

## A NOTE ON UNDERSTANDING

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### I

This article is an attempt to draw attention to a fundamental, obvious yet elusive distinction that has largely remained insufficiently noticed throughout the history of western thought. It is the distinction between 'knowledge' and 'understanding'. Owing to this failure to notice this fundamental distinction, 'understanding' has never been recognized as a distinct, autonomous, epistemic category. I think the consequences of this oversight have been far-reaching. To put it in broad terms, this failure to recognize that understanding is different from knowledge has distorted our perception of entire areas of civilized life. To cite a specific instance, it has blinded most of us from seeing the meaning and *raison d'être* of the entire domain of disciplines called the Humanities and has left us making futile efforts to justify philosophy, literature and history in terms of pursuit of *knowledge*, whereas in actual fact, they are all efforts towards *understanding*. The object of literary and human studies is to refine understanding in the sense of refining our understanding of certain particular things as well as in the sense of refining our capacity to understand. Unless we grasp this fact and free understanding from the shackles of knowledge-centred epistemology, these studies will continue to be consigned to a cognitive limbo. For these and several other reasons, it is necessary to restore conceptual autonomy to the notion of 'understanding' to restore it to its proper place in epistemology. Or, if we must use the term epistemology in the narrow sense of a concern with 'knowledge', it is necessary to clear the space for hermeneutics by resisting the dominance of epistemology.

But, all this rhetoric aside, what precisely is this distinction between knowledge and understanding? And how plausible is the claim that so basic a distinction has remained obscured for so long? To answer these questions in straightforward terms is not easy. To even begin to articulate this distinction we have to turn thought and

language inside out, so to speak, since this is one of those issues like the question of Being that we cannot express in language because they are so close to thought and speech that it would be correct to say that we think and speak *through* them. They are dissolved in the very medium of our thought, woven into the very fabric of language. Consequently, it is very difficult to objectify them and draw attention to them, the reason being that our language is continuous with our senses and our consciousness, and therefore our view of the world and our concepts are co-ordinated. As a result, it is nearly impossible to transcend them, and any articulation of these matters necessarily sounds simultaneously trivial, tautological as well as nonsensical. But the matter, in my view, is important enough to be worth the vexation.

At the outset it would be helpful to take note of a purely linguistic fact so as to prevent avoidable confusion. In the case of knowledge, there is a clear distinction between the act or process of knowing and the goal or product of that process. We use the verb form 'knowing' to refer to the act or process and the word 'knowledge' to the product of that process. Some people do not find the distinction important (though they should, since it is not without consequences), but it is there for those who wish to take note of it. But in the case of understanding, the word 'understanding' denotes both the process and the product. Understanding is a state. The process leading to it can, perhaps, be distinguished from it. We may call it 'reflection'. But it is better to adhere to common usage. Therefore, the reader must be advised to be alert to the sense in which the term 'understanding' is variously used on different occasions throughout this article.

The most general statement we can make about understanding is that *to understand is to make sense of what is presented to consciousness, and understanding is the state of attainment of a sense of what is presented to consciousness*. But this is, unsurprisingly enough, question-begging, which, as we all know, is the fate of any attempt to define primitive concepts. In any case, the question is not merely whether understanding should be treated as an irreducible concept. The entire idea of incorrigible concepts that cannot be reduced to more basic concepts is, as has been pointed out, particularly by Donald Davidson, a little misleading. When we try to trace concepts to their ground, what we find is not a collection of unrelated, irreducible concepts, but a structure comprising interrelated concepts, none of which can be understood or defined except in terms of each other. So, our ambition should not be to discover some basic, intuitively more obvious or more self-evident concept that can illuminate the nature of what we call 'understanding', but to find some way of grasping

the conceptual structure of which the concept of understanding is a central element. Given the fact that such grasping of structures is itself one mode of understanding, this attempt to ‘understand’ the structure of understanding would not only be a difficult and elusive enterprise but also, as I stated above, the result is likely to appear disappointingly circular. In this sense, at this level, genuine analysis in terms of conceptual reduction is not possible. Any attempted analysis would be rather a horizontal movement between concepts which belong to the same categorial level. The value of making this movement can only be assessed in terms of the ‘sense of illumination’ it offers.

