Understanding People

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1. We shall never know how the flowers smelt in the garden of Epicurus, or how Nietzsche felt the wind in his hair as he walked on the mountains; we cannot relive the triumph of Archimedes or the bitterness of Marius; but the evidence of what these men thought is in our hands; and in re-creating these thoughts in our own minds by interpretation of that evidence, we can know, so far as there is any knowledge, that the thoughts we create were theirs.

R. S. Collingwood. *The Idea of History*, Oxford, 1946, p.296.

2. He who understands [a] baboon would do more towards metaphysics than Locke.

Charles Darwin

3. The things with which we concern ourselves in science appear in myriad forms, and with a multitude of attributes. For example, if we stand on the shore and look at the sea, we see the water, the waves breaking, the foam, the sloshing motion of the water, the sound, the air, the winds and the clouds, the sun and the blue sky, and light; there is sand and there are rocks of various hardness and permanence, colour and texture. There are animals and seaweed, hunger and disease, and the observer on the beach; there may be even happiness and thought. Any other spot in nature has a similar variety of things and influences.

Richard Feynman. *The Feynman Lectures on Physics*, Vol. I, 1963, 2–1.

I

It has sometimes been maintained that the sense in which we may be said to understand people is entirely different from that in which we may be said to understand the weather, nuclear physics, set-theoretic topology or the nature of pictorial representation. Some thinkers have thus been led to make a sharp division between so-called 'explanation' (*erklären*) and 'understanding' (*verstehen*), a division which has been used to demarcate the natural sciences from the humanities. In this paper I want to do two things. First, I want to argue that the division is not as sharp as the conventional wisdom

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has appeared to maintain, since all understanding, including the understanding of people, consists in the connecting, ordering and appraising of things encountered, believed or known. Second, I want to examine what is distinctive in our understanding of people and how educated emotions are essential to it.

II

When do we say that the question of whether we understand something does not arise? Well, we do not normally talk of our understanding, failing to understand or misunderstanding a particular stone. This might be due to its particularity or it might be due to its stoniness. Which is it? It could not just be its particularity. We may well talk of understanding a particular volcano, Vesuvius, say. We know something of how it was formed, why it has erupted at certain times and can conjecture from our knowledge of volcanoes in general and this volcano in particular how it will be apt to behave in the future. A stone, on the other hand, is inert, or so it appears; we do not need to know its distinctive ways or take account of them or respond to them. Normal stones are inert within our life-times unless moved, pushed, hauled or hurled. But consider any stone over a million-year stretch of time. Imagine super-accelerated photography of its origin and development. Now we have a context in which the question of understanding can intelligibly arise.

If a thing changes, then it has both similarities to and differences from what it was before as well as similarities to and differences from other things. To know how and why it changes (or does not change), to know these similarities and differences, to know how it is connected or related to itself in past and future states and to other things constitutes understanding the thing in question. Moreover, part of this understanding is knowing how to respond appropriately to whatever changes the object in question is subject to.

In describing what happens to volcanoes, how volcanoes behave, we talk both of their past and their future. For in their present state we find traces and records of their past and also signs and indications of their future. Now whether we are concerned with stones, volcanoes or people, it is we who connect, relate, structure, order, assimilate, differentiate, exemplify, detail and emphasize. The manner in which we perform such intellectual actions is a matter for our choice and we find reasons for our choices in our experience of the physical world and of our fellow human beings. In this way we come to understand and *appreciate* the significance of what we know. Appreciation and appraisal enters into all understanding.

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People are like volcanoes (I once knew an Italian actor who, talking of his wife, would say even in her presence, 'She is a volcano, an eruption'). They have traces of their past and manifest tendencies to future behaviour. Where they standardly differ from volcanoes is that they have cognitive access to many of the 'traces' (memory) and some of the tendencies (self-knowledge) and can respond appropriately to their own states and those of others.

In order to facilitate and to give expression to this cognitive access, we need a framework of concepts and a vocabulary to describe, structure, and order what people do and what they tend to do or bring about, what they desire, intend and adopt as projects or aims. A conceptual framework of this kind will not be austerely physical or banally descriptive, but will be coloured by the agents themselves, so expressing their patterns of intention or their perception of the patterns of intention of themselves and others.

