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A SENSE OF NON-UNDERSTANDING

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That you did not understand a very simple claim
Against you I hold, so your obtuseness you should blame.
But when you once grasp an incomprehensible thing,
Then it seems you got worse, so give your doctor a ring.
Tadeusz Kotarbiński, *Wesołe smutki*

In fact, I could content myself with using as my motto this "rhyme," as its author would like to call it. Although it is not my cup of tea in terms of literary value, it nevertheless conveys adequately what I think. As to the rest, which is merely my supplementary comment, it is not going to be a dissertation or a research-based study, but rather a sort of an essay — occasionally humorous, somewhat exaggerated and provocative, yet undoubtedly concerning a serious matter.

I consider myself a teacher. I believe that a successful teacher must be comprehensible. It is a necessary condition, even if — obviously — it is not enough. But it certainly is a crucial condition. It is only when the students actually understand their teacher, instead of merely having a sense that they understand him, that they are able to learn or unlearn something from him. They are given an opportunity. The sense of understanding alone does not offer that, unless it goes together with actual understanding.

It is different with philosophers. In order to achieve fame and become popular among the masses, a philosopher had better be incomprehensible

and locate the "poetics" of his narration somewhere between a scientific lecture, a literary piece and journalism. This would allow his supporters and admirers, especially those who are not philosophers themselves, to strike a chord with an exceptional, profound and apparently very bright idea, which is at the same time put across in an appealing manner, so that it evokes aesthetic experience. And once they are under the illusion that they have fully grasped the idea, they are rewarded with a sense of intellectual power and satisfaction derived from communing with a wisdom available only to the chosen few.

Whereas a politician, in order to gain supporters and political power, should avoid making clear and unequivocal statements. Let him be understood differently – differently by different people. Then, everyone will feel that they understand him as a person who thinks this or that; this is something that people who experience such a sense of understanding tend to do. Even if these understandings differ, no matter how contradictory they are, people who have this sense of comprehension will be united by the illusion of shared beliefs and consequently, by the willingness to support the politician.

I once tried to draw a line between philosophical essays and studying or teaching philosophy academically (Pelc, 1999). To a certain, yet rather small, extent my work falls into the latter category. I prefer the prudence and restraint Władysław Tatarkiewicz expressed in his reservation: "if I am entitled to consider myself a philosopher." I go even further and do not claim this right at all. I am merely trying to teach some bits of philosophy. As a teacher — just like when I am advising that we recognize John's belief that a sentence p is true does not equal that sentence p is true — I am advising that we distinguish between a sense of understanding a statement and its actual, adequate understanding; even if this does not mean a full understanding, then at least in some respect. Making this distinction turns out particularly difficult and fallible when it concerns our own thoughts and statements. Unfortunately, it happens so often that we feel we understand them and we confuse this sense of understanding that we take for granted with genuine understanding.

Obviously, 'the sense of understanding' is a vague and imprecise expression, the same as 'the sense of non-understanding'. However, we know from experience that the road between the two, between the sense of understanding and actual understanding, is often long and bumpy. Following this road is a toilsome process of reaching a more accurate and fuller understanding, which requires time and, sometimes considerable, effort. Even then, it usually proves impossible to arrive at a complete understanding. Yet,

gradually, despite alternating between failed attempts and partial successes, we occasionally manage to get closer to understanding, although it makes it harder if we take the sense of understanding for understanding itself. It happens to people who are prone to experience the sense of understanding. Precisely that: prone, inclined. Just like there are people who are prone to colds and others who are prone to go into ecstasies, there are sometimes people who are prone to a spontaneous sense of understanding. I believe that this inclination is typical of people with a specific mental attitude, especially the emotional one. This inclination makes them more likable: we like people who are trusty, even credulous. But there are probably not many of those among the students of analytic philosophy.

How to distinguish the sense of understanding from actual understanding? Let us begin with understanding something or someone, which, in my opinion, stems from understanding respective propositions, either true or false, that do not necessarily take a linguistic form. What do I do to show that I understand something? One method would be to give specific examples. What do I do to check if a student understands a given sentence? I ask him to give examples. "Do you understand what it means that someone is 'spolegliwy' [eng. *reliable*, but commonly used in the sense of *acquiescent*]?" Give me some examples of such people, behaviors or attitudes." If, as it often happens, he gives examples of agreeable, submissive people who do not put anyone to inconvenience, because they predict everybody's wishes and comply with them, then I know that he understands it wrong. But if he mentions those who will not fail despite major obstacles, who keep their commitments, whom you can "rely on as on Zawisza" (I do not mean here Artur Zawisza, the deputy from Lublin, but Zawisza the Black of Garbów, who stands as a symbol of knightly virtues), then I know that this person understands what the word means. When my students give me their essays for evaluation, my comment "Example!" appears in the margin of almost every page. What could serve as an example is a drawing, a verbal image like a metaphor, a diagram or a table. Someone who wants to explain what they mean by saying "an off-brown fabric" brings in a wool sample, the sample being an example. In a different case they can resort to a comparison: Volkswagen, a car manufacturer, made cars in the color called "fireman red" in order to avoid a possible claim from the customer, who, upon hearing "red," could expect, say, "weinrot," which is the color of red wine. Another method of proving that one understands a statement is to translate it into other ethnic languages, as well as to provide either a few versions of the expression's translation into a foreign ethnic language