The approach we need to adopt here, therefore, is to use historical distance to see how the clear yet complex distinction between understanding and knowledge has been elided, and intersperse it with a look at contexts of common usage in which the term ‘understanding’ provides a sharper denotation through contrast with ‘knowing’.<sup>1</sup> The latter too, as I warned above, will be a rather unsatisfactory affair since the distinction between knowledge and understanding is rather problematic in ordinary usage.<sup>2</sup> As we shall see, at one level, there is an intuitive distinction between knowing and understanding that is too obvious to be noticed, whereas in some contexts, understanding is used as a synonym for knowledge and again in some other cases, understanding is contrasted with other capabilities,<sup>3</sup> and so on. As a result, at the level of ordinary usage as such, we will have to negotiate the ambiguous relation between knowledge and understanding, sometimes going along with common usage and sometimes going against its grain.

## II

Let me begin by giving a few instances where we intuitively recognize the distinction between knowledge/knowing and understanding.

- To know a joke is different from understanding the joke. In principle I may know a joke such that I can narrate it without however understanding it myself.
- More significantly, to know a certain poem is one thing; to understand the poem is a different thing. I may know the poem and even everything about it and may be able to recite the poem—all this without understanding it.
- I know truth but I understand meaning.
- I understand situations, patterns, structures and forms; it would be odd to use the term ‘know’ in these cases.

- Making a hazardous leap, keeping in mind all the risks of this ontological dichotomy and its fundamentally unstable character, we might say that we know entities and understand relations.<sup>4</sup>

Continuing the last point above, for all its attendant risks, it seems to me that the entity-relation distinction serves as a good point of departure to contrast knowing with understanding. To reiterate, entities are the objects of knowing while relations, forms and structures are the objects of understanding. We know objects but we understand a poem, a joke, or an epigram or a metaphor. The same can be said of a mathematical theorem or any theory for that matter. It is tempting to capture this distinction through the notion of meaning by saying that truth is known while meaning is understood.<sup>5</sup> This is a very useful way of looking at the matter, provided that we are careful about how we use the term 'meaning'. If we use the term meaning in the narrow sense of linguistic meaning, it would be incorrect since understanding cannot be reduced to linguistic understanding. The scope of understanding is larger than linguistic understanding and although the relation of understanding to language is a fundamental relation, we cannot reduce all understanding to linguistic understanding. We understand persons, situations, patterns and feelings. We can certainly associate the term 'meaning' with these things but it would be in a wider sense.

Before proceeding further, it might be helpful to clear one particular misunderstanding: I am not suggesting that knowledge and understanding are necessarily parallel, non-convergent phenomena. There are complex relations between knowledge and understanding including relations of interdependence. For instance, it seems correct to say that to know the intention of a person is to understand his action. This would seem to imply that knowledge is a necessary but not a sufficient condition of understanding. The task then would be to find out that feature whose absence makes knowledge an insufficient condition of understanding. In the final analysis, my insistence is that there is a cognitive phenomenon that is distinct from knowledge – a phenomenon that is not reducible to some species of knowing (a less rational, less logical or more intuitive mode of knowing), but is a totally different cognitive relation with reality, constituting an irreducible category.

But what precisely characterizes understanding? As I cautioned earlier, it is difficult to give the answer in a simple way. We could tentatively begin by suggesting, as I hinted above, that understanding is primarily the apprehension of relations, more specifically

the integrative relations.<sup>6</sup> Understanding is concerned with the organisation of awareness into a unity (which could be another way of saying that understanding is related to structurality). Continuing with the framework of entity-relations, entities are simple objects and are, therefore, not amenable to plurality of perception. But networks of relations are complex objects and are amenable to plurality of perception – in other words, they are amenable to interpretation. To invoke once again the distinction between truth and meaning, there cannot be multiplicity of truths. However, there can be multiple understandings or interpretations.<sup>7</sup> This means that there is no single ‘correct’ unity. While it is certainly not absurd to speak of a ‘true’ understanding, it would be a mistake to imagine that the notion of truth that we use in the context of knowledge can be applied here. The truth of knowledge is objective, singular truth while the ‘truth’ of understanding is a subjective truth in the sense of a truth in relation to the self. The better way out of this ambiguous formulation is, as I suggested above, to avoid the concept of truth altogether in the context of understanding and confine it to the domain of knowledge. In that case, the alternative formulation would be to state it in terms of interpretation and say that understanding is that cognitive satisfaction in which interpretation terminates. By interpretation here we must understand not the narrowly understood textual activity which overlaps with exegesis but the fundamental inclination of consciousness to constantly make sense of the co-existence of all its objects, which is in fact the very essence of consciousness.<sup>8</sup>