Understanding people is distinctively 'loopy'. Human action is determined by how agents interpret or understand other agents and the physical and the social situation they are in. Hence every agent needs a conceptual framework adequate to label, interpret and appraise practical situations. There are, of course, salient physical features of a situation, but there are also aspects of human conduct and character which we require suitably educated emotions to perceive. Understanding *anything* involves appreciating and appraising significance. In the field of human action this aspect of standard understanding is more conspicuous, for what we experience as significant is often determined by the emotions we feel.

III

I shall now turn to the distinctive character of the understanding of people. Consider any action. No action, past or prospective, is presented to the agent or the critic or the adviser as neatly and definitively labelled. Actions pure and simple cannot even be individuated or counted (any more than things, properties or events), only actions under a description. No action can be individuated, explained, justified, appraised, excused or, in general, understood, except as considered under some description. Our beliefs, desires, and emotions enable us to discern patterns in behaviour which would otherwise be invisible. So we connect an agent's action with his desires within a situation involving agents who think, feel and act in time and space. We connect an action, however initially characterized, with what went before and what comes after. Just as the character of a musical phrase is determined by its temporal context,

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so too is the nature of an action. What an agent is doing, and what he is properly characterized as doing, is determined by what he has been doing, what others have been doing, by what he is likely to do and by what he has been and is minded to do. Moreover, we can only make sense of the role of beliefs, desires, motives, emotions, etc., in a temporal context. Pride in achievements past, resentment for bygone wrongs, remorse for the agent's crimes, gratitude for benefits conferred, ambition for the highest honours, all these require us to be conscious of ourselves and others as intentional agents in time.

Now to understand the actions of a person over time we need, as Stuart Hampshire emphasized, the aid of conceptual thinking (*Thought and Action*, London, 1959, p.220). The agent who deliberates, who looks back at his past actions and forward to his future ones, requires an adequate stock of concepts if he is to make the necessary comparisons and classifications characteristic of what we would call a 'rational agent'. And when that agent contemplates the actions of others he needs these same concepts. We have an enormous variety of concepts descriptive of physical actions in much of their diversity. Consider the diversity of words applying to physical contact. Here is a sample:

Touch	Knock	Dig	Stroke	Squash
Push	Hit	Poke	Put	Wrench
Pull	Shove	Strike	Paw	Grip

Most of these words contain the notion of intentional action and some of the actions referred to are the appropriate objects of dislike or disapproval. To use these verbs with the name of an agent is to do more than simply to describe a physical movement; it is to ascribe responsibility. We ascribe the action in question to an agent and also ascribe a 'content' to the action, a content which may acquire expressive and/or appraisive force. The verbs become normative.

Other classes of concepts we use to discriminate certain kinds of behaviour or the dispositions or pronenesses to manifest certain kinds of behaviour. One group of these concern people's proneness to express or to arouse in others certain identifiable emotions. Here is a sample:

envious	enviable
loving	lovable
irritating	irritable
embarrassing	easily embarrassed

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These tend to merge with other appraisive concepts in which the expression or eliciting of emotions is not clearly indicated but mastery of which consists in knowing what would count in our society/language/form of life as verifying or falsifying, confirming or disconfirming their application. We need to experience or to be familiar with the emotions in order to apply the emotion-related words and to diagnose our own condition and that of others.

Other concepts, which we use both to describe and to appraise people's characters and actions, include the concepts of the virtues and merits, the vices, failings, flaws and deficiencies. These are the thick normative concepts, such as 'brave', 'cruel', 'mean', 'thrifty', 'candid', and 'graceful'. They are applied to actions in so far as they originate from a character, to which the concept in its dispositional use applies.

Further, there are 'social' actions, which are taken to have certain social consequences, like requiring a certain kind of response; a vocabulary for these social actions is indispensable both for deliberation and for describing and understanding human action. Words for such actions are:

Greeting	Rescuing
Welcoming	Abandoning
Snubbing	Worshipping
Helping	Paying respects to

Many of these concepts, for example, the so-called 'thick' ones, cannot be understood completely from the outside. This does not imply, as is sometimes thought, that we cannot understand these concepts at all unless we share the same dispositions and attitudes as those who apply the concepts from the inside. We do not have completely to share the concept, say, of miscegenation, as once used by Afrikaners, in order to make sense of it. We might act the part of a virulent racist and use the concept insincerely with all the requisite overtones, say, if we are on the stage, or are *agents provocateurs*. Grasp of the concept involves putting oneself imaginatively in the position of the sincere user. The historian needs to be aware of the concepts and vocabulary available to the historical person, which would have been deployed by the agent to describe, to explain, to justify, to excuse, to exculpate and so on. But the imagination which we need is not evenly distributed among men, and it requires to be tutored.

