

This paper is an abbreviated phenomenology of understanding accompanied by some very general suggestions as to how pedagogy is related to a grasp of the essential features of understanding. It is meant to serve as a basis for discussion among members of a college community each of whom, whatever his or her unique role and special interests, is presumably committed to the task of encouraging understanding through pedagogy.

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Understanding and How to Make It Happen

I call what I am offering here a phenomenology because in its core it most resembles those philosophical efforts, originally inspired by Edmund Husserl and Max Scheler, which have come to be recognized under the name phenomenology. In substance it is the description of what a direct intellectual examination reveals to be the essential features of the experience of understanding, that is, those features that, taken together, serve to mark understanding off from other kinds of experience, and that must all be present if a given experience of understanding is to be complete. This phenomenology is abbreviated, reduced to its barest outlines, to meet the requirements of a paper designed primarily to stimulate discussion.

Understanding: Dialectic of Experience and Reflection

Understanding reveals itself most generally as a dialectic of experience and reflection. By dialectic is meant a process in which, out of a given base or foundation, some element arises enjoying sufficient autonomy to turn back and interact with the base itself, significantly modifying it as a base. In this case, the base, which constitutes the most general character of understanding, is experience (understanding is, in the final analysis, an experience). The element that, in understanding, arises out of experience, returning to interact with it and enrich it as experience, is reflection. By experience is meant the direct, immediate encounter with reality (familiar modes of such encounter are the sensory, the emotional, the intellectual). By reflection is meant the act of attention by which experience is made explicit, formal, articulate. Understanding, then, most generally speaking, is a process consisting of the dialectical interplay of experience and reflection. A given event of understanding exhibits the presence of five essential moments.

The Essential Moments in the Process of Understanding

1. ALIENATION (Perplexity, Curiosity, Feeling & Question).
2. ANTICIPATION (Looking Forward to an Answer).
3. ARTICULATION (The Explicitation of an Answer).
4. APOLOGY (Acknowledging the Limits of the Answer).
5. RESOLUTION (Satisfaction in a Truth Achieved).

1. ALIENATION

Alienation is the first step in the dialectic of understanding. With respect to a given event of understanding, it represents a moment of relatively pure experience,

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prior to any reflection that would contribute to the articulation of that understanding. It is an essentially negative experience that may include a sense of privation, emptiness, malaise, anxiety, and frustration in various mixture. These feelings achieve their specificity as parts of the process of understanding by their essential linkage to the central experiences of curiosity and perplexity. Wonder is the term traditionally used to name this combination I call Alienation. It is felt, though inarticulately, as a more or less intolerable separation between some prior understanding and some further, enhanced understanding intimated as possible and desirable.

The moment of Alienation is essential to the experience of understanding. Without it, no understanding can be said to be complete. Where Alienation is missing, weak or pretended, understanding is inevitably superficial, thin, rigid and partial.

In pedagogy, the importance of the moment of Alienation is honoured in the effort a teacher makes to get students to actually feel the questions that give life and meaning to significant answers, rather than merely learning formulae, reciting from memory, summarizing research results, or imitating a master. The teacher attuned to this essential moment in the process of understanding will not be content to have elicited from his students solutions to problems they have not in some important way made their own.

2. ANTICIPATION

As a moment in the dialectic of understanding, Anticipation represents a transition from the relatively pure experiential moment of Alienation to the relatively pure reflective moment of Articulation. It arises as a response to the uneasiness felt in Alienation and is fulfilled in the decisive explicitness accomplished in Articulation. Anticipation is recognized in the activities of groping for an answer, weighing possibilities, mulling over evidence, pondering the situation, projecting a solution, reviewing pertinent materials. It is represented in an attitude of active and more or less confident expectation. The activity in Anticipation is an essentially creative one: it involves a departure from old forms no longer satisfying, the perception, in those old forms, of hints for constructing relevant new forms, the mining of regions of as yet unexplicit experience with a view to developing a variety of pertinent articulations, one or some of which may be seen as adequate and this made fully explicit. In this creative activity of Anticipation, *imagination* plays its principal role in understanding.

