UNIT 2 UNDERSTANDING

Contents
2.0 Objectives
2.1 Introduction
2.2 Meaning of ‘Understanding’
2.3 John Locke’s Origin of Ideas
2.4 Simple and Complex Ideas
2.5 Primaries and Secondary Source
2.6 Ludwig Wittgenstein’s Account of Understanding
2.7 Kinds of Understanding
2.8 Understanding as a Conscious State (experience) or Process
2.9 Understanding as a Non-Conscious state or process
2.10 Let Us Sum Up
2.11 Further Readings and References

2.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit gives general picture of philosophers’ view on understanding. Philosophical positions of John Locke and Ludwig Wittgenstein on understanding in the human mind are briefly discussed in this unit.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

“Understanding arises, first of all, from the interests of practical life where people are dependent on communicating with each other. They must make themselves mutually understood. The one must know what the other wants. Thus, first of all, the elementary forms of understanding arise.” Said Dilthey.

We see people often claim that they understand cars, or a certain persons, or computers. Even more they claim not to understand the same sorts of things. Now the question to be asked is that what is understanding. Is it a process? Is it this understanding which makes man unique? In recent time Philosophers debated about the limits of understanding- for instance, how could we know either that there is something or not for every beyond our grasp. Keeping this in the mind I would try to explain in this chapter the general theory of understanding. In philosophy one cannot have the same view. Each differs in their view. Here we are presenting John Locke and Ludwig Wittgenstein two great philosophers who understand the ‘Understanding’ in different ways. Let me enter in detail about what do they say about understanding after explaining about the general theory of understanding.

2.2 MEANING OF ‘UNDERSTANDING’

A common use of the verb ‘to understand’ is in the context of understanding a language. In this sense it is the concern of linguists and not of the normal speakers of the language. However, these normal speakers are also said to understand the language. Now what is the different
between these two understanding, is there first of all any difference? To the extend there is, but it is close enough that the use of the same word for both things is understandable, and not unreasonable. One understands the language when he understands the meaning of the word and grammatical construction. When the individual words and grammatical construction are under consideration, the situation is much more all-or-nothing: a failure to cope with all the nuances of a word is grounds for attributing a lack of understanding of that word. Thus one understands ‘the dog is red’ when, as a result of reading or hearing that sentence, he can construct a model of a red dog. A word is understood if the model so constructed responds appropriately to it: a grammatical construction is understood if the model is constructed according to that construction. From this one can conclude that understanding dependent on mental models. At the same it is worth noting that, on this model, the ability to understand a language and the ability to speak it are separate, and could have radically different levels in the same person. For example, I understand German does not mean quite the same as I can speak German. The word ‘understand’ carries with it the idea of something passive and the word ‘can’ carries with the idea of something active. In other words to understand a language, one must be able to go from the words to the model: to speak it, one must be able to go in the other direction, if the links between words and models are governed by something like mutors, there will have to be separate mutors for the two functions, and thus it would be possible to understand a language very well, but not be able to speak it at all. It seems that the reverse state should also be possible, but perhaps the ways in which we can learn languages rule it out.

2.3 JOHN LOCKE’S ORIGIN OF IDEAS

John Locke in his essay on human understanding he deals with many issues but his main concern was on knowledge and the capacity of the ‘human understanding’ to acquire it. In explaining first he enquires into the Origin of Ideas, notion, or whatever else one may call them, which a man observes, and is conscious to himself he has in his Mind; and the ways whereby the Understanding comes to be furnished with them; then ‘to show, what knowledge the Understanding hath by those Ideas; and finally to ‘make some enquiry into the nature and Grounds of faith, or opinion.

