Understanding Other Persons. A Guide for the Perplexed

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5.1 Introduction

I must not dwell upon the fearful repast, which immediately ensued. Such things may be imagined, but words have no power to impress the mind with the exquisite horror of their reality. Let it suffice to say that, having in some measure appeased the raging thirst, which consumed us by the blood of the victim, and having by common consent taken off the hands, feet, and head throwing them together with the entrails, into the sea, we devoured the rest of the body, piecemeal, during the four ever memorable days of the seventeenth, eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth of the month [1].

This description is taken from Edgar Poe's *The Narratives of A. Gordon Pym from Nantucket*—a shipwreck tale of survivor cannibalism. We can, indeed, hardly imagine the horror, guilt, or shame that mariners may have felt while consuming human flesh and after they did so. Words, as Poe says, "have no power to impress the mind" with the horror of reality.

It would not make such a difference if, instead of Poe's novel, I mentioned the opening of Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*:

One morning, as Gregor Samsa was waking up from anxious dreams, he discovered that in bed, he had been changed into a monstrous verminous bug. He lay on his armour-hard back and saw, as he lifted his head up a little, his brown, arched abdomen divided up into rigid bow-like sections. From this height, the blanket, just about ready to slide off completely, could hardly stay in place. His numerous legs, pitifully thin in comparison to the rest of his circumference, flickered helplessly before his eyes. "What's happened to me," he thought [2].

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Some sort of *disjunctive experience* between ourselves and the protagonist of the narrative would have arisen even if my examples were taken from the overture of Melville's masterpiece *Moby Dick*:

> Call me Ishmael. Some years ago—never mind how long precisely—having little or no money in my purse, and nothing particular to interest me on shore, I thought I would sail about a little and see the watery part of the world. It is a way I have of driving off the spleen, and regulating the circulation. Whenever I find myself growing grim about the mouth; whenever it is a damp, drizzly November in my soul; whenever I find myself involuntarily pausing before coffin warehouses, and bringing up the rear of every funeral I meet; and especially whenever my hypos get such an upper hand of me, that it requires a strong moral principle to prevent me from deliberately stepping into the street, and methodically knocking people's hats off – then, I account it high time to get to sea as soon as I can. This is my substitute for pistol and ball [3].

Uncivilized practices like cannibalism, oneiroid metamorphosis into a nonhuman body, and even a rather familiar mood like spleen are all good examples of narratives that defy—in part or totally—our capacity to intuitively understand someone's actions, expressions, and experiences. Something hardly intelligible is described by the other person; and, in addition to that, our emotions—including disgust, repulsion, astonishment, irritation, contempt, etc.—hinder our capacity to feel and make sense of what the other is trying to tell us. This is obviously a feeling we may have not only when we are confronted with a fictional tale, but even more so when we hear stories like these from a flesh-and-blood person, as it is the case when we listen to a friend asking our help, or to a patient in our everyday clinical work. Understanding other persons—in short: understanding others, as I shall call it here—is not an easy task when we are faced with such radical form of otherness, but perhaps, paradoxically, it may become even more tricky if we find some correspondence between the other's narrative and our personal experiences, since the latter may surreptitiously overwrite the story told by the other.

Which are the conditions of possibility for understanding others? Let us start from the beginning, that is, from ordinary occurrences of face-to-face encounters in the human life-world, before we pass to more sophisticated forms of understanding as the ones that take place in the clinical setting.

5.2   A Priori Understanding Others in a Shared Life-World

First and foremost, we understand each other—or at least we have the *feeling* that we understand each other. The cognitive sciences have generally adopted a mentalistic, strictly representational approach to this phenomenon, in which the understanding of others is attributed to the possession of a theory of mind, conceptualized as an ability to perform inferential or imaginative-simulative routines in order to account for or predict the mental states subtending the other's behavior [4, 5]. By contrast, phenomenology maintains that the basic process of understanding others involves a quasi-perceptual, unmediated access to the mental states of others as displayed in their expressive behavior [6].

There are several features involved in this basic form of understanding others. Under normal circumstances, we have the feeling that we understand each other well enough thanks to our *shared engagement* in a shared world. Our relationships are given in a world that is, from the beginning, a shared world of action. We feel embedded in a world of praxis or practical engagements that we feel we share with others. For each of us, a knife is a utensil to cut and a pen a different kind of utensil to be used for writing. This entails that when two or more persons are in front of a knife or a pen they prereflectively share the same attitude about the use and thus about the meaning of that instrument—that is, how to put it to use. We do not need to use cognitive concepts in order to comprehend and respond to others. The majority of everyday relations are based on immediate and prereflective face-to-face encounters with other persons, whose emotions, beliefs intentions, and desires are expressed directly in their actions and are typically grasped as meaningful in an emergent, pragmatic context.