The vitality of this activity, and the feeling of confidence that may accompany it, appears to depend in large part on a belief in the hidden but inexhaustible richness of the reality revealing itself in our experience. I shall refer to this belief below, in the discussion of the moment of Apology. But here it is important to see that such a belief allows the departure from old forms without a sense of betrayal, an interpretation of the meaning of truth that is not bound to the dogmatic acceptance of formulae which, if reality is infinitely rich, must in principle be always only partially adequate, and finally the expectation that new forms that are pertinent and true will indeed yield themselves to an inquiry focussed responsibly on a given region of experience.

The moment of Anticipation is indispensable in the overall economy of the dialectic of understanding. Without it understanding is premature, uncertain, lacking in confidence, devoid of the stability that can come only from having considered every perceivable alternative before arriving at an answer.

For pedagogy, recognizing the importance of Anticipation means making the

student aware of the principal answers, or kinds of answer, that tradition has provided to a given question. It means providing research materials or at least indicating clearly where they can be found. Honouring the moment of Anticipation involves also encouraging care, patience and circumspection in seeking understanding. It means discouraging the easy answer, the obvious answer, the dogmatic answer. Furthermore, it means always respecting and encouraging the imaginative proposal of alternatives. Finally, giving heed to the moment of Anticipation means fostering a firm sense of belief in the rich potential of reality for revealing itself in ever new, unexpected, yet nonetheless sometimes true ways. This belief in reality is, I maintain, what permits the consideration of alternatives to serve as a moment in the development of understanding, rather than as a station on the way to the wasteland of relativistic skepticism. Skepticism is the enemy of understanding, and the enemy of good pedagogy.

3. ARTICULATION

Articulation represents the moment of purest reflection in the dialectic of understanding. It involves making explicit the solution adopted in response to the discomfort of Alienation, in the light of all the information, the alternatives, and the confidence provided in the moment of Anticipation. It is represented in such acts as formulating an answer, settling on a line of argumentation, arriving at a conclusion, adopting a procedure, mastering a technique, putting a thought into words.

If Anticipation is essentially creative in its departure from old forms and its imaginative exploration of new ones, it must be said that Articulation is characteristically conservative. It involves coming to rest, taking a stand, rejecting the invitation to further debate and reconsideration. It demands the special effort and courage, the willingness to risk assuming a definite posture, that marks every true expression of conservatism. Here *will*, rather than imagination, enters into relation with understanding, for the moment of Articulation is accomplished only by an act of decision that must be sustained throughout its duration. Decision enters to stop debate, settle on an interpretation of the evidence, accept a new formulation. This is why Articulation can be described as decisive explicitness.

It may seem odd that I would take the trouble to insist on the indispensability of the moment of Articulation in the overall dialectic of understanding. Certainly the most widespread misconception about the nature of understanding must be that explicit formulation is identical, or nearly identical, with understanding itself. The tendency to this misconception is inherent in every empiricism, and in particular in the ubiquitous behaviourism which would, in the interest of maintaining scientific accountability, reduce understanding to the explicit behaviours it involves. Yet, insist I must, for the possibility of an attempt at understanding that would ignore or even avoid Articulation is not only conceivable, but realized quite often in fact. Such an understanding remains inevitably vague, implicit, stammering, incommunicable.

Pedagogy will pay homage to the moment of Articulation by insisting on the importance of clearly written or spoken work, success on tests, or actual demonstration of acquired techniques as proofs of a student's understanding. The well-known expression "I really do understand, but I can't put it into words" will be accepted only as the report of a position to be overcome, and treated accordingly. Discussion and other forms of explicit class participation by students will be encouraged, and teachers will take the trouble to actually give and carefully correct examinations and other written work. Finally, although discussion will be encouraged, a

teacher will carefully avoid giving the impression that nothing but endless discussion is involved in understanding a given matter. A decision, however provisional, must be made. A stand must be taken. Debate must come to an end. The student will be encouraged to exercise his will in this way, in the service of understanding.