On the first part of his Essay Concerning ‘Human Understanding’, we can see how Locke devoted the Book I in refuting the principles of innate ideas that says, there are in the understanding certain innate principles; some primary notions, characters, as it were stamped upon the mind of man, which the soul receives in its very first being, and brings into the world with it. All agree, he points out, that the mind is capable of understanding and assenting firmly to basic mathematical propositions and fundamental proposition such as ‘what is, is’. These are not found in the thoughts of children. Why then call them ‘implicitly innate’? it is to be noted, rejecting any innateness of knowledge would mean that what God gave us was not the knowledge that is necessary and useful, but rather the means to acquire it (In this he resembles Berkeley and Hume, and differs from Descartes and Leibniz.) So, at birth, the human mind is a sort of blank slate on which experience writes. In Book II Locke claims that ideas are the materials of knowledge and all ideas come from experience. The term ‘idea,’ Locke tells us “…stands for whatsoever is the Object of the Understanding or mind, when a man thinks.” Locke does not identify idea with perceiving. Descartes had distinguished two senses of the word “idea”: according to one of these an idea is an act of thinking, according to the other it is the
object of such an act. And it is true that much of Locke’s understanding of idea—along with his basic decision to make ideas central to his philosophy.

What does it mean to say that an idea is an object of thinking or thought? The first thing to note is that it belongs to the nature of thinking to be directed towards something, to have a subject matter or target. There is no such thing as merely thinking—thinking, period—without thinking something, thinking of or about something. And the same holds for perceiving, and for all of the other more specific operations of the understanding. Locke uses the word “object” to refer to this required target or subject matter: the object of a thought is that which the thought is of or about. When Locke says all or knowledge derives from ‘experience’, he also puts gloss immediately on this which is very important for three reasons. First, he makes it clear that there are two sources of experience, sensation (external), and what he calls ‘reflection; (internal), which provides the mind with ideas of its own operations, such as perception, thinking and doubting. Second, because the derivation of an idea from experience is not seen as always a simple matter (on the model of deriving the idea of green from seeing green things), in that it will be necessary to take ‘a full survey’ of our ideas; including ‘their several modes, combinations, and relations’, or as they are ‘with infinite variety compounded and enlarged by the understanding’; and, third, because, from the outset, the existence of external objects is apparently taken for granted. Ideas of sensible qualities, such as that of yellow, are thus introduced as those conveyed into the mind ‘from external objects’.

2.4 SIMPLE AND COMPLEX IDEAS

One basis for the charge that Locke’s use of the word “idea” is ambiguous is that he applies it to entities of different kinds. He himself makes a number of divisions within the class of ideas: between simple and complex, particular and general, concrete and abstract, adequate and inadequate, and so forth. But the items so divided are still all ideas, in one and the same sense to the word: several species in a genus not only does not entails several senses in the term for the genus, it entails the contrary. A more substantial point is that Locke uses the one term “idea” indifferently to refer to things that his predecessors had called by different names. Here I would like to consider the more stressed point of simple and complex.

The ideas which sensation gives “enter by the senses simple and unmixed”; they stand in need of the activity of mind to bind them into the complex unities required for knowledge. This would include the ideas of “perception, thinking, doubting, believing, reasoning, knowing, willing and all the different acting of our minds”. Sensation and reflection are each modes or forms or experiences for Locke and the two together exhausts it, so that any idea we have from experience must flow from one or the other of these two “fountain”. On the other hand, Locke lists several ideas that he says are simple and yet certainly are not ideas either of sensible qualities or of mental operations: those of ‘pleasure, or delight,... pain or uneasiness. Power, existence, unity,” to which list he later adds “the idea of Succession”. He says these convey themselves into the Mind, by all the ways (both) of Sensation and Reflection”. They do so because they always “join themselves to,” or “are suggested... by,” the ideas we do have by sensation and reflection. Finally he holds that every simple idea that is present in a mind has its source in experience.

The complex ideas of substance, modes, and relations are all the product of the combining and abstracting activity of mind operating upon simple ideas, which have been given, without any connection, by sensation or reflection. So in the process of creating new complex ideas, the mind is no longer merely passive. Instead it actively exerts itself, operating upon the ideas it has to
make the new ones. Furthermore, its action is voluntary, and the products thereof may be quite out of line with any pre-existent reality, external-sensible or mental-operational: ideas of fantastic voyages and fabulous monsters. Locke’s account of knowledge thus has two sides. On the one side, all the material of knowledge is traced to the simple idea. On the other side, the processes which transform this crude material into knowledge are activities of mind which themselves cannot be reduced to ideas.