Another way to grasp the nature of understanding might be to focus on those occasions when there is failure of understanding: Occasions such as when someone just cannot see the point of a story, or see the significance of a certain action in spite of having all the relevant information; when someone is unable to *see* the picture even though the full picture is in front of him. However, we must realize that since understanding itself is a type of object suitable for understanding, it will not be possible to describe in definite terms the insight one gets into it by observing cases of its failure. This fact, I think, has partly been responsible for the reluctance to use understanding as a cognitive category. It is not possible to give a positivist account of understanding and it is undeniable that, although as a movement logical positivism might have disappeared, we still live under the epistemological pressure of positivism everywhere. All branches of the Human sciences must constantly resist this pressure. Unfortunately, more often than not, the Human sciences have not negotiated this

pressure well. In most cases, the response to this pressure has been either to retreat into a discourse of poetic impressionism that refuses to engage in analysis and argument, or to strive to mould one's discourse into a form amenable to a positivistic treatment. Since the notion of understanding is clearly not amenable to a positivistic treatment, one finds a tacit refusal to invoke understanding as the telos of these disciplines. It is essentially an academic mind game and I think that if we can resist the positivistic pressure, we can assert that understanding represents a valid and important epistemic category.

### III

When we begin to look at understanding in this way, we discover that our understanding of the notion of knowledge, too, is far from perspicuous. In most of the philosophical literature, we find discussions on the conditions and limits of knowledge, and very little on the nature of knowledge itself. The famous definition of knowledge in terms of belief, truth and justification is actually a statement of the conditions for knowledge claims and is not a statement about the nature or structure of knowledge itself.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, it is necessary to go back and ask what knowledge is. However, our concern is not with knowledge but with understanding. I mentioned the above fact only to suggest that any attempt to have a clearer notion of knowledge will enable a better understanding of understanding itself.

On this point, we may begin with Plato himself since he was the first philosopher in the west to engage with this question of knowledge frontally, particularly in his dialogue, the *Theaetetus*. A reading of this dialogue is particularly rewarding since in a very interesting way it illustrates my point about the way understanding has been hiding in plain sight in the entire history of philosophy. In this dialogue, there are many points where, in his struggle to find an adequate definition of knowledge, Plato stumbles upon 'understanding', but moves on without noticing it. A careful reading of it (which I have attempted elsewhere), in fact, alerts us to the distinction between knowledge and understanding, although the participants in the dialogue do not appear to be aware of it.

The dialogue begins by asking what knowledge is. Different instances or kinds of knowledge are enumerated but it is agreed that such an inventory does not amount to a definition. One must identify the factor that connects all those different kinds. An answer is suggested that knowledge is essentially sense-perception. But this answer is rejected on the grounds that given the unreliability

of the conditions of sense-perception, the certitude associated with knowledge cannot be expected. Another answer is offered to the effect that knowledge consists of 'true judgment'. However, this immediately raises the question whether there can be such a thing as 'false judgment', without which the notion of true judgment would be incomplete. It is at this point—when Plato deals with the puzzling question of false judgement—that we get the first glimpse of the phenomenon of understanding lurking obscurely in the background. It is suggested that for false judgment to be possible, a person should at the same time know and not know the object of the judgment. To resolve this paradox Plato introduces the somewhat elusive distinction between 'possessing knowledge' and 'having knowledge'. After this, the dialogue moves on to making distinctions between knowing the difference between two things and knowing how they are different. The least unsatisfactory definition appears to be that knowledge is true judgement with an account. Socrates, with his usual, complacent agnosticism, concludes that the interlocutors failed to finally know what knowledge is.<sup>10</sup> But this latter part is not very relevant for our purposes. What is salient for us is the seemingly glib distinction between possessing knowledge and having knowledge. Possession of knowledge here does not mean possession of a source or repository of knowledge. It refers to possession of knowledge in the mind. How, then, can it preclude 'having' that knowledge, whatever that may mean? To answer this question, I suggest, we must invoke the distinction between knowledge and understanding. Possessing knowledge refers to knowledge whereas having knowledge refers to understanding. The simplest example we could give to illustrate this point is to imagine a situation where someone knows all the facts but does not understand what they mean. The notion of 'judgment' takes us to the other great philosopher Kant whose life project was to illuminate the landscape of epistemology in its most comprehensive sense.