or a number of different paraphrases, that is, translations within the same ethnic language in which the statement was originally expressed. A special case of such a paraphrase is a translation of a metaphorical expression into an expression in which some of the metaphors are replaced — if possible — by non-metaphorical expressions. I have already discussed this subject (Pelc 2000), while challenging the opinion that some metaphorical expressions are fundamentally untranslatable into metaphor-free expressions. Finally, what can also serve as evidence of understanding a particular declarative sentence, is looking for a logical consequence and drawing a few or even a dozen statements that follow logically from this sentence.

And what is someone supposed to do who wants to let others know that they have a sense of understanding of something or someone — merely the sense of understanding without actual understanding? There is left nothing but to avow his state of mind, his psyche being directly accessible only to him through introspection. The best he could do to support his confession, as well as to prove his sincerity and truthfulness, is to look his interlocutor in the eye and assure him by saying something like: "I understand, I swear." But when he applies the aforementioned means — giving examples, translating, enumerating possible logical consequences — in the attempt to objectify his sense of understanding and to make it available to others, this counts as evidence of actual understanding and not of a mere sense of understanding. A sense of understanding is something much more intimate, private, hermetic, exclusive and . . . unverifiable than, say, the feeling of unspecified fear, since anxious states manifest themselves as e.g. sleep disorders, lack of appetite, insomnia, dry mucous membranes, accelerated heart rate, rapid pulse and breathing, thus enabling extraspection and partial, intersubjective verification, while the sense of understanding can be detected by neither pressure gauge nor encephalogram, nor phonendoscope.

I suggest we distinguish this kind of sense of understanding from the sense of understanding that we experience after we have actually succeeded in understanding something. I could provide evidence to prove my understanding by resorting to numerous, aforementioned means. I could also receive such evidence in the feedback from other people. In a conversation, it could take the form of a statement like: "you understood me perfectly, this is exactly what I meant," or of nonverbal behavior or actions of the interlocutor — generally, evidence derived from the situational context. The second type of the sense of understanding will be called here "a *post factum* sense of understanding." This state of mind is a natural consequence of a certain objective occurrence and it results from my awareness of this event.

I am entitled to experience this *post factum* sense of understanding, just as a first prize winner or someone who was appointed to an important post has every right to experience the sense of success. Perhaps, the *post factum* sense of understanding consists in the fact, at least among others, that even though I am not thinking at the moment about what I have understood, even though I am not setting off the process of arriving at this understanding, I can still be certain that if I did, I would immediately regain the current understanding, which I once acquired. That is why the *post factum* sense of understanding could pass as potential understanding. And what I have in mind is not the *post factum* sense of understanding, but that first one, the spontaneous sense of understanding, which is not based on an actual understanding and which precedes all attempts to understand something.

It has occurred to me that the sense of understanding is like the gift of seeing at a long distance ascribed to a certain tzaddik from Odessa. This is something that Max Black, who himself came from Odessa, told me about. Two Jews are talking with awe and worship about a local miracle-working tzaddik. One of them — the enthusiast — says: "Can you imagine? He can see everything from thousands of versts away. He can see what is happening in Petersburg: he sees a Jewess carrying a baby in her arms, he can see a Jew wearing his fur cap today... He can see everything, even the smallest things." The second one — the skeptic — responds: "But how come? Is he never wrong?" The first one answers: "Oh, no... he is wrong. But the very fact that he can see that far, isn't that a miracle?!"

The sense of understanding of something or someone is a subjective state *par excellence*. It seems similar in some respect to a religious feeling, that is, to faith. Faith is a feeling or mental disposition, which by the believers is considered a gift or God's grace. Although the sense of understanding regarding whatever I hear, read, say, write or do is accessible to both believers and non-believers, it does require some faith as well, just of a different kind: it requires believing in yourself, in your own mental power or your intuition, instead of believing in someone else or in something "out there." Therefore, the sense of understanding is not experienced by everyone in the same measure, which probably depends more on one's confidence and the strength of one's conviction about their shrewdness and their interpretative potential, rather than on one's special skills, intelligence or knowledge. Knowledge determines not so much the sense of understanding, as whether we succeed in the process of arriving at understanding: the more you know, the easier and more you understand, but also the sooner you realize that you do not and maybe will never understand. Meanwhile, the other way round, the

sense that you understand something creates the sense that you know it, which is often illusory and which leads to the conviction that you are entitled to make authoritative judgments or force bans. It so often happens that people who have a sense of understanding of something e.g. how nuclear power plants work, even though it is not accompanied by actual knowledge of the subject, fiercely oppose building such plants; and people who have a sense of understanding what GM food is, but merely the feeling without actual understanding, fight against allowing its consumption. The sense of understanding something is a fertile ground, on which grows the often unfounded sense of knowing something that makes you feel certain about your decisions, often on very important matters, and in consequence makes you act hastily. Therefore, a sense of understanding without actual understanding is deceptive, as it encourages irrational attitudes, behaviors and actions.