Not only do we feel embedded in a shared world of practical engagements, we also feel embedded in a *shared world of symbols*. A second reason why we have the feeling that we understand each other is that we share linguistic conventions rooted in social traditions. For instance, in abecedaries, which are used to teach children the alphabet, a given word is coupled through its initial letter with a corresponding thing or animal (*A like ant, B like bee, C like cat,* etc.) and each word is paired with the image of the corresponding thing or animal. This conveys the correspondence between the world of symbols and that of worldly entities. The word "knife" *means* (symbolizes) the utensil knife. The coupling between a word and a thing conveys a feeling of reciprocal understanding when we speak to each other. We take it for granted that if another person says "knife," he means a utensil made for cutting and nothing else. These linguistic conventions are reiterated and all anomalies are discouraged and stigmatized—with the exception of art or poetry or other forms of creativity.

A third feature of our feeling of understanding others is that the others' *actions* have for us an intuitive meaning. From birth, understanding others is a sensorimotor and proprioceptive apprehension of others grounded in early relations with the caregiver, as the infant and caregiver are able to create a preverbal communication context. This implicit code—which develops hand in hand with a basic sense of Self—is procedural, nonsymbolic, and prereflexive [7]. We are in touch with each other through a fine prethematic understanding of the expressive behavior of other people. Behavior (postures, gestures, expressed emotions, gazes, and goal-oriented actions) intrinsically possesses an expressive unity and meaningfulness that we can directly grasp during our encounters with others, without any reflexive/introspective mediation. This basic form of understanding others is a particular kind of perception, thought to be innate. Understanding others is based on the resonance between my body and the other's body, with the other given in his expressive bodily presence. Intersubjectivity is basically *intercorporeality* [8]. What the others do is meaningful to me because of two reasons: first, the others are *embodied like myself* and they move as I—as any other animal being—would move in the same circumstances; second, because these behaviors are handed down by culture. Let us make an

example of the first case: "[w]hen young lady is faced with the problem of an undesirable marriage she has two choices. She may proceed calmly and deliberately to take advantage of her adversary's weakness, now resisting him energetically and now cleverly eluding him—with the result that by selecting words and actions appropriate to every new development, she finally reaches her goal. Or she may suddenly breakdown, tremble and quiver convulsively, roll and toss and work herself up into a frenzied state; she will behave in this way until she frees herself from the unwanted suitor" ([9]; p. 3). The second behavior is an example of *instinctive flurry*, a typical reaction to situations that threaten or interfere with someone's existence. It is a built-in mechanism with a biological function. This behavior is embodied in *every* animal including humans and thus intuitively understandable by anyone who is observing it.

There are other behaviors whose meaning is culturally dependent. Some of our *corporeal habits* are embedded in a given culture and are implicitly handed down to all its members. For instance, in our culture, we all use forks, knives, and spoons to eat; thus, we feel that a person who is using these utensils is engaged in feeding himself or herself. Pierre Bourdieu [10] provides an excellent example of these: our arms and legs are full of silent imperatives. These imperatives include "Sit up straight!" and "Don't put your knife in the mouth." They select the range of affordable perceptions and actions. These corporeal orientations, which people acquire through their rearing in a given culture, constitute the track of our action and perception. In particular, they orientate our social relations. They are nonconceptual in nature: embodied schemas that are out of one's voluntary control and are difficult to be made explicit. Habits *qua* incorporated social schemas shared by a given community play a fundamental role in intuitively understanding the behavior of other members of this community.

Last but not least, in principle, we are *attuned* to other persons: *interpersonal prereflexive attunement* is a further aspect of the *a priori* form of other-understanding we are exploring. A fundamental feature of intersubjectivity *qua* intercorporeality is *intertemporality* or *synchronization*, that is the prereflective intertwining of lived and living bodies that mutually resonate with one another, or the reciprocal bodily synchrony that allows two or more persons to share a given experience through their lived bodies [11]. Prereflexive attunement is an entanglement between persons based on a silent mode of relating, a nonpropositional flow of communication between persons embedded in a given situation. Attunement is thus based on a prereflexive receptivity, enabling one to feel a situation and to adjust to it—the spontaneous capacity to orchestrate one's own feeling state according to the feeling state of the other [12]. It is like playing music together [13] where one musician coordinates and synchronizes his personal *tempo* (which in music indicates a mood, e.g., allegro, vivace, etc.) with the tempo of the other without the external help of a metronome.