We come across one variant of the distinction between knowledge and understanding in Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* in the form of the distinction between 'Reason' and 'Intellect'.<sup>11</sup> According to Kant, the Intellect concerns the domain of sensation whereas Reason is the source as well as vehicle of concepts. The problem here is that this distinction quickly gets attached to the empirical-transcendental distinction, which is useful for Kant's own project of tempering rationalism with empiricism but does not help clarify the distinction we are discussing here. However, a related point in his thought comes very close to illuminating the knowledge-understanding distinction,

though only in a tangential way. Kant makes a distinction between 'Concept' and 'Idea'. To put it simplistically, a Concept is a singular entity whereas an Idea is a configuration of concepts. The notion of Idea comes closest to 'understanding', but Kant does not properly clarify the relation between Reason and Idea, which could have helped in delineating how knowledge as perception of sensations or entities is distinct from understanding which is related to configuration of concepts. He relegates Ideas to the domain of regulative principles, refusing to grant them the status of constitutive principles, and thereby does not give the formation of 'Ideas' a proper epistemic status. However, in his later work *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant comes close to delineating the notion of understanding through his concept of 'judgment'. Judgment bridges the gap between Reason and Intellect, and provides an epistemic product he does not name but to which we can safely attach the label 'understanding'. But in the final analysis, it cannot be said that Kant succeeds in offering a clear notion of understanding as distinct from knowledge.<sup>12</sup>The only reason we can imagine is that these philosophers were totally concentrating on knowledge and could not see that there is another epistemic entity called understanding, or did not regard it as significant enough to require separate engagement. The culprit, as it turns out, is the enthralling grip of the notion of 'truth', the sanctity we attach to it. Of course, the sanctity of truth can never be overstated. But ultimately, truth is a matter of just facts. It is a question of whether or not something is so. Our relation to the world, in fact, the orientation of our consciousness to the world is not exhausted by facts. We may know some facts. But we must understand what they mean. This is not always a matter of logical implication. It is to do with organising the facts into a structure and see what they mean. This is understanding. And as I have tried to point out, it is different from knowing truth or fact. If I may take recourse to an analogy, the significant move that Wittgenstein made when he said that the world is not a collection of things but a collection of facts, needs to be understood more fully and extended further. *Things* or entities are *perceived* in the narrow sense of sense-perception. *Facts* or relations of things are *known*. But there is a next step—which is in fact implicit in Wittgenstein's thinking right from the *Tractatus*—where the relation or network of facts is not a matter of knowledge but of understanding. Starting from his metaphor for philosophy as showing the fly the way out of the fly-bottle, to his notion of philosophy as a sort of therapy, Wittgenstein's conception of the function of philosophy is that its aim is 'understanding'. One could go to the extent of suggesting



that if we re-read Wittgenstein through the lens of ‘understanding’ as a central concept in his view of the practice of philosophy, we will get a better sense of the depth of his insights. But the fact remains that he too did not explicitly delineate the knowledge-understanding distinction, and ‘understanding’ remains a central but unarticulated idea in his thought. What is it about understanding that eluded these extremely perspicacious thinkers? As I suggested at the beginning, it seems to be the case that in a strange way it did not occur to them to *state* it because that is what they were *doing*. If anyone were to point it to them, their reaction probably would have been something like, ‘Of course! What else do you think I have been going on about?’

Gadamer says somewhere that ‘Being that can be understood is language’. This is a statement simultaneously both about language and understanding. As a statement about language, this assertion, essentially Heideggerian in spirit, is correct as far as it goes. But there are two points worth noting about this statement. In terms of what it implies about understanding as such, it is wrong since the circle of understanding is much larger than the circle of language. If we understand the statement to mean that Being becomes understood only in language, again wrong, for this formula in effect reduces all understanding to linguistic understanding, since it is not evident that there is any understanding other than that of Being. On the other hand, if we take this assertion to mean that understanding has a structural relation with Being, this seems incorrect since it is not Being but Becoming that constitutes understanding.

