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G. H. von Wright’s Understanding of Actions

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0 Introduction

Of all the philosophical books written by G. H. VON WRIGHT, *Explanation and Understanding* (1971) is – to quote his own words – “perhaps the most challenging or even controversial” one.¹ So it certainly was.

In the early 70’s, for most analytical philosophers VON WRIGHT’s book was really shocking. It broke one of their strongest taboos. For them, just to speak of *E and U* was tantamount to declaring war on the ideal of a unified science in which every explanation had to meet the standards of the deductive nomological or statistical explanations of the natural sciences to be worth to be noticed at all. In contrast, the hermeneuticans praised the book enthusiastically hoping that it would initiate the full rehabilitation of the understanding-discourse even beyond the humanities. For them, G. H.VON WRIGHT was like a new Moses, a person who might free them from their methodological exile imposed on them, as they believed, by their positivist opponents.

Today, this is already part of the long history of philosophical revolutions. The story of E&U’s-reception and its effects may be told in more detail in a future hopefully not too far away. But one thing is beyond any question: No other philosophical contribution had a greater influence in bridging the gap between Analytical Philosophy on the one side and traditional continental philosophy on the other side.

¹ ANV, S. 27.

Let me remind you today very roughly just of the main tenets of VON WRIGHT's approach to the understanding of actions.

1. The Early Theory (of E&U)

1.1 Revolutions often result from very simple ideas. This was the case with VON WRIGHT's theory of Action Understanding. The whole thing started by means of putting forward a very simple – but in the end extremely fruitful - question: If scientific explanations (of natural events) take the form of deductive-nomological or probabilistic inferences – which form of inference corresponds to the understanding of actions? VON WRIGHT's answer focussed on the Aristotelian schema of Practical Syllogisms.

(U-PS) An action is understood iff it is regarded as the conclusion of a (suitable) Practical Syllogism.

1.2 There are many different types of *Practical Syllogisms*. Let's start with this one:

(PS) (1) X wants A.
 (2) X believes A will occur iff he himself does f.
Therefore (3) X does f .

Here, the *voluntative* premise (1) and the *doxastic* (or *cognitive*) premise (2) together are representing the *mental aspect* of the action in question, identical in this case with (to use Anscombe's terminology) the "*intention with*" which the action is or was being done by it's agent or will be done by him.

1.3 We can either take the *forward looking stance* starting from the premises and ending up with the action-conclusion; or we can take the *backward looking stance*, following just the opposite line. Given the action, we are looking for some premises adding the mental aspect. The first stance we take in *practical deliberation*, the second one in *explaining the action*, i.e., in *Action-Understanding*. ANSCOMBE's interests in Practical Syllogisms rather regarded their deliberative use; whereas, after some hesitating, VON WRIGHT preferably focused on their

explanatory use. Related to this latter (backward looking) perspective, (PS) is giving us the logical structure of – in VON WRIGHT’s words – an intentionalist action-explanation.

(U-PS*) An action is understood iff if it is regarded as the conclusion of a (suitable) ex post actu Practical Syllogism (= as the conclusion of an intentionalist explanation).

Or, to put it very roughly in ordinary discourse:

(U-I) You will understand an action iff you know the intention, with which it was performed (= iff you know it’s purpose).

1.4 Now, exactly as in the case of natural events, the inferences giving us their respective deductive nomological explanations must be logically valid, the same must hold for our intentional explanations of actions. Is this condition satisfied by (PS)? Is its conclusion really entailed by its premises?

No, definitely not.

1.5 This confession provoked the philosophical community to produce hundreds of contributions, all trying to correct this flaw by putting in additional premises. But in the end, none of these attempts turned out to be successful. For that reason, some participants in this discourse – including me – voted for a new beginning. Instead of looking for the best way of strengthening the premises, let’s weaken the conclusion.

(PS-R) (1) X wants A.
(2) X believes A will occur iff he himself does f.
Therefore (3*) It is/would be *rational* for x, to do f .