2.5 PRIMARY AND SECONDARY SOURCE

According to Locke objects have within themselves certain objective ‘primary qualities’ such as solidity, extension, figure, motion or rest, and number, which are capable of producing ‘sensations or perception’, that is, ‘ideas’, in our minds. Secondary qualities such as odours, tastes, colours and sounds, which produce ideas or perceptions in our minds even though the qualities have no exact counterpart in the object. They do not belong to or constitute bodies, except as powers to produce these perceptions in us. The idea of primary qualities presupposes that there must be a ‘something’, a ‘substance’, which is solid and is moving. We do not experience ‘substance’ itself but we do experience the primary qualities or ‘accidents’ that cluster together in groups around a ‘supposed but unknown’ support or substratum which is generally called the substance, the ‘idea’ of substance lies beyond experience. It is obtained by abstraction, that is, by a separating of some ‘ideas’ from other ‘idea’ that accompany them; or rather, it is a ‘supposition’ of we ‘know not what’ as a support of qualities that appear to clump together around an invisible substratum. It is not perceived but it is inferred.

A Thing cannot both Be and not to Be

If proposition is to be innate, the ideas which are its component elements must be innate; but in fact no such ideas are innate; therefore, the proposition itself cannot be innate. E.g., the maxims ‘whatever is, is’ or ‘A thing cannot both be and not to be,’ although undoubtedly true, are highly abstract and far beyond the comprehension of a child of several years, let alone a new born infant. What could be possible reason for supposing that the human infant knows or accepts the truth of these maxims, when the ideas involved are far beyond anything that it is capable of? The chief argument for innate principle, viz., that such principles command a universal consent, Locke immediately counters with two objections. First, even if it were true that any principle did receive universal consent, this would not prove them innate. Simply because there are great parts of mankind to whom such maxims are not known.

Locke maintained his view that a man could not formulate or understand the proposition that white is black until he had learned the meaning of the words white and black, unless he had seen white objects. In advance of seeing white he could not formulate any proposition about white. Once he has by experience learned what it is to be white, to be black, and to be different. And this is what is self-evident for Locke. If by universal consent to a proposition is meant consent of all who understand the proposition, and if some propositions which are not innate command universal consent (in this limited sense), it follows that universal consent is not a sufficient condition of the proposition assented to being innate.

Secondly, Locke maintains that, if universal consent is used in an unlimited sense, no proposition does command consent. Taking what he pejoratively calls" those magnified principles of demonstration "whatever is, is and it is impossible for the same thing to be and not to be, which, of all others, I think have the most allowed title to innate; Locke replies these propositions are so far from having a universal consent, that there are a great part of mankind to whom they are not
so much known. For it is impossible to through life without ever hearing either of them, and children and idiots having not the least apprehension thought of them.
To conclude, Locke says ‘we can have knowledge no further than we can have ideas’. Knowledge, there is nothing more than ‘the perception of the connection of the agreement or disagreement and repugnancy of any of our ideas’.