There is, however, a second point which has to do with the proximity Gadamer posits between language and understanding. To speak essentially is to exhibit understanding. In other words, language embodies understanding. One conjecture we can hazard for the elusiveness of understanding is that it is this fact which makes it nearly impossible to distance understanding from language and speak about it. Another point – though this would be to stretch the import of Gadamer’s statement – is that the posited relation between Being and understanding is also open to question since, while the epistemological aspect of understanding is constituted by being, its ontological aspect is constituted by Becoming. Understanding is necessarily self-transformational in its ground as well as in its function. In order to counter the reduction of understanding to its linguistic component, we could focus on the process of understanding and say that:

*Within language, poetry represents the ideal object of understanding.*

*Within thought, philosophy represents the ideal object of understanding.*

*Within consciousness, emotion represents the ideal object of understanding.*

Michael Polanyi has pointed out<sup>13</sup> that there is a tacit component to knowing (of all kinds, but particularly the knowing-how kind, which, for Polanyi is the paradigmatic category). This component is essential to learning a skill. No amount of discursive interaction or regimented methodology can facilitate learning without the tacit, inarticulable component, which is beyond method and which functions as a catalyst. We could say that there is no method of teaching but, nevertheless, learning happens. In this sense this component is marked by spontaneity. A boy struggles in vain to balance his bicycle and then suddenly, he doesn't know how, he discovers with delight that he can ride! As I have already pointed out, the nearest we can bring understanding to knowledge is in knowing-how. What Polanyi points out about skills can be extended to the process of understanding: You strive to make someone understand something, but there is no particular method you could adopt; at some point understanding happens. The precise relation between your efforts and the event of understanding can be hardly analysed. Understanding just has to *happen*. There is no set of rules or methods that we can employ to make it happen.<sup>14</sup> But when it happens, it is transformative. It is like suddenly seeing a pattern in what seems random. Once you see it, you cannot undo your perception. It is as if your consciousness is forever transformed and cannot go back to the pre-understanding stage. To extend the same point further, what is called wisdom is understanding in matters of life, and, as we all know, there is no methodology to wisdom. We cannot ever make a *science* of wisdom; nor can wisdom be unlearned.

#### IV

Let me now put together some more stray thoughts and try to convey my sense of the category of understanding.

Experientially, understanding is fundamentally distinct from knowing. In fact, when we look at the conceptual structure of which 'understanding' is an element, we see that the closest concept is that of experience in the sense of a centred awareness of consciousness and all its contents. In other words, understanding is an experiential event. We can make machines that can 'know' and recognize. But it would be difficult to say what it is for a machine to *understand*. Unless, that is, we can meaningfully talk about machines capable of experience. The latter notion is even more difficult to comprehend since, in a strict sense, understanding is self-transformative but does not necessarily translate into a particular behaviour. People often talk about how we are now able to make a machine that could compose

a poem or a piece of music. The understandable technological sense of achievement aside, all this talk is totally misguided since it is of no significance that a computer can compose a poem. What distinguishes a computer or a robot from a human being is that the former cannot understand a poem. Machines would be human-like not when they equal or surpass the computing or cognitive or even creative capabilities of humans, but when they acquire the capacity for experience. The question is not whether a robot can create a poem. The question is whether it can understand a poem and/or enjoy it.

In this sense, understanding is a singularly human phenomenon. This is not to say that only human beings (as opposed to other animals) can understand. It means that we cannot understand what it means to understand without humanizing the being that understands. Another way of saying this is to say that we can only understand a human understanding. This is what Wittgenstein must have meant when he said that if a lion could speak, we could not understand him. This, as most analytic philosophers have tended to interpret, has nothing to do with language as such. It is not a matter of untranslatability. We cannot understand what the lion is saying because we cannot grasp his mode of understanding which would be integral to his experiencing of the world (which Wittgenstein calls 'form of life'). That is why, as I said earlier, although Heidegger's idea of thinking (as expounded in his *What is called Thinking*) runs parallel to the act of understanding, it diverges ultimately because Heidegger does not take into account the fact that understanding occurs *in* experience. In saying this I do not wish to imply that in that work, Heidegger was trying to articulate the notion of understanding and failed to do it. His aim is to clarify the nature of thinking as a necessarily unstructured, rule-free, algorithm-transcendent, open-ended activity. Understanding, on the other hand, is teleological in the sense that it has a terminus. We could say more precisely about the relation between Heidegger's notion of thinking and our idea of understanding that understanding is a mode of thinking that occurs in the field of experience.

