

The Significance of Interculturality for the Problem of (In)Transparency

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"We also say of a person that he is transparent to us. However, for our observation it is important that a person can be a complete enigma to another. One experiences this when coming into a foreign country with altogether foreign traditions; and, what is more, even given mastery of the country's language. One does not *understand* the people. (And not because of not knowing what they are saying to themselves.) We cannot find ourselves in them" (Wittgenstein, 2003 – I have modified the translation).

This passage occurs in a discussion treating the apparent asymmetry involving my relationship to my thoughts, intentions, feelings, etc. compared to that which another person has to them. Concepts such as 'inner' and 'hidden', 'knowing' and 'guessing', 'certainty' and 'doubt' dominate the exchanges between undisclosed interlocutors. However, this passage is unique in that it draws a parallel, perhaps even stronger, a connection between the intransparency of another person and the foreignness of another peoples' culture and tradition.

Although this passage has been the focus of much debate over the years, and has by no means suffered from a lack of interpretation, especially in conjunction with other key passages occurring in the *Philosophical Investigations*, my intention here is neither to add yet another to the list, nor comment on them directly. Rather, the purpose of this paper is to exam Wittgenstein's assertion that the opacity and puzzlement another human being presents to me is essentially of the same kind as that of encountering another culture. To this end, I am not so much interested in trying to situate this idea within those surrounding it, as I am with its consequences for the discussion. Is the parallel as he portrays it plausible? And if so, what might be its significance for language and intercultural exchange?

Wittgenstein opens the passage claiming that we can and do talk about another person as being transparent or open to us – we know what they are thinking and feeling. In English this phenomenon is captured by the expressions "you are like an open book" or "he wears his heart on his sleeve." Both expressions employ a very distinctive and explicit imagery, namely that of availability and openness. If someone I know says to me "I can read you like an open book", it means that the motivations "behind" my actions are obvious and on display for them to see. In both instances we can say that a person's transparency is directly associated with the public display of something within them -- something essentially internal. And like a book, the ability to read the intentions of another is completely dependent upon whether or not the he or she is open or closed.

However in what sense am I closed off and are my thoughts hidden? Assuming that a very specific context is lacking, if a friend were to come up to me and ask me about what I was thinking, in most cases, pretty much anything I say would have to be accepted, whether true or false. After all, whereas others can only guess at the content of my thoughts, I am the only one who can be said to actually *know* them. Although Wittgenstein disputes the appropriateness of framing my relationship to my own thoughts and intentions in terms of knowing, the

phenomenon being described is well-known. Indeed, I do seem to have a different kind of access to my thoughts; one fundamentally different from that of another person. In other words, according to this model, my openness is intimately tied to that which is internal and hidden, but which is capable of being disclosed.

Thus, it would seem that if someone can be transparent to us, then the opposite must also be possible. In this case, Wittgenstein refers to the possibility of encountering someone who we simple cannot figure out – they are truly enigmatic. The question is in what sense is this person opaque? In order to treat this question, we must imagine the scenario outlined in the third sentence, where Wittgenstein draws a parallel to that of someone entering a land foreign in every respect with one very unusual exception – language. In what appears to be merely a passing remark, he states that the people and their traditions could be completely foreign to us, even if we have mastered the language. Of course, the qualification Wittgenstein stipulates is somewhat confusing, especially to anyone who has learned another language, much less mastered one.

Assuming that I have the highest level of linguistic proficiency, in what way would the people and their traditions appear foreign? Had Wittgenstein not used such a strong term like *beherrschen* [to master], then it would be easier to imagine a situation where a person with a limited grasp of the language might run into trouble as the result of grave misunderstandings (a situation due primarily to insufficient experience with the language). Or perhaps one learned a foreign tongue without ever having studied the culture, and thus knows how to form grammatically correct sentences, but his or her employment of vocabulary and concepts does not correspond to how the language is actually used (e.g. learning from a grammar book).

However, these situations are not what Wittgenstein has in mind. His use of the term "mastery" appears quite deliberate, and serves the purpose of radicalizing the example in order to make a very specific point. But, as I have just mentioned, the connection between the intransparency of another human being and the foreignness of another culture is by no means obvious. Put differently, given the conditions prescribed above, in what sense could one say that "one does not *understand* the people?"

The significance of this statement is linked to Wittgenstein's use of *verstehen* [to understand]. Does the importance of the term lie in the fact that it is italicized? Certainly Wittgenstein intended to emphasize the term – bring it to our attention. However, this still leaves the question as to why unanswered. Perhaps he wanted to draw our attention to a different meaning of the term. Placed within the context of the passage, it is clear that *verstehen* does not mean here a difficulty in communicating, e.g. "I don't understand/know what this person is trying to say" or "She was speaking so fast that I could not understand/make out the directions to the old market square."