We need, then, to be taught and tutored in our common stock of concepts in order to understand our own projected actions and those of others. But because these normative concepts are always to

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some extent contestable, we need to be aware of the different ways in which different people or different groups of people may, from time to time, apply them. Of course, some of these concepts may be peculiar to particular cultures or sub-cultures and it will take hard work for those outside the culture to 'recover' them. Further, there are stories, legends and true histories, which give us pegs or headings for classifying actions, Aesop's fables, Jesus's parables, characters in the work of famous story-tellers and novelists, Mr. Micawber, Vautrin, Swann, Falstaff or Pooh, Piglet and Tigger. Understanding what it is which we intend or which others have done involves deploying the concepts and stories we have in our store, and since we feel the need to defend and justify our actions or influence the deliberations or actions of others, in order to be effective and to behave appropriately, we employ shared concepts and common stories.

IV

Those who do not have a mastery of the shared normative concepts and common stories will be culturally impoverished and will not understand the point of the stories which are told, in much the same way that an ignorant or dull-witted person may not see the point of a joke. In telling stories we impose pattern; patterns are needed because each individual life can be presented as exhibiting a pattern. We are, indeed, compulsive story-tellers. Even in recounting physical events, the onset of a storm, the inundation from a leak in the roof, the car's spluttering to a halt on a frosty morning, we weave the events into a coherent story, unfolding, explicating, explaining in the widest sense the march—or the tangle—of events. Of course, any sequence of actions which we call behaviour or conduct can be described in greater detail, but our descriptions are essentially gappy. These gaps are not necessarily gaps for other actions which we have inconsiderately omitted from our description, but gaps for connections, connections which will justify the agent's or the critic's application of a host of verbs, adverbs, adjectives or qualifications of some kind (We already have the bricks, what we need are not further bricks, but cement).

All understanding is from a perspective or point of view and so to understand a person we have not only to understand *from* a perspective but also to identify correctly the perspectives of those we seek to understand. Any understanding description or characterization of a person's conduct must be from a perspective which takes other perspectives into account. *Egocentric thinking moves nothing socially*. Thus in learning the thick normative concepts we learn to

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enter into, to 'simulate' the minds of others, to frame within our own minds a kind of 'model' of the minds of others. If we fail to 'read' them, we shall find our fellows 'inscrutable'. For the thick concepts we use are concepts of a common language and a common way of life (even if sometimes 'insular' or 'provincial'), and in acquiring them we learn agreed criteria for applying the concepts, e.g. 'vain', 'fastidious', 'dilatory', 'fulsome' and 'vulgar'. To use these concepts *from the inside* we have to acquire not mere conceptual facility but also the will and/or the skill to use them sincerely. Use of the concepts highlights certain aspects of the actions we seek to describe. To do this effectively we need a sensibility or sensitivity to those aspects which otherwise might be unrecognized or entirely obscure to us. In this way there comes into being an alliance of the head and the heart. (Much of this is no doubt generally agreed now thanks to the work of Philippa Foot and Iris Murdoch, but I think that it can also be found in the novels and letters of George Eliot).

It is an important fact in our lives that people differ both in the range and in the depth of their mastery of thick normative and emotion-related concepts and also in their experience of the varieties of human personality. This difference in mastery I shall illustrate from Henry James's novel *The Spoils of Poynton* (SP). The plot in brief is as follows. Mrs. Gereth has spent all her married life collecting fine things, furniture, porcelain, 'works of art' and so on. Her husband dies, leaving the principal house at Poynton in its entirety to his son, Owen. Owen has fallen in love with and wishes to marry Mona, and Mona and he want Mrs Gereth to leave Poynton and all 'the Things', as Mrs Gereth calls them, and to live in a small cottage with just a handful of choice possessions. Mrs. Gereth is dismayed and wants to retain possession of 'the Things'. She confides in a young friend, Fleda, an unattached and relatively impoverished young lady. Of her Henry James writes:

> The progress and march of my tale became and remained that of her understanding. (*The Bodley Head*, Henry James, Vol. IV, (SP), London, 1967, Preface, p. 13).