2.6 LUDWIG WITTGENSTEIN’S ACCOUNT OF UNDERSTANDING

It is generally believed that understanding, like thinking, is a mental process. Wittgenstein’s approach to sensation and mental process is a bit complicated. According to him, we have to study the language in which certain phenomena are spoken about, but not the phenomena themselves. As regards human tendency, Wittgenstein holds: “where our language suggests a body and there is none: there, we should like to say, is a spirit.” The reason for such a tendency is that we normally deal with physical objects in a simple manner. The paradigmatic interpretation of any real thing is that it is a physical thing. But, whenever we come across things that are not physical such as minds, sensations and so on, we tend to make negative bodies without any solidity and substantiality. Also, we attribute properties to them that can be attributed to physical bodies and later change the properties in order to say that they are applied only to those things that are not substantial.
Normally we consider meaning something as a mental act. What sort of mental act is it? A person may be deeply engrossed in some work and inadvertently he may hurt somebody’s feelings by saying something offhandedly. Later on he says that he did not mean it. What goes on in a person’s mind when he says something and means it but does not go on when he says something and does not mean it? We say eating and drinking are bodily activities. Similarly we tend to say meaning something is mental activity. It is like a bodily activity but of a different kind. This is the same old assimilationist mistake.
How does the philosophical problem about mental process and states and about behaviourism arise? The first step is the one that altogether escape notice. We talk about processes and states and leave their nature undecided. Sometimes perhaps we shall know more about them we think. But that is just what commits us to a particular way of looking at the matter. For we have a definite concept of what it means to learn to know a process better.
The point Wittgenstein tries to drive home is that saying something and meaning it is not at all like saying something and scratching or saying something and sitting down. What could possibly go on in one’s own mind that would count as meaning it? The search for what goes on in one’s mind when he says that ‘I mean it’ is a useless search, for to mean something, is not a mental process. If to mean something is mental process occurring privately in one’s mind like a thought, an emphasis, an image, then it is private to oneself. Under these circumstances one cannot know when someone was meaning something and when he was not. If it is private to one self, then it cannot be shared by others. But we know what one means someone says that he means it. Therefore, it cannot be a mental process. Normally we know that someone means what he says. How is it possible? One way of knowing it is through his behaviour. Whether one is serious in what he says or not is determined by the context of the situations and people’s actions that ordinarily guide us. Suppose someone tells that I love to visit Mysore because I like the palace. This is to concentrate on one thing rather than on another. Similarly, to mean this but not that is a matter of concentrating one’s attention here rather than there. But Wittgenstein does not accept this. According to him, one’s concentration is not a publicly observable act. Therefore to mean
something cannot be a mental process. Wittgenstein presents some counter examples to the thesis that to mean something is to concentrate on something. He writes: “Imagine someone simulating pain, and then saying “it’ll get better soon.” Can’t someone say he means the pain? And yet he is not concentrating his attention on any pain. And what about when I finally say “it’s stopped now”? The above cases show that in the first case pain is counterfeited and in the second case there is no pain for it has ceased. In both these cases there was no pain on which one can concentrate one’s attention. However one can say that the speaker meant pain he spoke. Therefore, to mean something does not mean to concentrate on something. In a similar fashion when someone says that “I mean this piece called the ‘king’, not this particular bit of wood I am pointing to.” But how could anyone concentrate on the piece as king without concentrating on it as block of wood, marble, plastic, or ivory? And if one is able to do that, then one is not concentrating when one means it. Similar is the case of understanding.

2.7 KINDS OF UNDERSTANDING

Two different senses of the word understanding can therefore be distinguished which mirror the ‘essential’ and ‘inessential’ use of pictures just described. These two different senses ‘internal’ and ‘external’ understanding respectively.

**Internal Understanding**

Wittgenstein notion of understanding a sentence in the sense in which it cannot be replaced by any other will be called internal, to register the fact, as Ridely says, ‘that what is grasped in it is, because “expressed only by these words in these positions”, understood as internal to this particular arrangement of words’

**External Understanding**

Whereas understanding the sentence in the sense in which it can be replaced by another which says the same will be called external to mark the fact that what is grasped in it is, because “something common to different sentences”, not understood as internal to any one specific formulation”. Taken together, these two senses comprise the concept of understanding which can therefore be said to consist of both a paraphrasable and a non-paraphrasable aspect.