Then, from this new conclusion you may derive the old one – (3) X does f – by means of the *agent’s situational rationality presumption*, i.e. by adding the proposition, that in the situation in question agent X was a *rational agent*, i.e., that he did in fact what rationality was demanding from him.

1.6 Though VON WRIGHT did not seem to be very happy about this move, I think that, in the end, it was accepted by him. Otherwise, what else should have been his motive to refer to our understanding explanations of actions also as “rational explanations”.

(U-PS**) An action is understood iff if it is regarded as the conclusion of a (suitable) ex post actu Practical Syllogism, characterizing the action to be a rational one.
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Or to put it again in less technical words:

(U-R) You will understand an action iff you know for what reasons it is rational for the agent to perform the action
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1.7 Rational Explanation Theory is nothing else than rational decision theory applied from the ex post actu perspective. Thereby, this way of approaching Understanding goes far beyond the Practical Syllogisms approach we, following VON WRIGHT’s guidance, had started from. This approach is not only covering intentional explanations involving the strong “intentions with” – as in (PS) – and its weaker cousins of the “intention in”-variety; it covers the totality of the voluntative-cognitive complexes (preferences and subjective probabilities) regulated by the wellknown Bayesian principle for the general case of decisions under risk.

1.8 *Understanding is rationalization ex post actu.* And as Bayesian rationalization of an action is always relative to the respective preferences and probabilities, the same holds for our understanding of the action. To put it again in intentionalist terms: Understanding an action is knowledge of the agents intention. But this knowledge does not imply any additional knowledge about the reasons which may be behind these (socalled first level) intentions. Of course, a *deeper understanding* of an action would have to involve some knowledge about these “reasons behind” (= some knowledge about the agent’s deeper intentions and beliefs) as well.

That much on what I take to be (a fair first hand reconstruction of) the essential kernel of VON WRIGHT’s earlier (= E&U’s) Theory of Understanding.

2 The Intermediate Theory

2.1 The most critical arbiter of VON WRIGHT's philosophical ideas was VON WRIGHT himself. This is most evident in his "Deontic Logics". But his self-critical way of thinking is clearly exemplified in his philosophy of action as well.

Let's consider next some of VON WRIGHT's own objections to his *earlier approach* (of E&U, 1971) as well as some of his proposed revisions. Most of these revisions are part of the argument of his book on *Freedom and Determination* (1980), which he regarded as "the fullest and best-argued statement of my position in the philosophy of action". (ANV, 27).

But, typically, even this "best-argued statement" was not considered by him to be the end of his engagement in the field. In the middle of the 80's VON WRIGHT took another decisive turn in his philosophy of Action-Understanding, thereby questioning the very basis of the whole approach as developed by him before. (ANV, 26)

For convenience's sake, I will continue to refer to these 3 stages in the development of VON WRIGHT's philosophy of action as *the early, the intermediate and the last stage*.

2.2 I already had the chance to comment on some of his objections and revisions on some other occasions. By my comments I regularly proved myself to be very conservative, always trying to defend VON WRIGHT's earlier positions against its later revisions. Today, I will try to do the same again.

2.3 Now, in order to be fair to the VON WRIGHT of all the 3 stages mentioned, I have to begin with an objection which he brought forward in discussion several times. Just compare these two situations:

(S1) I want to get home quickly. Should I take a taxi? Should I wait for the bus? "The bus will only come along in 20 minutes; I'll easily be home by that time if I take a taxi" – this is the thought which goes through my mind, and I hail the next taxi I see.

(S2) I'm driving close behind a lorry on the motorway. Suddenly the lorry's brakelights turn on. Automatically I put the brakes on too – after all, I don't want to cause an accident.

With regards to these two situations, VON WRIGHT's explicitly declared position is this one. When explaining the meaning of Understanding, just forget about cases like (S2). In contrast to (S1), they miss the necessary element of *conscious deliberation*.