Mrs Gereth, Owen and Fleda exemplify differential mastery of thick and emotion-dependent concepts. Owen has virtually no mastery of such concepts at all. 'He had no more sense for a motive than a deaf man for a tune. No wonder that he went through life with a frank dread of people's minds' (*SP*, p. 36). For they appeared to him as mere bundles of preferences and aversions with no principles of connection to give them order, unity, rationale, significance or even predictability. Owen's vocabulary primarily consists of

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words or phrases denoting physical movements or of words expressing 'thin' and highly general value-concepts, e.g. 'awfully jolly' and the like, leading him to make oversimplified interpretations of other people. 'It was devilish awkward (*SP*, p. 52) and it was so in part because Owen had no imagination. It had lodged itself in that empty chamber that his mother hated the surrender because she hated Mona'. Mrs Gereth oversimplifies too but for different reasons. She has a good grasp of a variety of thick concepts, especially aesthetic ones, whether she is attending to Louis XV furniture or Oriental porcelain. Her 'ruling passion' is the collection and custodianship of fine things. However, 'she had no imagination', Henry James says (*SP*, p. 118) 'about anybody's life save on the side that she bumped against', namely, the side that affects 'the Things' and her ruling passion. For this reason she cannot apply her thick concepts in a disinterested and impartial way. Alone in the novel Fleda, who unfortunately falls in love with Owen whom she finds 'delightfully dense', tries to do justice to everybody's point of view and succeeds in perceiving the situation in all its complexity. Consider how she reacts to what appears puzzling to Mrs Gereth. Because Mrs Gereth in a dramatic gesture removes all the furniture from Poynton, Mona tells Owen that she will not marry him until he has made his mother return the Things. Mrs Gereth with characteristic oversimplification sees this stand of Mona's as 'greedy and grasping'. Indeed, temporarily Mona's conduct produces 'aversion' on Owen's part. When in a precipitate gesture Mrs Gereth returns the furniture, Mona and Owen are immediately reconciled and get married without delay, Mona having overcome Owen's aversion. Mrs Gereth finds this unintelligible, but Fleda thinks she understands. Mona is 'a person who's upset by failure and who blooms and expands with success. There was something she had set her heart upon, set her teeth about—the house exactly as she had seen it ... When the pressure was removed she came up again. From the moment the house was once more what it had to be her natural charm reasserted itself' (*SP*, p. 200) and Owen soon found himself under its sway.

The point of this example is two-fold. First, we cannot understand other people unless we appreciate their differential conceptual mastery. Second, in acquiring the capacity and the disposition to use shared concepts, we thereby learn to take up an impersonal standpoint. In this way the individual can escape the prison of his own peculiar perspective.

How can we best acquire the capacity and the will to avail ourselves of our stock of normative concepts and store of stories in order to understand people better? For this is no trivial matter that

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we are discussing but how we can live harmoniously with mutual understanding. The common-sense answer is that we should learn from 'real life'. But the trouble with real life is that it is like the Kantian thing-in-itself, we cannot know it, we can only know the real situation-as-characterized-by-us. For a real-life situation does not carry a definitive and authoritative label, characterizing it once and for all from a God's-eye point of view. Moreover, interesting real situations are so complex that (1) we fall short in detailed knowledge, and (2) when we immerse ourselves in the situation in order to be fully acquainted with it, we may lose the necessary detachment for balanced understanding. Real life does not simultaneously facilitate both the detachment of the intellect and the engagement of the sensibility. Yet we need them both. This must have been one of the difficulties Sir Richard Scott was conscious of when he wrote his report in 1996 on British policy on arms sales to Iraq. He remarks (*The Independent on Sunday*, 18 February, 1996, p.18):

> Any attempt to summarize my findings runs the risk that the complexities and subtleties of the factors which influenced the contemporaneous actions of government officials will not be adequately reflected.

But it is not merely the complexity of the factors but also the possibility of co-existent accounts, diverse but possibly complementary, of one and the same situation which may lead a disinterested observer to essentially contestable verdicts. Sir Richard Scott may have been wrestling with this when coming to a view on the conduct of Mr William Waldegrave. During the Iran-Iraq war it was the policy of British and other governments not to export defence-related equipment to either side. After the end of that war, UK government ministers decided to adopt a more relaxed interpretation of the guidelines on defence sales as far as Iraq was concerned. Since in their opinion this did not amount to a change in policy, they came to a decision not to inform Parliament of this change in interpretation, although 'in any ordinary use of language' they were agreeing on a change in policy. Although, then, ministers were deliberately leading the public to believe that a stricter line was being applied than was the case, this did not amount, as Sir Richard Scott saw it, to duplicity but rather to sincere mistake. Thus Scott writes of Mr Waldegrave:

> In his evidence to the enquiry, he strenuously and consistently asserted his belief, in the face of a volume of overwhelming evidence to the contrary, that policy on defence sales to Iraq had, indeed, remained unchanged. I did not receive the impression of

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> any insincerity on his part in giving me the evidence he did. But it is clear that policy... did not remain unchanged.