On the other hand, the effortlessness of arriving at the sense of understanding is subjectively perceived as something positive and it is considered nice to have a sense of understanding of another person — even when it does not go beyond the sense of understanding by accompanying actual understanding, in other words, even when it is basically unfounded. In this case of understanding another person, the sense of understanding often accompanies infatuation, not so much love as falling in love, especially in its first stage of uncritical acceptance, full of feelings such as passion or ecstasy.

For the purpose of these considerations, I suggest we call those who easily arrive at the sense of understanding of something or someone "understandingable" people, while those who are resistant to this experience — "not-understandingable" people.

What makes a person inclined towards an "understandingable" attitude, is his urge to empathize with others, to develop spiritual bonds with them, to sympathize with some of their desires and to be tolerant of others. An "understandingable" person leads a life that many conformists would desire; it goes on in a blissful atmosphere, as if taken from the ending scene of *Revenge* by Fredro: "Peace and concord! / Troubles at an end — / Now, may the Lord His hand to us extend!" (Fredro 1993: 109) We all know that a communion of hearts and minds is an invigorating experience. It also wins you friendship among your fellow men and it is certainly nice to be liked. An "understandingable" person gains more and more satisfaction as their sense of understanding of other people grows and as this unifying feeling encompasses more numerous and more varied attitudes and views. At that point, all these different stands seem similar and that, which differed from them, however radically, goes out of sight. The world around becomes

a harmonious and friendly, unified whole. And whenever the sense of understanding concerns something to which an "understandingable" person originally strongly objected, they are rewarded with the awareness of their admirable tolerance.

Despite numerous benefits connected with adhering to the "Sense-of-understanding Party," despite mental and social advantages of the life lead by an "understandingable" person, the more mature and more critical approach of a "not-understandingable" person is recommended, especially to analytic philosophers, as it is more productive from a methodological point of view. It is a "not-understandingable" person's principle to ask the question: "what does it mean?" and look for differences hidden under the surface made of similarities, rather than ignoring differences in order to succeed in finding similarities. I encourage you to cherish the sense of not-understanding. However, loyalty to those who will actually follow that suggestion, forces me to warn them that the life of a "not-understandingable" person is far less pleasant than the comfortable life of an "understandingable" one, because all the features which characterize the latter — criticism, hesitation in accepting and approving the opinions that he comes across, a habit of getting to the bottom of things — make people anxious and they start to treat such a person with reserve: "he is difficult and hard to please, we'd better watch out and put on hold any signs of friendliness or support."

Although a "not-understandingable" person treats all analyzed concepts and theorems with a dose of conscious distrust, he allows for, as an exception, a sense of understanding of the considered problems, a sense of understanding of a particular kind. That sense of understanding is all about readiness to interpret those problems, while approaching them. This attitude requires a "not-understandingable" person to refrain from rejecting *a limine* a hypothesis that he has to do with something uninterpretable. Such a person is inclined to acknowledge from the start that this something could become the subject of the process of arriving at an understanding. Therefore, he assumes that the statement he heard or read makes sense, which means it is interpretable. However, this hypothesis needs to be verified. So he starts with assuming an opposite hypothesis, so that in the following steps he can refute it. You could say that in the first phase a "not-understandinable" person makes a certain concession to an "understandingable" attitude and begins by taking this position. Sometimes the concession is limited to a minimum, which could be illustrated by the following example. Half a century ago jewelry stores in the People's Republic of Poland used to import gold-plated cufflinks from China. There is a golden ornament against the black enamel.

Once, when professor Janusz Chmielewski, a sinologist, saw the cufflinks, he asked me if I knew what was written on them. At that moment the ornament turned into a Chinese sentence. I no longer remember what it means, but I know that it is a meaningful whole. I adopted the attitude of a reader towards it: I see it as a text, rather than as an ornament which does not signify anything, even though in this case I am unable to undertake any further action that would result from this embryonic sense of understanding. It seems to me that experiencing this initial sense of understanding is a prerequisite for further interpretation, that is, of arriving at a more and more complete understanding of the signs, which consists in ripping off the veils covering the meaning one after another. Raising the first veil is something to which both an "understandable" person and his skeptical opponent would agree. This unanimity is encouraged by the "let's take the preliminary interpretation principle at face value." It is the interpretation suggested by an "understandable" person, which is related to Grice's conversational maxims in the sense that it too has at its source a willingness to understand, but without giving up the requirements set out by a "not-understandable" person.

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