Understanding is the dissolution of a puzzle into a state of equilibrium. I use the notion of 'equilibrium' because it represents this structure better than any other notion. An object presents itself to understanding only by assuming the form of a puzzle. In taking the form of a puzzle, it induces a disturbance, a disharmony, it creates a space. The sense of turbulence so caused provides the motive for the movement towards understanding. And the

movement from the puzzle to the understanding is structurally a movement towards equilibrium in which the space that was created is filled and the incongruities find their resolution. It is a movement from restlessness to stillness. But, one may ask, why we should give primacy to this notion of equilibrium? The answer is that it is, at any rate in my view, ontologically a primary notion. In fact, if we can see understanding in terms of equilibrium in this fashion, we can see how consciousness is itself an incessant movement towards equilibrium. Without some such notion it would be impossible to coherently describe the dynamics of the psyche: we should be able to understand the dynamics of neither cognition nor emotion. Next, understanding is always in relation to the self. *Any understanding is always my understanding*. This is the meaning of Gadamer's insight about 'horizons': the fusion of horizons is *my* singular fusion, resulting in a synthesis of understanding that is unique to myself. This also implies that understanding is a function of subjectivity in the Kierkegaardian sense when he stated that subjectivity is truth. This brings us to the relation between understanding and truth. I suggested at the beginning that truth is the telos of knowing whereas meaning is the object of understanding. However, to leave it at that would be to leave out the important question as to whether there is any such thing as 'true' understanding. If we have grasped the notion of understanding correctly, we can see that a heterogeneous concept of truth is necessary. The 'truth' of facts is different from the 'truth' of meaning. Although it is misleading, we could say that the truth of understanding is that of coherence whereas the truth of facts or knowledge of facts is that of correspondence. The two theories of truth are not rival theories but cover different facets of truth or rather different kinds of truth. The truth of knowledge relates to the relation between proposition and fact that are both outside the self, whereas the truth of understanding relates to the relation between the object of understanding and the self.

Let me conclude with a few remarks reiterating the importance of recognising understanding as a distinct epistemic category in contrast to knowledge.

Knowledge is a necessarily positivist idea. However, there is no harm in this being so. Problem arises when we mistakenly try to enlarge the idea of knowledge to include what it cannot cohere with – we end up in confusion. Knowing pertains to the realm of things and facts. But there is a domain outside it where knowledge is not pertinent. To repeat an example I gave earlier, to know a poem is to know the facts about the poem and to remember the lines of the poem. If this is all

my relation with the poem amounts to, then the poem has in effect completely escaped me. I have not seen the poem at all. I cannot know the poem as a poem because a poem is not an inventory of facts. If there are any facts at all in the poem, there are integrated into a structure that constitutes the poem and have been transmuted into something else. There is nothing to know there. There is only an object to be understood. Must injustice has been done to literature by those among the practitioners of literary studies who have tried to claim that literature is a repository of knowledge. They have tried to convince generations of young scholars that a novel is a source of knowledge—geographical, cultural, social, psychological or historical, or of whatever kind. But the simple fact is that a novel *qua* novel, *qua* literature is not in the business of providing knowledge. It is an object for understanding. I have conflated two related facts here. To put them separately, first, you understand a poem or a novel or a work of art in general. You do not try to know it. Second, the poem or the novel in turn provides you with understanding—of life or whatever. In other words, a work of literature as a work of literature is neither an object of knowledge nor a source of knowledge. I think this clarity would help restore their proper objective to arts and literature. The same is true of philosophy too. All the talk about whether and why not there is progress in philosophy is based on the assumption that philosophy is a vehicle of knowledge. That is simply not the case. Philosophy, to reiterate what I said earlier, enables understanding. Whatever refinements philosophers make to their theories, each generation has to attain understanding on its own terms. There is no accumulation since understanding does not consist of facts or truths that can be accumulated into a larger and larger corpus. In a slightly different but essentially similar way, the telos of history is not really knowledge of the past. The value of history lies in the enhancement of understanding it provides through knowledge of the past. That is primarily why history represents a middle ground between social sciences and humanities. It pursues knowledge but ultimately to use it as a frame for understanding. The entire spectrum of Humanities is concerned with understanding. The misguided imitation of social sciences under the pressure of a positivist ethos and the resultant striving to pursue truth and knowledge have all but destroyed the spirit that animates the intellectual adventure they represent.

Further, it is not a matter of academic pursuits or intellectual life. It is, more importantly a matter of living itself. The central but implicit question of the Humanities is as to what constitutes a good life—for the individual and the community. Each discipline within that ambit

tries to contribute some strands to the full fabric of understanding as to how we should live in order to do justice to the spirit of human existence. Society today, as we proudly proclaim, has become a knowledge-driven society. Knowledge can provide some of the means for a good life. It can guide us towards it. But what humankind needs is not more knowledge as much as a greater, more refined capacity for understanding. For our own individual and collective sakes, we must understand the importance of understanding. If we do not, we will all end up destroying ourselves or sink into a dark night of barbarism—the latter being the infinitely worse fate to befall any race of sentient beings.