My second real-life example is from the life of George Eliot. (For a short account of this episode, see Kathryn Hughes, *George Eliot: The Last Victorian*, London, 1998, pp. 244–7). Her publishers, John Blackwood and his brother, had encouraged and fostered her development as a novelist and had become personal friends to GE and to George Henry Lewes. It was natural, then, that she should consult them about the planning of *Romola*, which she was finding very difficult to write during the period from 1860 to 1862. Now, unknown to Blackwood, George Smith of the *Cornhill Magazine* started negotiations with the Leweses for publishing it and made to GE 'the most magnificent offer ever yet made for a novel', £10,000, for *Romola* to be serialized in the *Cornhill*. GE and Lewes felt that this was an offer they could not refuse, and GE wrote a brief letter—I would call it '*curt*'—to John Blackwood, acquainting him with her decision and claiming that 'there would be an *indelicacy* in my making an appeal to you before decision' since the terms were 'hopelessly beyond your usual estimate of the value of my books to you' (*The Letters of George Eliot*, Gordon S. Haight, (ed.), Vol. IV, 34–5). John Blackwood was hurt at this *snub*. 'It is too bad', he wrote to his brother, 'after all the *kindness* she has experienced, but I am sure she would do it against her inclination' (*Letters* IV. 38), attributing the decision principally to G. H. Lewes's *greed* and '*voracity*'. (The emphases in the above quotations are mine and are of the 'thick' vocabulary.)

What did the Leweses do and how is it to be characterized? Words like 'ingratitude' and 'greed' come into one's mind. Full knowledge of the Leweses, their financial affairs, and attitudes is not to be had. We know GE's ideals and attitudes in general in the novels, but the way they are realized in personal dealings with other people is another matter. There may also be something in Blackwood's suspicion that GE was decisively influenced by Lewes's 'voracity'. But one may wonder whether she had what she might have described as a 'prevision' of how the Blackwoods would feel. On the other side, perhaps John Blackwood did not appreciate the precariousness of the Leweses' existence. Their livelihood was dependent on their being able despite ill health to write work deserving of publication and sufficiently remunerative to support the two of them as well as GHL's family (his separated wife and two children) and to put something aside for the future. If GHL was rapacious, there was a genuine insecurity which led him to be so. Of course, even if Blackwood had appreciated all this, he would still

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have been very hurt. In characterising and appraising action and in deliberating, people need to consider the *how* as well as the *that*. For what is done cannot be neatly separated from how it is done. It was certainly embarrassing for GE to withdraw *Romola* from them, for the Blackwoods and the Leweses considered one another 'old friends'. It would indeed have been indelicate to push an old friend into an offer he could not as a man of business afford. But a candid explanation prior to her decision of the thoughts and considerations, which led her to desert Blackwood, would, I am sure, have been appreciated by him, even if he regretted the decision. Indeed, it would have been easier to heal the rift between them, if GE's approach had been different; in the event the 'desertion' was one-off and the rest of the novels were published by the Blackwoods. The Eliot-Blackwood example is intended to illustrate three points. First, the difficulty of full knowledge in a complex situation, and this every biographer is conscious of. Second, the difficulty of detachment for one immersed in a situation, but of this more later. Third, the importance of thick concepts in appreciating the salient factors in a complex situation. Most biographies, unless the writer is very slothful or very partisan, can escape the first and second difficulty, but he has to work hard at appreciating the thick concepts available to his subject for describing, explaining and justifying his or her own conduct.

V

I shall maintain that we need to combine the observation of real situations with an acquaintance with realistic fiction and drama in order to provide a proper education for the emotions and to teach us how to understand people. It is a shortcoming of educating the emotions solely through the study of real life that the detachment necessary both for disinterestedness of judgement and the engagement of sensibility may be impaired. Real life, provided it is known with certainty, cannot be faulted for lack of verisimilitude and plainly it frequently exhibits both the complexities and the largeness of scale which characterize so much that each of us has to encounter in his own life. Lack of adequate scale in fiction and drama leads to 'cardboard' characters which do not engage the sensibility. Notoriously, the little fictions, which appear in the examples of moral philosophy, are often ludicrously abstract and 'unreal'. Lack of verisimilitude leads either to fantasy which may be of little help in understanding real people or to oversimplification which carries the greatest danger.