According to Ludwig Wittgenstein the notion of understanding which is a correlate of meaning. It has been assumed as a truism that ‘understanding is a mental state or experience or process’. Wittgenstein has severely criticized this view. The thesis, which takes ‘understanding’ to be a mental state or experience or process, can be divided into two sub-thesis.  
(i) Understanding as a conscious state or process  
(ii) Understanding as a non-conscious mental state or process, e.g. brain process

2.8 UNDERSTANDING AS A CONSCIOUS STATE (EXPERIENCE) OR PROCESS

Understanding, Wittgenstein holds, is not a state or process. The logic (grammar) of understanding and that of mental states, experiences and processes is totally different. The two belong to two different language-games as their grammar of is different. Their meaning and employment cannot be the same.
Understanding as a State (experience)

There are certain experiential states which accompany when something is meant or understood. Wittgenstein does not deny this. What he repudiates is the view that meaning and understanding consists in being conscious of these experiential states, e.g. the view that meaning consists in being conscious of a picture or an image. (This is central to the empiricist’s conception of meaning and understanding). The reason, Wittgenstein argues is that our investigation is logical or conceptual rather than being empirical or psychological. The coming of an image or a picture before one’s mind, or being in a certain conscious state, may be psychologically relevant. This has nothing to do with the logical/conceptual status of meaning and understanding.

The image or picture, which accompanies when something is meant or understood, cannot by itself determine that it is to be taken in the same connotation in future as well. However, it is characteristic of conceptual investigation that it must be used in the same connotation in all its occurrences whether in the present, past or future.

What is essential is to see that the same thing can come before our minds... when we hear the word and the application still be different. Has it the same meaning both times? I think we shall say not. (PI 140) What comes before one’s mind could well be a symptom of understanding? It could in no way be treated as a criterion of understanding without the risk of committing absurdity. There is a logical gap between ‘an image that comes before mind’ and ‘understanding’. The conceptual maps of the two are different. This could be judged from the fact that temporal predicates are applied on them differently. Experiences and states of consciousness take place in “time”. So is the case with understanding and meaning. But here the similarities end. States of consciousness continue or stop. They are characterized as strong or weak etc. Such predicates cannot be applied to meaning and understanding.

Understanding as a Process

A process comprises of a sequence of events which are linked together exhibiting both change and unity. Change in successive stages, unity as a whole in the purpose it serves. Events are internally joined together in a process. A certain sequence of the occurrence of events is necessary in defining a process. Any change in the internal relation will change the process. Again, the sequence of events that constitute a certain process must be independently given. It is only by seeing the sequence of events that we judge whether a certain process is going on or it has stopped, it is fast or slow, etc. The case of understanding is different. Change, unity and the sequence of events are characteristic of processes. They are not, however, characteristic of understanding. It makes perfectly good sense to talk about the sequence of events that constitute a certain process but it is senseless to ask about the sequence of events that allegedly constitute understanding. We say of processes that it is going to finish in ten minutes but not of understanding that it is going to finish in ten minutes. Again, had understanding been a process, the successive stages constituting it must have been independently given. There is no such series of events independently given which constitute understanding. Finally, temporal predicates do not have the same application in the case of understanding as is the case with processes. To say that understanding is going on at a rapid pace is non-sensical whereas to say that a certain process is going on at a rapid pace is perfectly all right. As the application of the two is different, therefore, Wittgenstein concludes that understanding is not a process.

2.9 UNDERSTANDING AS A NON-CONSCIOUS STATE OR PROCESS
With the rise of science in the 20th century there is a strong tendency to construe understanding as a non-conscious physical process occurring in brain and nervous system. This means that an increase in our knowledge of chemistry and chemical processes in the brain would further our knowledge of human understanding. Human understanding, it is implied, is nothing more than the sum of processes occurring in the brain. A little thought on the matter will bring to light the fact that understanding is taken here to be causally connected to the physicochemical processes of the brain. A causal process could be of great interest but it can never define what understanding is. There is a big gap between causal investigation and conceptual investigation. The former needs empirical data whereas the latter demands grammatical rules or the rules for the use language. Moreover, the empirical data with which a causal investigation is done stands in need of a theory or hypothesis grounded in our conceptual schemes. This means that the grammatical rules or language is a pre-requisite for a conceptual investigation. In other words conceptual investigation is logically prior to empirical/causal investigation. Causal connection, therefore, is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for understanding. The following example will help us understand this point.