2.4 I was surprised when I first noticed that this objection was meant to be an objection not against his own (early etc.) position (which he hoped would exclude situation (S2)), but only against my reconstruction (which does not exclude (S2)). .

I still would like to see my above rationalization-reconstruction of the early VON WRIGHT position as an improvement. Rational explanations, as well as all the diverse applications of rational decision theory in general, are *not* restricted to (S1)-cases, i.e., to cases in which the action in question does in fact result from *conscious deliberation*. Of course, in (S2) it was rational for me, to put my brakes on immediately – even without having the chance of starting some process of deliberation before.

For this reason, I would like to discount this first objection as far as possible – and will do so in the rest of this talk. (By the way, I think that this first objection results from VON WRIGHT's indecision whether to take the *ex ante* or the *ex post* perspective regarding the Practical Syllogism. And as it will be clear in 4.12 ff again, VON WRIGHT's antipathy against *no conscious deliberation* cases may loom in the background of the whole story to be told here. Where there is no conscious deliberation, there may be no chance for von Wright's later Connection Condition – cf. 4.6 either.)

2.5 VON WRIGHT's real objection to his early approach was that it was too restrictive. (i) This approach defines Understanding exclusively with reference to rational explanations. Now, (ii) rationality in the sense assumed in these explanations is limited to so called *instrumental actions*, actions which are *means to ends*. (iii) But only a small class of human actions has this character. (FD, § 24).

VON WRIGHT's paradigm cases for non-instrumental actions are what he calls "symbolic challenges [and responses] – institutionalized 'games' of communicative action." (FD, § 25). His favourite example is that of two people greeting each other. Other examples would be: to answer a question, to fulfil another person's request, to stop when traffic lights signal red etc. etc.

Actions responding this way to symbolic challenges need no rational explanation to be understood. Hence, so von Wright's conclusion, understanding these actions is an understanding *sui generis*.

2.6 Whereas the mental aspect (the voluntative-cognitive complex) referred to in rational explanations gives us the *internal reason* for an action, symbolic challenges give us an *external reason*.

VON WRIGHT's new account of understanding is meant to be broad enough to cover both kinds of reasons for actions:

(U-R*)	You will understand an action iff you know its (internal or external) reason.
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3 Understanding and Meaning

Now, before moving onwards, let me embed this crude reconstruction into a wider context – though this extension was not practiced by VON WRIGHT himself.

3.1 The most general and simultaneously the most illuminating understanding of *understanding* consists, I think, in its correlation with *meaning*. In the ideal case, a Theory of Understanding would be equivalent with a general Theory of Meaning.

(U-M)	Understanding = Knowledge of Meaning
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This holds for all possible (kinds of) objects of understanding, including actions.

(U-M*)	You will understand an action iff you know its meaning
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3.2 As regarding actions, we have to distinguish between *action tokens* versus *action types*. [Action tokens are realizations of action types by particular individual persons (action-subjects) or collectives in particular moments of time.] And as regarding meanings in general, again including action-meanings, we also have to distinguish between *individualistic_X* (or *subjective_X*) *meaning* on the one side and *collectivistic_P* (or *intersubjective_P*) *meanings* on the other [with the indices X or P referring to the individual or collective (population) to whom or which the action is said to have its respective meaning]. Now, though in principle these 4 categories can be freely combined, there are two salient correlations of special importance: subjective meaning as attached to an action-token and intersubjective meanings as connected with action-types.

3.3 VON WRIGHT's early Theory of Understanding started, following the lines of MAX WEBER, with the category of the subjective meaning of an action-token – to be identified with the role or function the performance of the action has for the agent himself. Thus, we know this subjective meaning or function, when we know the agents *internal reason* for his action, i.e., when we know his intention behind his action.

Now, in his next step (in F&D), VON WRIGHT, following WITTGENSTEIN, took up the category of the collective meaning of action-types – to be identified with the role or function the performance of an action of this type would have for the participants in the language game being played at the situation in question. We know this meaning when we know the rules of the game. Moves in this game which, according to its rules, demand situation-specific responses from participants in the game – these are (VON WRIGHT's) “symbolic challenges”, the *external reasons* for the agent's responses to these challenges.