### Notes

1. This approach—of imbricating the two strands of historical account and examination of current usage, and intertwining the historical elision of ‘understanding’ with the ambiguous relation between knowledge and understanding we find in common usage—is certainly not the best strategy. But given the peculiar nature of the issue I am trying to present here, I do not know how to produce a sequential or linear narrative. I am afraid the reader just has to bear with me.
2. In any case, the point of any analysis is not to elucidate common usage but to use it as a point of departure for refining the concepts such that they can be forged into useful tools in more rigorous descriptions.
3. For instance, ‘Bose understands Assamese’ and ‘Bose knows Assamese’ may seem to convey the same meaning but it will be noticed that in the former case it means that Bose can only comprehend Assamese but is not necessarily capable of speaking or writing in Assamese.
4. There are cases where we use the term ‘know’, but a moment’s reflection would make it clear that we mean ‘understand’: I *know* the meaning of a word but I *understand* the meaning of a statement. Even when we use the term ‘know’ in the latter case, we are using it in the sense of understanding. Similarly, I may say to someone, ‘I know how you feel.’ But, what I mean is that I *understand* how he feels. In the same way, when I say to someone, ‘I don’t know what you mean’, I actually mean that I don’t *understand* what she means. In all these cases, the difference is conceptual. Casual usage may allow it but if we wish to be precise, we have to take note of the fundamental character of this difference. Now, it is not the case that the distinction between knowledge and understanding implies necessary separation between them. There are situations where they are separate, but there are also situations where understanding is quite distinct from knowledge but requires the latter as a prerequisite. In other words, you need to know certain things before you can understand them.
5. Hannah Arendt makes this observation in her *Life of the Mind*, though in the context of what she, and Heidegger before her, call ‘thinking’. My own understanding is that what these thinkers call thinking is broadly the act or process of understanding. I shall try to explain my view in a while.
6. Things—as entities—can be perceived but cannot be understood. In other words, things *qua* entities are opaque. Understanding requires the dissolution

of content into form: in the sense that—in Aristotelian terms—matter can only be sensed while form alone can be understood.

7. One could also say that truth has no multiplicity whereas ‘meaning’ can be plural. However, this needs a caveat. Understood in the narrow sense, meaning, too, is singular like truth, and therefore the idea of multiple meanings is, strictly speaking, incoherent. The relation between meaning and interpretation is complex and in a sense the two are incommensurable. If we use the term meaning to imply objectivity, for instance, by saying, ‘this is the meaning of this passage’, there is no scope for interpretation. We must dispense with the objective notion of meaning if we want to do hermeneutics.
8. Here, a remark or two regarding the relation between understanding and language might be in order. It is easy to be misled into positing too close a relation between language and understanding and reduce all understanding to linguistic understanding. As a matter of fact, Gadamer and, to some extent, Heidegger before him think of understanding almost exclusively in terms of language. However, it is doubtful how far such a view is tenable. Understanding is not limited to/by language. Therefore, language cannot be the ground of understanding. It is doubtful whether language even has an ontological priority in the context of understanding. It can, however, from a heuristic point of view serve as a *model* for understanding and can provide a point of departure to get a sense of the essential nature of understanding. That is to say, the importance of language lies in the fact that we can begin to get a grasp of understanding only in terms of language. It is in this sense that I maintain that language has only heuristic priority in the context of understanding.
9. Similarly, in the case of understanding also, most discussions centre on the conditions of the possibility of understanding rather than with understanding itself. For example, Gadamer is interested in the question of what is needed for understanding of a text or a person to be possible, whereas our interest here is in the more basic question of the nature of what we call understanding.
10. There is, at any rate as per my reading, a delicious irony there which sheds light on the entire Socratic project, in particular about what has been called the Socratic irony. Great scholars have contended on the question of how exactly we are to understand the fact that Socrates claims that he does not know anything and yet goes about trying to prove everyone ignorant as if he himself knew everything. Opinions have ranged from the suggestion that it is a discursive strategy to the idea that it denotes a sort of dishonesty on Socrates’ part. The truth, I believe, is different and will become clear once we look at the entire matter from the perspective of the distinction between knowledge and understanding. Socrates is perfectly serious when he claims that he is the most ignorant of men. There is no irony in that admission. But the point where we go astray is in assuming that Socrates’ quest is knowledge. It is not. The thing that Socrates keeps seeking everywhere is *understanding*. Once we begin to look through this lens, we find confirmation in many dialogues including dialogues such as *Protagoras*, where the latter hints to the young Socrates that he will realize the actual nature of his quest gradually. The fact that understanding is the telos of Socrates should really come as no surprise to us since, although almost the entire history of western thought appears to have had a blind spot towards the notion of ‘understanding’ as a distinctive epistemic category, some of the pre-Socratic thinkers such as Protagoras seem to have had a fairly perspicuous grasp of this notion. In fact, we can go so far as to say that they were quite clear about