Let us take the example of a movie we see on screen. We know that the motion pictures we see on the screen are caused by the rotation of motionless pictures at the back. Now this knowledge of causal connection depends on our knowledge of waves and optics. This knowledge constitutes our background. (We know how difficult was it to convince that what we see through telescope is reliable until Kepler formulated the laws of optics.) Again, the crucial point is that in order to appreciate a movie or know the meaning of a feature film one needs not know this causal connection. It belongs to grammar or the ‘form of life’. We need not know what process is going on in someone’s head in order to appreciate the work of art. Wittgenstein hints to the same in the following remarks in Zettel:

No supposition seems to me more natural than that there is no process in the brain correlated with associating or with thinking; so that it would be impossible to read off thought-processes from brain-processes. I mean this: if I talk or write there is, I assume a system of impulses going out from my brain and correlated with my spoken or written thoughts. But why should the system continue further in the direction of the centre? Why should this order not proceed, so to speak, out of chaos? The case would be like the following certain kinds of plants multiply by seed so that a seed always produces a plant of the same kind as that from which it was produced but nothing in the seed corresponds to the plant which comes from it; so that it is impossible to infer the properties or structure of the plant from those of the seed that comes out of it, this can only be done from the history of the seed. So an organism might come into being even out of something quite amorphous, as it were causelessly; and there is no reason why this should not really hold for our thoughts, and hence for our talking and writing. It is thus perfectly possible that certain psychological phenomena cannot be investigated psychologically, because psychologically nothing corresponds to them.

I saw this man year ago: now I have seen him again, I recognize him, I remember his name. And why does there have to be a cause of this remembering in my nervous system? Why must something or other, whatever it may be, be stored up there is any form? Why must a trace have been left behind? Why should there not be a psychological regularity to which no physiological regularity corresponds? If this upsets our concept of causality then it is high time it was upset. (Z 610)
**Wittgenstein’s View of Understanding**

Wittgenstein concludes that understanding is not an experience, state or process (conscious or unconscious). These states and processes have duration while understanding lacks duration. True, certain states or processes accompany when one understands something, but they are neither necessary nor sufficient condition of understanding. Understanding belongs to another logical category. "He understands" must have more in it than the formula occurs to him. And equally, more than any of those more or less characteristic accompaniments or manifestations of understanding. (PI 152)

In order to get clear about “understanding”, we must inquire into the meaning of related terms (as they are used in language). The grammar of the word “Knows” is evidently closely related to that of “can”, “is able to”. But also closely related to that of “understands”. (PI 150)

Understanding is closely related to ability (or to mastery of a technique). Abilities and skills are always acquired. The ability to play chess is to “know how” the game is played. Knowing how here indicates that there is a certain way of doing or using something. There is regularity in practice which is called habit or custom. This regularity is the regularity in “actions”. The regularity in action is to be seen in ways of living or forms of life. There is nothing hidden as far as way of living is concerned. What is given in the final analysis is a description how an activity is carried out. Language, for Wittgenstein, is interwoven with action. The regularity in action is what is known as the ‘rules’ of language/action. Since, rules constitute language-games, therefore, understanding a language-game involves an understanding of the rules that constitute it.

Understanding, as we have seen, is a mastery of a technique or ability. Meaning is the content of understanding. Since understanding consists in knowing how, therefore, its content is given by the description of this knowing how. The description of this knowing how is the explanation of meaning.

To understand a sentence means to understand a language. To understand a language means to be master of a technique. (PI 199) “Understanding is effected by explanation; but also by training,” says Wittgenstein.

**2.10 LET US SUM UP**

We have presented views on understanding by two different philosophers. Locke and Wittgenstein talk about sensations and mental acts. Locke considers understanding as mental process but Wittgenstein refuses to call understanding a mental process. To Wittgenstein it may be true that some mental process may accompany our understanding, but that does not indicate that our understanding consists in having that process. There are sensations and mental processes and they are non-physical and non-behaviouristic ones. What is interesting to note here is that Wittgenstein discusses sensations and mental acts at length without committing himself to the notion of consciousness anywhere in his writings.

**2.11 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES**