3.4 That much concerning the central ideas of VON WRIGHT's intermediate Philosophy of Understanding. Of course, this summary gives you only the sketch of a huge research program, not yet anything like a worked out theory.

Before turning to the next and last stage, let me draw your attention to what I think would be a good test for such a generalised theory of action-Understanding to be really adequate.

With regards to internal reasons “Action-Understanding” has been explicated in terms of the logical form first of a Practical Syllogisms and then of rational explanations. Now, what is the logical form with regards to the external reasons? In discussion VON WRIGHT’s first notation has been this one:

(U-ER)	(1)	Challenge
	(2)	Action f = Adequate Response to Challenge
Therefore	(3)	Action f

Can we say a bit more on the Logic of this new Schema?

4 The Later Theory (Understanding without Knowledge)

4.1 The whole picture of VON WRIGHT’s Philosophy of Understanding of Actions I presented so far relied on the principle that Understanding is a special kind of knowledge, i.e., knowledge of the agent’s relevant (internal and / or internal) reasons of his action. This premise was questioned and even denied by VON WRIGHT himself in his later years.

Even as early as 1984 he wrote: „One could say that action-explanations are not at all true or false; they do not fall under the category of the True and the False” (Probleme des Erklärens und Verstehens von Handlungen, german Lectures in Austria, NWH, 154.) And, even more explicit, in 1987: “According to Meggle, the Understanding connected with action-explanations is a case of Knowledge. I disagree. There is no analogy between the pair of the concepts of *Understanding & Misunderstanding* on the one side and the pairs of *Knowing & Not knowing* or of *True/ & False* on the other side.” (in his postscript to our Public Debate at Münster University, NWH, 205 / QUOTE GERMAN IN FN).

4.2 Now, I have to confess that my Understanding = Knowledge premise is so deeply entrenched in my thinking that I am not sure whether I do really understand the arguments VON WRIGHT had presented in favour of his, as he noticed himself, radical and provokative position. So it would be fine if this audience could help me to improve.

4.3 But first, let me briefly explain what is at the heart of my conceptual personal background unshaken up to now.

I simply want to continue being able to distinguish between “X knows that p” on the one hand and “X believes to know that p” on the other hand.

$$(i) \quad K(Y,p) \neq B(Y,K(Y,p))$$

4.4 And, correspondingly, I want to remain to be able to distinguish between “Understanding” and “Understanding-as”. “Understanding” (being Knowledge) implies “Understanding as” (being Belief) – but not vice versa. That You *understand* X’s act s (say, his smiling) *as* being an act with the feature F (say, being a nice signal of approval), is just another way of saying, that You *believe* that his act has this feature – full stop. Understanding implies Truth, *Understanding-as* (as Belief in general) does not. (X’s smile may have just accompanied his otherwise secret cruel imaginations of how best to torture you tonight.)

$$(ii) \quad \text{UNDERSTAND-AS}(Y,s,F(s)) = B(Y,F(s))$$

$$(iii) \quad B(Y,F(s)) \rightarrow F(s) \quad \text{(PFEIL DURCHSTREICHEN!!!)}$$

$$(iv) \quad K(Y,F(s)) \rightarrow F(s)$$

In this sense, *understanding* is already (by definition) *correct Understanding*. Thus, the phrase *understanding correctly* can – if not redundant - only be used in the sense of “correctly understanding this and this as being so and so”, i.e. of stating that the respective belief is a correct (true) one.

$$(v) \quad \begin{array}{l} \text{UNDERSTANDING} \neq \text{UNDERSTANDING-AS} \\ \text{Knowing} \quad \quad \quad \neq \quad \text{Believing} \end{array}$$

4.5 Beyond VON WRIGHT, there is no philosopher whose conceptual brainwashing I would have been less reluctant to accept. Nevertheless, in this case I just can’t give in. So, may I dare to propose that in this context even a G. H.VON WRIGHT was sometimes disregarding the necessary distinction between *Understanding-as* versus *Understanding* simpliciter? Did not even Leibniz, in my opinion the greatest of all great philosophers of the western world,

commit comparable mistakes even with the negation-sign, one of the most simple logical operators?