Shared pragmatic engagement, linguistic conventions, embodiment, habits, and attunement are the columns of our a priori feeling of understanding others, that is, the ability to grasp or assess the meaningfulness of their actions and expressions. The understanding of others is enacted and fully embodied in the sense that it

unfolds in a pragmatic and semantically meaningful, situational context that is a constitutive part of the encounter itself.

5.3   Second-Order Understanding

What I tried to describe in the previous section are the modes of our primary and spontaneous engagement in the world, which allows a form of understanding of the other persons' actions and expressions. If we compare these with more sophisticated forms of understanding others, such as the ones required to have feelings in response to and to make sense of Poe's, Kafka's, or Melville's narratives, we may establish the following distinction: on one side, we have first-order or nonconative forms of understanding others, and, on the other, second-order or conative ones. While we experience the limitations of the first-order mode of understanding others, we may deliberately put forward all our efforts to thematically understand the other person. Whereas nonconative understanding mainly involves shared pragmatic engagement, linguistic conventions, embodiment, habits, and prereflexive attunement, and in general an unprompted and implicit resonance between me and the other, conative understanding others requires something more than this [14]. Conative understanding others, then, is a more reflexive and mediated task than nonconative understanding. Here I *actively* look inside myself for stored experiences to make them resonate with those of the other.

Thus, the most basic form of understanding others does not require any voluntary and explicit effort. Nonconative understanding others is basically a kind of spontaneous and involuntary phenomenon through which we implicitly make sense of the other's behavior. But, as we have seen, in some cases, the other person's behaviors and expressions become elusive: while performing this act of imaginative self-transposal, we experience the radical un-understandability of the other. In some cases—maybe the most relevant, at least in clinical practice—we do not feel immediately in touch with the other, we do not immediately grasp the reason and meaning of his actions, and, as a consequence, we purposively and knowingly attempt to put ourselves in his place. While attempting to transpose ourselves into the other, we experience the radical otherness of the other. In this vein, early clinical phenomenologists (like Jaspers) and early psychoanalysts (like Freud) rejected *Einfühlung* (usually translated with 'empathy') as an adequate tool for understanding the subjectivity of patients affected by severe mental illnesses like psychoses [15].

An important epistemological concern arises here: How do I know that when I am "empathizing" with someone I am not projecting my own experiences onto the other? Also, a perhaps even more important ethical concern is: How do I know that the other wants to be understood by me, that is, assimilated to my own experience?

Understanding severe aberrations of experience such as those that can be met with in schizophrenic, melancholic, or manic forms of existence requires a kind of training that goes beyond spontaneous nonconative empathic skills, and at the same time avoids the pitfalls of conative empathy based on the clinician's personal experiences and commonsense categories. To achieve second-order understanding is a

complex process [16]. First of all, I need to acknowledge the autonomy of the other person, and consequently that the life-world[1]—the province of reality inhabited by a given person, having its own meaning structure and a "style" of subjective experience and action determined by a "pragmatic motive"—of the other person is not like my own. Second, I must learn to neutralize my natural attitude that would make me try to understand the other's experience as if it took place in a world like my own. Third, I must try to reconstruct the existential structures of the world the other lives in. Fourth, I can finally attempt to understand the other's experience as meaningfully situated in a world that is indeed similar to my own, but also constantly and indelibly marked by the other person's particular existence, and by that person's endeavor to become who she or he is.

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[1] The life-world is the original domain, the obvious and unquestioned foundation both of all types of everyday acting and thinking and of all scientific theorizing and philosophizing. In its concrete manifestations, it exists as the "realm of immediate evidence." The concept of *life-world* was introduced by Edmund Husserl in his *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology* [17]: *In whatever way we may be conscious of the world as universal horizon, as coherent universe of existing objects, we, each "I-the-man" and all of us together, belong to the world as living with one another in the world; and the world is our world, valid for our consciousness as existing precisely through this 'living together.' We, as living in wakeful world-consciousness, are constantly active on the basis of our passive having of the world... Obviously this is true not only for me, the individual ego; rather we, in living together, have the world pre-given in this together, belong, the world as world for all, pre-given with this ontic meaning… The we-subjectivity… [is] constantly functioning".*

The lifeworld is a grand theatre of objects variously arranged in space and time relative to perceiving subjects. It is already-always there, and is the "ground" for all shared human experience. Husserl's formulation of the lifeworld was influenced by Wilhelm Dilthey's "life-nexus" (*Lebenszusammenhang*) and Martin Heidegger's Being-in-the-world (*In-der-Welt-Sein*). The concept was further developed by students of Husserl such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Jan Patočka, and Alfred Schutz. The lifeworld can be thought of as the horizon of all our experiences, in the sense that it is that background on which all things appear as themselves and meaningful. The lifeworld cannot, however, be understood in a purely static manner. It isn't an unchangeable background, but rather a dynamic horizon in which we *live*, and which "lives with us" in the sense that nothing can appear in our lifeworld except as *lived*.