4. APOLOGY

In the dialectic of understanding, the moment of Apology stands as a transition from the pure reflection represented in Articulation to the pure experience of the final moment, Resolution. Apology involves above all a refusal to accept as totally satisfying the explicitation represented in the moment of Articulation. Apology recognizes the continued presence of the original Alienation, even after the development of a new formulation. Referring back to the variety of relevant perspectives and alternatives, the pertinent, variously interpretable evidence considered in the moment of Anticipation; and referring forward, as in the experience of Anticipation itself, to the unexplored richness of the reality gradually revealing itself; Apology, without prejudice to legitimate results achieved, nonetheless introduces the essential note of *modesty* into the experience of understanding. Apology is represented in such acts as specifying the context of results, making clear the known limitations of a line of demonstration, inviting criticism, awaiting unforeseen developments, listening with sympathy to opposing views.

Without the moment of Apology, understanding is proud, presumptuous, dogmatic, a victim of *hybris*. It is inevitably vulnerable because it pretends something impossible, namely, to have exhausted the meaning of reality, or some region of reality, in a single explicit articulation. Nothing could be less certain than that the experience of reality is in principle even susceptible of complete explicitness.

The moment of Apology is honoured in pedagogy when teachers scrupulously avoid giving the impression of having final and absolute answers, unqualified by any context, presupposition, special purpose, theoretical framework, methodological choice, or other limitation. This moment is recognized in the humility with which a good teacher expects, even hopes, to be surpassed by his students, and in the encouragement he gives them not to be overawed by the positions of the great men in a given field.

5. RESOLUTION

Resolution, as the final moment in the dialectic of understanding, represents a return to the level of relatively pure experience. It is a moment of felt satisfaction, of release from tension, of easiness, relaxation, distention. It refers back particularly to the tension felt in Alienation, which it experiences now as dissolved. It represents a satisfaction with the Articulation achieved across the moment of Anticipation, and maintains itself intact even in the face of the critical influence of Apology. Resolution is experienced not as a victory achieved (Articulation may often be experienced this way) but rather as a benefit to be hospitably welcomed. It involves a sense of peace and confidence at having made an advance, come to an insight, glimpsed a truth, and it is not destroyed by the recognition that the advance may not be the last, the insight not the only one possible, the truth not exhaustive of the reality in question.

Without the presence of the moment of Resolution, understanding dissolves into its opposite, agnosticism, and eventually, into the anxious wandering of nihilism. Thus Resolution appears as an essential, indispensable moment in the dialectic of understanding.

In pedagogy, the indispensability of the moment of Resolution is recognized when the teacher stoutly resists the temptation to cynicism arising from his knowledge of the wide variety of views on important problems in his field, the inevitable limitation of viewpoint represented in the methodology of his discipline. The teacher who honours Resolution attempts to radiate an appreciation for results achieved, truths arrived at. He will show respect for the firm beliefs of his students, even while he strives to discourage complacency and foster questioning. He will permit a student to enjoy having gained an insight, having clearly reached a new stage in an inquiry. In general, such a teacher will foster an appreciation for the truth of positions reached in the literature of a discipline, however they may have evolved in the course of time. He will acknowledge that a truth that evolves, deepens or becomes absorbed in a more adequate view does not thereby cease to be a truth.

A New Beginning

With the arrival at the moment of Resolution, the event of understanding is complete, supposing that the other essential moments have been duly lived. But this completion represents, within the overall dialectic of understanding, not only a destination but a point of departure as well. The moment of Resolution is precisely that newly enriched, enhanced experiential basis within which, through the development of circumstance, Alienation may grow anew, and the process of understanding is invited to start all over again on a new level. In human understanding, the repetition of the process, each time on a higher level, is in principle always possible.