4.6 Fortunately, VON WRIGHT's radical statement – denying that Understanding entails Knowledge and Truth – is (as he implicated himself) just a provocative exaggeration. His real position is much weaker: It is this one:

There are 3 necessary conditions which an action explanation must fulfil to be adequate:

- (i) The explanandum, the action performed, is correctly identified.
- (ii) The reasons mentioned are really present.
- (iii) The reasons and the action are effectively connected.

Effectively connected – that is: There is a connection between the reasons and the action such that this connection brings it about that these reasons will be the effective (compelling) reasons.

4.7 Now, whereas the first two conditions are on facts identifiable independently of the act of understanding itself, this does not hold for the third Condition, the Connection-Condition. For VON WRIGHT it is a connection *sui generis*, neither a causal relation nor a conceptual (logical) one. It is constituted by the act of understanding itself. It is the understanding itself which is bridging the gap between reasons and act.

4.8 To this Connection-Condition I have attached – just for my private thinking purposes – the label “VON WRIGHT's *mystery condition*”. I am sure that I do not yet fully understand what this condition, when demystified, would really amount to. I have some idea, as you will notice; but in our Understanding vs. Knowledge debate it would work just the other way – i.e., *supporting* my “Knowledge is essential for Understanding”-position.

4.9 Up to now we could avoid to take notice of this condition. There was no need to distinguish between reasons simpliciter and compelling (effective) reasons in particular. Reasons simpliciter are just like pro-arguments; compelling reasons are those reasons bringing about the action in question. All situations considered so far were very simple – remember, for example, our primitive Practical Syllogism case at the beginning. So it was no problem just to speak of *the* reason (*the* intention) behind the action. When the action was

performed, *this* very reason accordingly must have been *the* effective (compelling) reason as well.

4.10 Things are different in situations with a complex motivational background, as, for example, in a situation like this one:

X has promised to do something, but knows that fulfilling this promise will have very bad consequences for some people. In addition to that he has been assured that, if he does, what this promise demands from him to do, he will get a lot of cash. Now, X has to make up his mind about whether to keep his promise or not.

This situation is motivationally complex in several respects:

- a) there are more than one pro-reasons
- b) the reasons are, let's suppose, not of equal strength (not equally good)
- c) and there is at least one contra-reason (that in the case of promise keeping some people will be harmed)

4.11 X did what he had promised to do. Why? Did he want to stick to the principle that given promises should be fulfilled? Or was he just craving for getting the cash? We don't know. We just can make up our suggestions.

4.12 Now, to come back to VON WRIGHT's Mystery Condition, let's ask ourselves: What could it mean with regards to this complex motivation situation (§ 4.9) that it is the 'understanding itself' by which the action and its reasons get connected – without, to repeat, this connection, i.e., the understanding itself, having or getting a cognitive function?

This condition will be most plausible, I suggest, when directly applied to the agent's (ex ante) understanding of his own action. The decision on what to do is up to him. He knows the options; he is informed about their consequences. But still, he does not yet know what to do. How come?

4.13 Now, I fully agree: At this point of the story the agent's problem is not an information-problem any more. No further information would be of help. The only open question is what he, agent X, really wants; what does it really mean for him to keep the promise, to inflict harm

on other people, to get or to forget about the cash. His problem is rather of the form: Who am I? What kind of person do I want to be? X's decision is not only on promise-keeping or cash-acceptance – it is at one and the same time also a decision on his personal identity. It is X's self-understanding what is at stake here. Up to now the agent himself did not take any of the given reasons as being really decisive. But some of them will become decisive for him as soon as he has taken his stance on what is really important for him and what is not.