Since Wittgenstein grants that we are highly proficient users of the language, in possession of a considerable vocabulary and know what to say, when to say it, etc., miscommunication would appear to be excluded from the proposed situation. Further complicating matters, Wittgenstein says that our puzzlement does not result from "not knowing what they [the people of this country] are saying to themselves" (Wittgenstein, 2003). Although this last statement invokes the inner/outer model mentioned above, it is not the hurdle that one might at first imagine, for a distinction between an inner and outer realm is not responsible for the enigmatic other.

As Wittgenstein has attempted to show throughout this discussion, inner and outer are concepts which belong to a certain picture or model (see Wittgenstein, 2003, pgs. 188-190). And although this model can lead to potential difficulties, our puzzlement lies elsewhere. We seem, at some very fundamental level, unable to relate to these people – as Wittgenstein put it in the sentence immediately following, "We cannot find ourselves in them." Here, I have intentionally chosen a more literal translation over Anscombe's ("We cannot find our feet with them"), primarily because I find the original German wording more suggestive and yet still very accessible to the English speaking community.

But, if the other's foreignness or alterity cannot be attributed to their hiding something from me, from public view, then what other possibilities exist? I think the key to the highly unusual situation Wittgenstein has sketched out lies with tradition, for it is tradition which even the most proficient non-native speaker lacks.

One could object that such a skilled user of the German language, for example, must have knowledge of the culture and understand the tradition, otherwise they would never have been able reach such a degree of proficiency. To a certain point, I would agree with this objection. It is, indeed, unlikely that a person would be capable of such sophisticated and nuanced language use without having learned about and studied the culture and its traditions. Yet, here I would like to call attention to the term tradition, and pose the following question: Can tradition at all be a matter of understanding? Is it, rather, not the case that understanding evolves out of or even on the grounds of tradition?

Gadamer's hermeneutics (Gadamer, 1990) has exposed that we are situated in a horizon of understanding which pre-figures the way we conceive of the world. The horizon serves as ground for our understanding which means, at the same time, that it does not become explicit. Taking up the perspective of a particular *form of life*, Wittgenstein also regards tradition (being an aspect of a form of life) as something primary or primordial. In other words, I stand within a tradition, a horizon of significance that is its own ground. However, in contrast to Gadamer, Wittgenstein is very mistrustful regarding the category of understanding, and therefore, his later investigations are descriptive endeavours instead of explanatory theoretical approaches.

In the present context, I read Wittgenstein as emphasizing the primacy of tradition, on the one hand, but reluctant regarding the possibility of it being fully grasped, on the other: "What has to be accepted, the given, is – so one could say – forms of life" (Wittgenstein, 2003). With respect to the passage opening the paper, the italicized "understanding" could be read as a clue to the precarious status of understanding.

While it is certainly possible to study another culture and know parts of its tradition, it does not seem that the grounding moment of tradition can be dissolved in an act of understanding.

This aspect appears relevant for intercultural encounters. At this point, we can see that in our encounters with other cultures, we are not only bound to our specific categories of understanding, which make it impossible to encounter the other (culture) outside of this framework. However, what is perhaps of even greater significance is that our idea of cultural encounter is – in a problematic way – dominated by understanding. As a side note, it is interesting that in German, successful communication [*Verständigung*] is conceived in terms of understanding [*Verstehen*]. Since Wittgenstein denies a meta-level discussion regarding language-games, he draws our attention to the fact that understanding is localized, and therefore, is limited when it comes to encountering other cultures.

Returning to the problem of the (in)transparent other, we can now ask whether the parallel to intercultural encounters is plausible. Does the primacy of tradition in some way illuminate the issue of transparency? One would then have to ask what the primacy of thoughts, feelings, intentions, etc. would mean. Posed in this way, the inner/outer model is not what is at issue, but rather the relationship it purports to describe. If a person says that they cannot *know* what I am thinking or feeling, this is not a claim that I am "hiding" something from them (although this could also be the case); rather they are making a remark about an asymmetrical relationship. In a related passage on the same page, Wittgenstein makes the following observation regarding the guessing of other's intentions and actions:

Two points, however, are important: one, that in many cases someone else cannot predict my actions, whereas I foresee them in my intentions; the other, that my prediction (in my expression of intention) has not the same foundation as his prediction of what I shall do, and the conclusions to be drawn from these predictions are quite different (Wittgenstein, 2003).

Thus, it would seem that, according to Wittgenstein, I cannot simply conceive of my thoughts and feelings in terms of understanding. Is there, similar to the instance of intercultural encounter, a grounding moment, which is not at understanding's disposal? It is clear elsewhere that Wittgenstein is critical of a subject that grants meaning and understanding, and thus cannot be considered. The question to be addressed is how this certainty (lack of doubt) regarding my thoughts and feelings -- as *mine* -- is granted. This line of thought gives an entirely new meaning to the issue of transparency as dealt with in the opening passage.

References

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- Wittgenstein, Ludwig 2003 *Philosophical Investigations*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd.