *knowledge* while the unofficial one is about *understanding*, and it is part of his larger project to demonstrate that the latter cannot be reduced to the former. Last, Wittgenstein's official remarks on understanding themselves fall into two distinct categories that do not neatly match the focus of his unofficial ones. One set is comprised of those remarks near the beginning of the *Investigations* that challenge the thought that understanding is an inner mental process accompanying behavior such as speaking and reading. The other consists primarily of the famous "tribes and lions" passages in *PPF* and *On Certainty* concerned with the difficulty of understanding others without immersing oneself into their form of life. Here the problem is cultural or sociological, and Wittgenstein hits a mean between optimism and pessimism. In its unofficial counterpart, Wittgenstein focuses on *individual* people, rather than collectives, and is much less optimistic about success, not least because he sets the bar for understanding those closest to him so high that he may appear not to acknowledge that understanding is a matter of degree rather than kind (though, in fact, he writes of an "almost complete

lack of understanding’). The official and the unofficial sets of remarks are here united in assuming a distinction between understanding a *person* and understanding the (expression or utterance) meaning of their *words*. If to understand a language is to understand a *form* of life, then to understand a person is to understand a *whole* life.<sup>29</sup>

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