Again, I would agree. There is no deep mystery left. X's (self-) understanding of what acting this or that way would mean to himself (to his self) may have finally closed the gap between his reasons and (one of) his action-options. Some of his reasons will have changed into compelling reasons.

4.14 And again, I agree: This act or process of self-understanding would in deed fulfil VON WRIGHT's connection-Condition.

Fine!

But still there is a problem left: That is not “understanding” in the sense of a rational explanation *ex post actu*. And so it is not understanding in the sense which is at stake here. VON WRIGHT's Mystery Connection may have worked very well in the case of the agent's deliberation *ex ante*. But this is no argument against Knowledge being entailed by Understanding in the sense of a rational explanation *ex post*.

4.15 Quite to the contrary: All future understandings of the agent's act of fulfilling his promise will have to refer to the fact that the agent's own understanding-connection did come about in the way just described. All these understandings will have to presuppose this part of knowledge. Hence, in my interpretation, VON WRIGHT's ingeniously referring to the understanding connection in the case of deliberation, finally turns out to be a strong argument not against, but for the Principle that Understanding implies Knowledge.

4.16 There is another VON WRIGHTian argument contra this principle. Again, it seems to be very simple: Self-deception is possible, as every psychologist knows – possible even in the case of the deliberative selfunderstanding just discussed.

X did what he had promised to do. Why? His answer is: “Because given promises have to be fulfilled.” Let’s take it that in giving this explanation he is sincere. He does really believe, that was the (compelling) reason which made him do what he did. Could it be, that – all this considered - nevertheless he is wrong? “Yes, maybe” says von Wright - with reference to FREUD’s psychoanalysis.

4.17 Is this kind of self-deception *really* possible? Maybe, so perhaps I might give in.

But that’s not the real problem. The question to be settled now is not possibility in some FREUDian sense, but possibility as restricted by VON WRIGHT’s Mystery-Connection-Condition.

What would be your suggestion? Are VON WRIGHT’s *non-cognitive-and-no-independent-Truth-Connection-Condition* on the one hand und our agent’s self-deception about his own effective reasons really compatible? I don’t know. (And I *can’t* know as long as I do not really understand this Mystery Condition itself.) But about one thing I am pretty sure at least: Where there is no truth, there is no deception either.

4.18 Again, we are back in the deep waters of personal identity. Any attempt to give a correct description of self-deception on one’s own *compelling* reasons might immediately lead us into intricate contradictions. At this point we and our psychoanalytical colleagues normally prefer to switch to metaphorical speaking, to postulating multiple persons and introducing different levels of knowledge and agency. To all my knowledge, G.H. von Wright is one of the very few philosophers who at least had made a start in trying to resist this temptation.

4.19 All these complexities will multiply if we would, as VON WRIGHT in fact proposed (see next reference), next combine our agent’s self-deception with the possibility of his later recognition of this former self-deception and then maybe even add the chance of his later undergoing some kind of conversion. For the best introduction into these complexies just read the last §§ of von Wright’s german lecture “Probleme des Erklärens und Verstehens von Handlungen”.

So, in the end VON WRIGHT’s Philosophy of action and understanding overlaps with a new philosophical foundation of Psychoanalysis.

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I am deeply missing GEORG HENRIK. But still I do not like to follow him in his negation of the Principle of “Understanding is Knowledge”. So *you* may tell me now, what’s wrong with me.

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NWH = Georg Henrik von Wright, Normen, Werte und Handlungen, Frankfurt (Suhrkamp), 1994.

ANV = Georg Meggle (Ed.), Actions, Norms, Values.

Schilpp =

Georg Henrik von Wright:

Probleme des Erklärens und Verstehens von Handlungen (Vortrag 1984), in NWH, S. 141-165.

Das Verstehen von Handlungen – Disputation mit Georg Meggle (Münster 1987), in NWH, S. 166-208.