"If Some People Looked Like Elephants and Others Like Cats": Wittgenstein on Understanding Others and Forms of Life

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Abstract
This essay introduces a tension between the public Wittgenstein’s optimism about knowledge of other minds and the private Wittgenstein’s pessimism about understanding others. There are three related reasons which render the tension unproblematic. First, the barriers he sought to destroy were metaphysical ones, whereas those he struggled to overcome were psychological. Second, Wittgenstein’s official view is chiefly about knowledge while the unofficial one is about understanding. Last, Wittgenstein’s official remarks on understanding themselves fall into two distinct categories that don’t match the focus of his unofficial ones. One is comprised of those remarks in the Investigations that challenge the thought that understanding is an inner mental process. The other consists primarily of those passages in PPF and On Certainty concerned with the difficulty of understanding others without immersing oneself into their form of life. In its unofficial counterpart, Wittgenstein focuses on individuals, rather than collectives. The official and the unofficial sets of remarks are united in assuming a distinction between understanding a person and understanding the meaning of their words. If to understand a language is to understand a form of life, then to understand a person is to understand a whole life.
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References


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Of course some individuals studying lions, chimpanzees and other animal species do learn their conventions of 'speech', sounds and gestures. Or if a human child grew up with tigers, lions, etc s/he would internalize and be socialized in their languages, sounds and gestures. But do not be too harsh on him and his ignorance in this and other areas or that of Plato, Marx, Hegel, Kant, Descartes et al - in areas where secondary school pupils of today are aware of information, technology, etc that those individuals were unaware of or in areas where they were ignorant. By the way, I for one, can understand the parrot when it speaks (English). Philosophical Investigations. I like to imagine Wittgenstein getting really high and watching The Lion King, and having it just like...blow his mind. Form of life (German: Lebensform) is a technical term used by Ludwig Wittgenstein and others in the continental philosophy and philosophy of science traditions. Wittgenstein himself used the term consistently in his works Philosophical Investigations and On Certainty, but other writers have sometimes used it in very different and often mutually incompatible ways.