If a novelist is to help her readers to understand real people, she needs to write on a large scale. A sensitive writer can combine most

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of the desirable factors for a scrutable scenario. The desirable factors, as I see them, are:

1. Scale.
2. Tractable complexity.
3. Concreteness.
4. Distance.
5. Balance of diverse perspectives.
6. Verisimilitude.
7. Sensitivity.
8. Difficulty of interpretation.

First, a novelist can provide a canvas sufficiently large as to be to some extent comparable to all the complexity of real life. As far as real life is concerned, a biography aims to do the same and may be successful, given adequate records, evidence, good will and good judgement. Second, for the novel to be 'instructive' (all that this unhappy word means is 'such as to be helpful in enabling one to understand how real people feel and act') the complexity must be tractable. The novelist is omniscient within the novels and judiciously excludes the irrelevant or adventitious which in real life may hinder or obstruct deliberation or appraisal. Uncertainties, unclarities, ambiguities and loose ends must not be so numerous that they cannot be absorbed and taken account of by readers of intelligence and good will, although some uncertainties may and must remain, for in real life we have to learn how to handle them, how to act and judge with tolerant circumspection. Indeed, in the case of people like Robespierre, Father Damien, Cardinal Manning or Oscar Schindler we may remain perpetually uncertain as to their real motives or even their real intentions.

Third, the characters of a realistic novel should be concrete and not mere 'cardboard' characters. They should make the reader feel that these are people one might have known. The very tendency to abstract and to simplify, which is so important to theoretical understanding, can hamper the understanding of people. For people are not mass-produced replicas of one another, but individuals with distinctive hopes and fears, joys and sorrows, loves and aversions.

Fourth, fiction can more easily achieve a distance from the situation than, say, real-life biography. In any cognitive understanding, and especially in the cognitive understanding of people in which emotions are engaged, distance is essential if one is not to miss the wood for the trees. In personal understanding one cannot deliberate, advise or judge successfully without a sincere attempt to distance oneself to some extent from the situation in question, however difficult that may be.

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Fifth, it is easier in extended fiction to see things from more than one perspective at one and the same time, e.g. from the perspective of both Maggie Verver and the Prince in James's *The Golden Bowl* or of both Mr and Mrs Ramsay in Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*. Jane Austen's Emma only comes to realize, when it is too late, how things had looked to Jane Fairfax and, because Jane Austen had told the story from an Emma-centred point of view, both Emma and the reader experience a *Gestalt*-shift at the same point. Understanding is always from a perspective and to gain improved understanding we need to aim at balance, and this applies both to fiction and biography. In real life such balance may be unattainable when there is no fact of the matter accessible either to the agent or to the biographer. Diversity of perspective may be the final judgement even of omniscience. Here are two examples. First, the question of duplicity or sincere mistake with regard to William Waldegrave was rightly treated by Sir Richard Scott with circumspection. Second, consider Norman Hampson's biography of Robespierre where his despair of being able to attain balance led him to structure the book in the form of a dialogue (Norman Hampson, *The Life and Opinions of Maximilien Robespierre*, London, 1974).

Sixth, there is verisimilitude. The writer of realistic fiction has to draw on her own necessarily limited experience and knowledge in such a way that her work stands the test of time in being 'true to life', as we say. She undertakes what George Eliot called 'experiments in life' (*Letters*, Vol. VI, pp. 216–7). The characters of an Eliot, a Proust or a Balzac need to be significantly similar to us and sufficiently different from us at one and the same time, significantly similar to engage our emotions and sufficiently different to engage them in a detached manner.

The seventh feature is sensibility or sensitivity. Active sensibility involves exploration, both conceptual and emotional. Adapting, extending and refining the existing thick concepts involves a kind of controlled simulation, putting oneself in thought and feeling into the position of another person. The control and discipline is as necessary in everyday life as it is in historical research. We may divest ourselves in imagination of the whole body of our particular presuppositions and preferences and abstract from the memory of all that is distinctive and idiosyncratic in our own education and personal history. There was once a tyrant in Sicily, called Phalaris, who used to roast his enemies in a brazen bull. Yet he would weep at the theatre when he saw the performance of a tragedy. Phalaris saw the character, Hecuba perhaps, through the tragedian's eyes (i.e. sensibility) and his own moral sensitivity was thereby given free rein, uncorrupted by self-

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interest, personal enmities, prejudice or ideology. Such is the power of drama and literature.