the difference between their factual/scientific/knowledge-oriented enquiries and their quest for understanding. Insofar as they practised was philosophy they pursued understanding. This becomes fairly obvious when we look at philosophers like Parmenides, Heraclitus and Pythagoras. Their interest was not to add to the corpus of knowledge but enlarge the scope of understanding. Philosophical practice at the point of its origin was identical with the practice of understanding: *to philosophise was to understand*. It is an elementary, positivist mistake to conceive of entire pre-Socratic thought as primitive science whose telos was knowledge. For that matter, it is not a historical but essential fact that philosophy is not a clumsy, anachronistic attempt at science but is a practice of understanding. The goal of philosophy has always been not knowledge but understanding. These thinkers were very clear in their minds about the distinction between understanding and knowledge, and they were also aware that what they were pursuing was not knowledge but understanding. It was this distinction, fundamental and blindingly obvious that got blurred since the time of Plato till now, barring a few thinkers who dimly sensed the distinction but, for some strange reason, brushed past it. Socrates, we can confidently say, was never interested in knowledge. When he asked his interlocutors to define their terms, from that point itself, he was moving in the direction of understanding. That is also one of the reasons why he was not interested in cosmological questions. It is in Aristotle that we first see a serious quest for knowledge, although he never abandons his primary activity of pursuit of understanding. In Socrates, the key function is 'reflection' whose product can only be understanding. We must interpret his famous statement about the worthlessness of an unexamined life in this light.

11. Kant's term 'vernunft' translated as 'Reason' here is sometimes translated as 'understanding'. But Kant uses the term 'verstand' which comes closer to the English term 'understanding'. However, as will presently become clear, the latter term does not denote 'understanding' in the sense in which we are discussing here. Rather it comes close to what we call 'knowledge'.
12. The classification of judgment as 'determinative' and 'reflective', as important as it is, does not give us a picture of 'understanding' as the object, although it is valuable insofar as it makes a crucial distinction within the act or process of understanding. The influence of this distinction can be seen clearly in Heidegger's question about thinking, where his notion of 'thinking' comes very close to Kant's reflective judgment. In his book, *What is called Thinking*, Heidegger claims—without any deprecatory intent—that science does not represent thinking. His meaning can be understood better when we relate it to Kant's distinction. The process of 'thought' involved in science is the structured, sequential, reasoned, determinative thinking, whereas the kind of thinking Heidegger is trying to emphasise is not structured, does not follow any set rules of reasoning and is characterised by spontaneity. The latter comes close to Kant's concept of regulative judgment.
13. Polanyi's book *Personal Knowledge* is extremely relevant in this context.
14. This point has far-reaching implications for Humanities pedagogy. Polanyi, of course, points them out with reference to the sciences, but for the Humanities, they are absolutely vital. For instance, take the teaching of Literature, say teaching a poem. What is it to teach a poem? Are we imparting 'knowledge'? if so, what kind of knowledge? If we realise that what we are striving for is not knowledge for there is no significant knowledge to be sought in a poem, we see



that we are striving to generate understanding in the student. But how do you do that? There is no method, technique or approach for it. To put it bluntly, a teacher of poetry must just perform a ritual dance around the poem, incanting some magical phrases and hope that somehow suddenly understanding dawns on the student and her face lights up with delight of that understanding. Most of the Humanities pedagogy is yet to come to terms with this fact. This in itself is perhaps not such a calamity, but more unfortunately, this failure to come to terms with the centrality of understanding and the elusiveness of the methods to catch it have prompted the practitioners in the Humanities to desperately cling to the pretence that the Humanities primarily constitute the quest for knowledge, that for instance, Literature is a knowledge system, and that there is a 'methodology' that can be mastered and deployed to find the knowledge hidden somewhere in the interstices of Literature or philosophy.