The most relevant variant of life-world phenomenology was developed by Alfred Schutz [18]: "The reality which seems self-evident to men remaining within the natural attitude (…) is the everyday life-world. The region of reality in which man can engage himself and which can change while he operates in it by means of his animate organism. The object and events which are already found in this realm limit his free possibility of action. Only within this realm can one be understood by his fellow-men, and only in it can he work together with them."

A life-world is the province of reality inhabited by a given person, having its own meaning structure and a "style" of subjective experience and action determined by a "pragmatic motive."

Although the majority of people are situated within a shared life-world, there are several other frameworks of experience—for example, fantasy worlds, dream world, and psychopathological worlds. Abnormal mental phenomena are the expression of a more or less pronounced modification of the ontological framework within which experience is generated. The overall change in the ontological framework of experience transpires through the single symptoms, but the specificity of the core is only graspable at a more comprehensive structural level. The experience of time, space, body, self and others, and their modifications are the principal indexes of the patient's basic structures of subjectivity within which each single experience is situated [19].

The supposition that the other lives in a world just like my own—that is, he or she experiences time, space, his or her own body, others, the materiality of objects, etc., just as I do—is often the source of serious misunderstandings. Take the example of lived time: existential time cannot be detached from the life and history of the individual. One day for a young man can be lived as growth and fulfilment, whereas an old man may live it as consumption and decline. An anxious person may be afflicted by a feeling that time vanishes, inexorably passes away, that the time that separates him or her from death is intolerably shortened. Another patient in an early stage of schizophrenia may experience time as the dawn of a new reality, an eternally pregnant "now" in which what is most important is not present, what is really relevant is not already there, but is forever about to happen.

In order to understand these persons, I need to acknowledge the *existential difference*, the particular autonomy, which separates me from the way of being in the world that characterizes each of them. Any forgetting of this difference, for instance, between my own world and that of an anxious or a schizophrenic person (but we would say, also, *mutatis mutandis* between my own and an adolescent's or an old man's world), will be an obstacle to understanding, since these people live in a life-world whose structure is (at least in part) different from my own. Achieving second-order understanding thus requires me to set aside my own prereflexive, natural attitude (in which my first-order understanding capacities are rooted), and to approach the other's world as I would do while exploring an unknown and alien country.

5.4   Understanding Others in the Psychotherapeutic Setting

In this last section, I will concisely discuss five apparatuses that seem to be relevant to develop understanding others in the context of psychotherapeutic care: "dialogue," "attunement," "recognition," "intimacy," and "tact." My analyses will be not much more than a list of topics, building on and extending my previous contributions. If the reader's interest is attracted by this sketchy review, I may suggest her or him to read the following [12, 14–16, 19, 20].

Dialogue is the overall framework within which other-understanding unfolds as we belong together in a human shared world, since we can dialogue. Dialogue is the essential happening of language. It is about communication about concepts, personal experiences, and meanings, but not only about that. Dialogue is not mere exchange of information. In dialogue, "meanings-effects" are always accompanied by "presence-effects" [21] as genuine dialogue points to what is irrevocably non-conceptual in our lives. Dialogue is the possibility to listen to each other, and listening is the opportunity to be touched by what the other says. In dialogue, words have a semantic content, which conveys meanings, but dialogue is also a performance that has a nonsemantic dimension, that is, the *Volumen* [22] or *materiality* of the voice of the speaker through which a resonance between the speaker's and the listener's bodies is established. A genuine dialogue is a genuinely social act. In it, at a given moment, the interlocutors themselves become the subject matter. As a

consequence of that, in dialogue, subjectivity is displaced. One enters into dialogue, but one does not control its progression and outcome. In dialogue, something new about the interlocutors is revealed [14].

Attunement, as we have seen, is the modulation of the emotional field in-between oneself and the other. I am attuned to the world and other persons through my emotional feelings. Attunement, as we have seen, is based on a prereflexive spontaneous receptivity, enabling me to feel situated in a given place or relationship. Yet attunement is also the capacity to actively and purposefully coordinate my tempo with that of the other. It is also the reflexive capacity to orchestrate my emotions according to the other's emotions and adjust to it—a modulation of the emotional field in-between myself and the other. Attunement is thus inter-emotionality and also inter-temporality. My feeling of being in sync with nature, of belonging to a world shared with other human beings, and of being recognized by the other person are all based on attunement.

