If some people looked like elephants and others like cats, or fish, one wouldn’t expect them to understand each other and things would look much more like what they really are.

Human beings regularly have great trouble understanding each other, let alone members of other species. How can we come to better understand ourselves and others? My current research seeks to demonstrate that without a philosophy of understanding we cannot properly address human concerns as diverse as those of conflict between different cultures and faiths, ethical and political debate, mental illness, and our inheritance of the past.

The English word ‘understand’ first appears in early theological texts and is etymologically related to comprehending, apprehending, and grasping. The notion of understanding played a central role in Early Modern philosophical systems such as Locke’s Essay on Human Understanding and Hume’s Enquiry on Human Understanding as well as in the late modern sociologies of Dilthey and Croce. Despite a recent revival of interest in empathy, spurred by scientific studies of mirror-neurons and simulation, contemporary philosophy leaves little space for a theory of understanding that is distinct from the theories of knowledge and explanation. This is largely due to the assumption, found in Locke among others, that understanding another is a matter of obtaining information about their mind.

But is this true? It is helpful to here compare the understanding of others to self-understanding. The traditional view that understanding oneself is a matter of acquiring information or knowledge via some kind of privileged introspective access to the ‘contents’ of our own minds is deeply implausible. This is because self-understanding is inseparable from our relationships to the people, objects, and institutions that make up our world. Accordingly, one typically comes to understand oneself better when one loses something that was an integral part of one’s life e.g. one’s job, child, reputation, abilities, property, dreams, etc.

As with self-understanding, the understanding of others comes from a shared communion which cannot be reduced to propositional knowledge. We might be able to correctly cite another’s reasons for acting as she did, but this is not the same as understanding why the reasons in question motivate her to so act. Principles of charity can only get one so far here, not least when we are trying to understand people who suffer from autism or psychopathy. Whatever causal explanations are available cannot provide us with the sort of understanding that is in question here.

Eleanor Stump has argued that the experiential knowledge of persons is transmitted through stories. We must, however, remain sceptical about the truth value of the narratives we deliver. Autobiography reveals how our attempts to understand are inextricably tied to the desire to conceive of our lives as having purpose and direction. While these may produce the feeling of understanding, we have good reason to mistrust the tales we spin to ourselves, which is not to deny that we may comprehend ourselves better by reading old letters, diaries, etc.

I have been arguing against the Lockean idea that the prime aim of communication is to decode and transfer information from one mind to another. This view has recently resurfaced in popular accounts of empathy as a kind of emotional tool which provides one with an access-pass to otherwise hidden ‘mental contents’. I urge that this radically distorted account of what it takes to understand another should be replaced by a stance which places priority on public phenomena such as cultural practice and shared behaviour. What we need is not a more efficient Information and Communications Technology but to better ourselves in the art of communicating.

This is not a matter of developing a perfectly precise and unambiguous ‘ideal language’, which Russell held could eliminate all vagueness and ambiguity in communication. Rather, understanding others involves being at one with their emotional, conceptual, motivational, and cognitive framework. In his supervision of the Voyager gold records that were propelled into space in 1977, Cal Sagan sought to include inscriptions that could be deciphered by conscious creatures whose nature was as far removed as possible from our own. In so doing, he attempted to create a language that was purely formal as opposed to one that could only make sense to creatures with a certain range of sentiments. This included basic symbols such as arrows which he assumed would be understood as pointing in the direction of their heads. Yet Wittgenstein has shown that symbols are conventions that cannot contain the key to their own meaning, for the latter is dependent upon the use we make of them.

The understanding of others, then, involves an awareness of their aims and intentions. Language alone cannot inform us of these,
The importance of culture regularity is at the heart of universal or national social groups. The universal culture inevitably manifests itself and exists in the form of the national, which acts as a synthesis of different class cultures of a definite society and as a fusion of the best human achievements in diverse spheres of life. But national culture can never fully cover this universal principle, it simply acts as one of the diamond facets, which should be organically linked to other facets, with other national cultures. “...cultural history is a chain of equations in images, pairwise binding another unknown to known. And this known, constant for the entire series, is a legend, laid at the base of tradition. Unknown, every time with a new is the actual moment of the current culture” [2, p. 225].

Contemporary spiritual situation in Kazakhstan society has convincingly proved that the formation of an open democratic society is impossible without culture as a way of human existence and as a basis of his existence as a goal.

The essence of human is multifaceted, multiqualitative and multilevel. The availability of diverse forms of art arises from the large variety of human essence and existence in history. The peculiarity of human existence and its essence is revealed by different forms of art, each of which affects some aspect, some moment, in this variety. And if a person wants to know himself, he refers to these kinds of art, values each of them; understanding and recognizing the importance of all types and genres. One of the types of art that has deep historical roots and origins is a puppet theater.

The puppet theater is a form of culture, not only at a subconscious, sensual level, but also at a reflexive level that promotes deep understanding of man to his essence and existence. It helps to put some life goals and objectives in to perspective, choose necessary needs and interests, and understand that there is a man, a humanity as a whole, what are his ideals, what are his goals, and what are his aspirations? And perhaps more deeply, respond quickly to the diverse realities of human existence. This theater maintains man’s connection with his childhood the ability to see the world as wonderful and kind, encouraging optimism that makes these art forms relevant and desirable at all times in human history, including at the present stage.

From the beginning the theatre has been helping man to understand himself, developing the foundations, the essence of concepts of “person”, “society”, “good – bad”, “worthy – low”, etc. In Thomas Mann’s words, “The Theatre is a sublime and childish pastime, it performs the most beautiful task when he devotes a lot of something to the people” [3, p. 354].

The Puppet Theatre is not a simulacrum, not a visibility, not an illusion but it is what it is. Despite the fact that for a long time its existence differs in modesty, simplicity, unobtrusiveness, it was popular amongst the people at large. Today, in the new market...