Lastly, we have difficulty of interpretation. Our conceptual resources are often not adequate to make sense of the intricacies of the concrete situation. The totality of relevant 'information' may underdetermine our decision as to what to do or our judgement after the event as to whether it was rightly done. A realistic novelist must simulate up to a point the indeterminacy in real life.

VI

My topic has been the cognitive understanding of people. This is a kind of cognitive understanding which has a practical side; it involves the emotions. For the concepts by means of which we try to understand people are in large part emotion-related and response-dependent. The education of the emotions is needed for us to understand, first, ourselves as agents, and then other people whom we wish to appraise or advise. Understanding ourselves is essential for effective deliberation. Self-understanding, so often the topic of the great novelists (Austen, Eliot, Henry James), involves not merely understanding why one is disposed to act *thus* rather than *so*, but also how what one has it in mind to do may be justly characterized in so far as it is one of a number of options open to the agent. The image of the deliberating agent is of one who stands at the crossroads, in the fading light, able to descry only imperfectly the alternative routes ahead, knowing that, whichever is chosen, there is no turning back. The skill and expertise which the agent needs to acquire involves what John Dewey (*Ethics* by John Dewey and J. H. Tufts, New York, 1908, p. 323) calls an imaginative or 'dramatic rehearsal' when he writes:

> Deliberation is actually an imaginative rehearsal of various courses of conduct. We give way, *in our mind*, to some impulse; we try, *in our mind*, some plan. Following its career through various steps, we find ourselves in imagination in the presence of the consequences that would follow; and as we then like and approve, or dislike and disapprove, these consequences, we find the original impulse or plan good or bad.

To make the consequences of a proposed action 'palpably present' to oneself (the expression is George Eliot's) requires a learnable skill, the combined operation, as it were, of the head and heart. This is the 'prevision' or foresight which Esther Lyon makes use of in George Eliot's *Felix Holt* when she explores in her imagination

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what life would be like, what life would feel like, if she married Harry Transome, and decides that she sees it as a 'silken bondage', a life of loveless ease. (*Felix Holt*, Chapter XVIX, 'With a terrible prescience which a multitude of impressions during her stay at Transome Court had contributed to form, she saw herself in a silken bondage that arrested all motive, and was nothing better than a well-cushioned despair'.) This imaginative exploration is not a common-or-garden foreseeing, a presage, of purely factual consequences, but rather a fallible, tentative exploration of how things would look to her, how she would evaluate what it would feel like to live with the likely consequences, if she chose *thus* rather than *so*. The alternative which Esther chooses is a life of relative poverty with Felix and she had to make real to herself in imagination how the romance of genuine love might become tarnished amid the austerities of day-to-day hardship. Obviously the same skills, which one uses in reading about Esther, say, can be exercised with reference to one's own past, where plainly it loses most of its practical point. Here there is scope for regret or for remorse, here one discerns the opportunity let slip, or the illusion of happiness mistakenly chosen.

It is of the greatest importance that when we deliberate, whether on matters of common prudence, good taste, manners or morals, we can avail ourselves of friends. If a friend is another self and friends are those who know the agent and share to a great extent his own values, they often know or understand him as well as, or even better than, he knows or understands himself. For that reason they can join in exploring the options available to the deliberating agent at a given place and time. For it is in the nature of friends that, first, they are different from oneself and therefore should have a distance from the agent's personal projects (for example, Fleda and Mrs. Gereth in *The Spoils of Poynton*), and second, they are sufficiently similar to be capable of imaginatively internalizing and simulating the whole framework of the agent's emotions and preferences, values and attachments. If, *per impossible*, we were all friends of one another, we should find mutual understanding much easier. The Golden Rule involves treating all as friends, treating others as we would have them treat us. Indeed, any imaginative rehearsal, if it is to be effective, if it is to take into account how others are likely to perceive our actions, has to involve taking a standpoint outside ourselves. In this way the 'cunning of reason' brings it about we are translated into an impersonal point of view. But here we stand on the threshold of morality.