Recognition is the epistemic and ethical capacity to acknowledge the alterity in myself and of the other person. Both these forms of recognition—self- and other-recognition—take place in the context of dialogue and supported by attunement. Self-recognition is the acknowledgement of the preindividual elements not yet appropriated by myself, my involuntary drives, emotions, and habits. Other-recognition is the acknowledgement of the other person as a fellow man to whom I attribute value, life, and consciousness like my own. Other-recognition has a spontaneous emotional side grounded in attunement (nonconative other-understanding), and a more intellectual nonspontaneous side fueled by my attempt to understand the other's experience as meaningfully situated in a world that is similar to my own (conative other-understanding), but also indelibly marked by the other person's particular existence. Thus, recognition has an epistemic as well as an ethical value.

Intimacy is an atmospheric experience of aloneness-togetherness, self-recognition, and other-recognition. The recognition of belonging to a common destiny of fragility and solitude. My sense of being a self emerges in the experience of resonance with another person—often a mute or wordless resonance. This experience is embedded in an atmosphere—the elusive and often almost indefinable "air," "mood," or "ambience" that envelops a given situation in which you and I are sited. An atmosphere is based on a feeling that is neither private nor internal, but spatially spread out and tinges the situation in which two or more persons happen to be involved. Enveloped in an atmosphere of intimacy, I *get in touch* with myself via getting in touch with the other person. This is often the climax of friendship or love, or of a psychotherapeutic encounter: an aesthetic happening enveloped in an atmosphere and leading to an experience of intimacy. It brings about a prereflexive feeling of shared meaningfulness, a preconceptual assemblage of the assortment of all sensorial inputs available to both partners. The sharing an atmosphere of intimacy may happen spontaneously, yet it usually needs that the persons involved actively clear the ground from memories, representations, desires, and all sort of prejudices. This clearing is what phenomenology calls *epochè*.

Tact is the capacity to feel and attune with the other within an atmosphere. Tact is the dexterity not to intrude into the other's sphere, to avoid instrumental relationships, to let the other manifest his or her uniqueness. Tact touches upon the very origin of the moral law. It is a form of connection released from prejudices and from instrumental relationship. It expresses a kind of contact that is not that of possession, physical (e.g., to take hold of the other in order to force him or her to do something), or intellectual (e.g., to grasp the significance of the other's behavior). Tact is a kind of grace, an implicit promise, and the capacity to wait until the moment is ripe for making explicit what I sensed.

5.5   Why Understanding?

Understanding other persons is a complex phenomenon that mingles the voluntary with the involuntary, conative with nonconative postures, cognitive with pathic forms of *cogito*, nature with culture, meaning-effects with presence-effects—in an unstable state of tension or oscillation between the two. Perhaps, genuine understanding is a dialectic situation that involves these conflicting attitudes without a synthesis and this is one of the reasons why it remains open to a process of infinite approximation to the other whose emblem is the feeling of aloneness-togetherness, that is, the more I feel in touch with the other, the more I acknowledge the distance from the other.

Understanding other is thus not merely a kind of accurate knowledge about the other, a concept that grasps the states of mind motivating the other's behaviors and expressions. Rather, it is a *gesture*—the commitment to cross the space that separates me from the other, the act of tending to the other, purified from its goal. Yet, unlike a Kantian or religious virtue, understanding others is not its own reward. What good do we get from this kind of "virtue"?

This brings us to the final question: why should I try to understand the other? Especially if I have become aware that grasping his states of mind, reasons, and motivations is on the edge of being an epistemologically impossible task (the essence of the other is its otherness), if not an unethical one (understanding others should not be a kind of "grasping," that is of physical or intellectual possession). Why should I condemn myself to such a frustrating effort? The reason is that without an effort to understand the other, I am at risk at imploding into myself. The other is the counterweight that avoids my collapsing into myself. Also, the other, without my effort to understand him or her, and more exactly without my effort to *recognize* him or her, is at risk of imploding into himself or herself. Mental pathologies can be defined as the sinking of the Self into itself that takes place when the dialectic with otherness – the dialectic of recognition – comes to a stop. Understanding other persons is not an act of pure generosity, but a necessity inscribed in the fragile condition of being a human Self. The effort to understand others is not only a way to care for the other, but an essential part of the *techne tou biou*, that is of the care for myself.

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