The difficulties of taking a stand outside ourselves are both cognitive and practical; that is the reason why an education of the emo-

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tions is necessary. For, as Frege once put it, in an utterly different context, 'everyone is presented to himself in a particular and primitive way in which he is presented to no-one else'. ('The Thought' in *Essays on Frege,* E. D. Klemke (ed.), Chicago, 1968, p. 519). Each person is the centre of his or her own world. To distance oneself from oneself seems to go contrary to human nature; to achieve it requires a *Gestalt*-shift. Such a radical change is described by George Eliot as taking place in Maggie Tulliver in *The Mill on the Floss* (IV iii), when, as a reaction to reading St Thomas à Kempis, 'it flashed through her like the suddenly apprehended solution of a problem that all the miseries of her young life had come from fixing her heart on her own pleasure, as if that were the central necessity of the universe; and for the first time she saw the possibility of shifting the position from which she looked at the gratification of her own desires—of taking her stand out of herself and looking at her own life as an insignificant part of a divinely-guided whole'.

Seeing the possibility of so shifting, as Maggie Tulliver did, is only the first step. Achieving a stand out of oneself is a practical task. A training as well as an education of the emotions is required. For that more than a literary understanding is needed; indeed novelists and biographers too are as prone as the rest of us to fall prey to some powerful emotion. For someone in the grip of such an emotion it may not be possible to recognize the nature of his own predicament. Overweening pride, gnawing jealousy, obsessive love, and vaulting ambition distort one's perceptions of both facts and values, and although the shared thick concepts provide the cognitive wherewithal, yet the flexibility and essential contestability of these concepts make it easy to make an exception of oneself. It is because of the individual way in which the agent is presented to himself that it is the differences rather than the similarities to others which strike him as relevant and salient. We contract or extend our shared concepts and colour our own conduct accordingly. Some moral novelists are superb in their description and understanding of all the complexities in the lives of their fictional characters, while appearing almost unaccountably 'blind' in their own lives. George Eliot, when writing to John Blackwood about *Romola*, was bent above all else on avoiding any 'indelicacy'. But she does not appear to have asked herself the question 'Which line of action on my part will hurt Blackwood more?' Nor does it occur to her that somebody might think her conduct ungrateful. Her self-centredness and fear of embarrassment lead her to oversimplify and ignore how others in general and the Blackwoods in particular would perceive her action.

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VII

All understanding requires responsiveness to those characteristics of phenomena which we consider important. In the case of people, we respond to them not merely as moving physical objects, but also as the appropriate subjects and objects of emotional and normative response. The ability to explore situations with one's emotions is essential not only for the understanding of oneself and other people *post eventum*, but also in action. Clearly, the concepts by means of which we understand human action are very different from the concepts by means of which we understand the physical world. In natural science we form a relatively small number of fundamental concepts by means of which we try to make sense of an immense variety of phenomena. In the human sphere the 'fundamental' concepts are concerned with belief and desire and are, for the most part, formed as part of our social activity. So one of the big differences between the concepts we use to understand people and those we use to understand natural phenomena is in the manner of that formation.

A second difference between understanding people and understanding natural phenomena and cognitive topics is in the different means by which we come to understand them. For, as I have indicated, we use our shared thick concepts and our emotions to illuminate characteristics and features of people and their actions which to a passionless observer would remain dark and invisible. While it is right to emphasize the unity of understanding, it would be bizarre to assimilate one kind of understanding to the other. The misassimilation of 'natural' to personal understanding seems mildly dotty nowadays, but if we may believe one of John Keats's friends, Richard Woodhouse (quoted in W. J. Bate, *John Keats*, Cambridge, Mass, 1963, p. 261), 'he has affirmed that he can conceive of a billiard ball that it may have a sense of delight from its own roundness, smoothness, volubility and the rapidity of its motion'. The opposite kind of misassimilation can be seen in any attempt to see people as natural objects only, never as subjects, and to neglect the ways in which people perceive or misperceive one another. The objects of personal understanding are also subjects.

Like purely physical objects human beings live in space and time. But we try to understand them not as purely physical objects but as beings who experience regret for the past, joy or sorrow in the present, and hope or fear for the future. We learn to understand people in real situations when we come to recognize both success and failure in our 'reading' of their actions, in biographies when we discern a dominant project, a ruling passion or, at any rate, an intelligible

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pattern, and in the realistic kind of fiction when we encounter the insights of great novelists. An education of the emotions, so achieved, can serve to promote mutual understanding in a more harmonious world.

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