

# The Value of Understanding

## *Introduction*

Understanding has a special kind of value that other epistemic states such as knowledge do not, and this fact threatens the justification for the focus on knowledge that the history of epistemology displays. I have argued elsewhere that knowledge does not possess this special value.<sup>1</sup> There are a couple of lines of argument, however, that threaten to extend the denial of this special value for knowledge to a denial of a special value for understanding. Underlying all such challenges is the obvious fact that the language of knowing and the language of understanding are closely related. In the end, however, I hope to show that the kind of understanding that we prize most is immune from the concerns I have argued plague the theory of knowledge.

The kind of understanding in question I term ‘objectual understanding,’ as when one understands combustion or quantum mechanics or Republican ideology. I will begin with a brief discussion of some alternative types of understanding, but will move relatively quickly to the threats I see to the special value of objectual understanding. One threat is that if objectual understanding is special, then so should objectual knowledge be special. Another threat is that objectual understanding can be analyzed in terms of understanding following by a *wh*-phrase, most especially understanding *why*. Since understanding *why* and knowing *why* are intimately connected, any difficulties plaguing an account of the special value of knowledge will also plague an account of the special value of understanding. If either difficulty can be sustained, we will have to conclude that understanding has no

greater chance of having the special value in question than does knowledge.

I will begin with some remarks about the notions of understanding and knowledge that will be in focus here.

### *Types of Understanding and Knowledge*

When we are examining cognitive successes and achievements from a purely theoretical, as opposed to practical, point of view, two grammatical forms involving understanding stand out.<sup>2</sup> First is propositional understanding, and the grammatical form in question employs a ‘that’-clause. For example, propositional understanding is involved when we say that Jason understands that ‘knows’ is not a gradeable adjective. The other primary form is objectual understanding, and here the grammatical form takes an object, as when we say that Bas understand quantum theory or Cheney’s hunting buddies understand fear.

There is also the range of attributions of understanding followed by ‘wh’-clauses: Cheney’s buddies understand where not to stand, when to duck, what to do to avoid hospitalization, why they should prefer other hunting partners, etc. In each such case, it is tempting to adopt the thesis that such uses can be explained in terms of propositional understanding. Such is likely not the case with understanding how, but we have come to expect that epistemic terms involving a ‘how’-clause are more relevant to practical concerns than theoretical ones, so those can be ignored here.

The question of the relationship between objectual and propositional understanding mirrors a similar question about the relationship between objectual and propositional knowledge. One can know

that Bush is President as well as know Bush; one can know that quantum theory is counterintuitive, and also know quantum theory. Moreover, the verb 'knows' also takes 'wh'-complements, and it is plausible here as well to think of such constructions as reducible to propositional knowledge.<sup>3</sup>

The central point I want to emphasize here, however, is not one about the reductive relationships in question, but rather the difference in focus when understanding is before our minds rather than knowledge. When we think about the nature of understanding, what is foremost in our minds are the ways in which pieces of information are connected with each other. To understand is to grasp the variety of such connections. It involves seeing explanatory connections, being aware of the probabilistic interrelationships, and apprehending the logical implications of the information in question. There is, of course, an element of factivity to the notion of understanding, just as there is with the notion of knowledge. But when we move past the alethic aspect of both notions, our attention turns to diverse paths. When the question is whether one knows, the issues that are foremost in our minds are issues about evidence, reliability, reasons for belief, and, perhaps most importantly, non-accidentality regarding the connection between our grounds for belief and the truth of the belief. When the question is whether one has understanding, the issues that are foremost in our minds are issues about the extent of our grasp of the structural relationships (e.g., logical, probabilistic, and explanatory relationships) between the central items of information regarding which the question of understanding arises. The questions are those that led Plato to the method of collection and division, where the end result of the application of the method is a full grasp of a thing through a classification that sorts from genera to species in such a way that the thing in question is fully identified through the system of classification in question. Some have suggested that the application of this method is what Plato intended as an answer

to the question at the end of the Theaetetus concerning the nature of *logos* which perhaps was taken by Plato to differentiate knowledge from true opinion.<sup>4</sup> Such an account of knowledge surely overintellectualizes it, since the reflective efforts needed to complete the method are surely more than is ever achieved by small children and animals and even ordinary adults in cases of common perceptual knowledge. But once we recall the dispute over whether ‘*episteme*’ should be translated as “understanding” rather than “knowledge”, it is not as surprising to find such intellectualizing in the account, since the information generated by the process of division is just the sort of information one would expect when understanding is present. For when understanding comes to mind, the central elements in focus are ones concerned with structural relationships between various pieces of information grasped by the possessor of understanding, unlike the central element of non-accidentality in focus when one is one is reflecting on the concept of knowledge.

It is worth issuing a note of caution once we have reached this point. The cautionary note concerns the predilection in the epistemology of the last century or so to attempt to settle substantive philosophical disputes by appeal to ordinary language. Such an approach here would counsel us to consider and systematize the various ways in which the language of knowledge and understanding are used in common parlance. Though ordinary parlance might be a useful starting point when thinking about substantive philosophical issues, it is surely a mistake to think that whatever forces have led to the particular meanings encoded in ordinary language are also forces sure to encode in a way that resolves philosophical issues. We should distinguish the linguistic data regarding the use of epistemic terminology from substantive points about the phenomena in question. In the present context, there is no question that much of ordinary parlance treats ‘understanding’ and ‘knowledge’ as interchangeable. Here we

should remind ourselves that ordinary parlance also counts as knowledge things that are not believed, are not true, and are merely rational to believe. Philosophers, like other theoreticians, have a responsibility to develop a vocabulary adequate to their subject matter, and in developing such a vocabulary, they will often counsel revising ordinary language instead of merely reporting it. My remarks about the fundamental difference between understanding and knowledge are elicitable from our ordinary concepts of the two, but I make no claim here that the distinction I'm pointing to between the two is somehow faithfully reflected in ordinary language or some facet of it thought to be especially useful for revealing proper philosophical theory. It may well be that certain uses of 'understanding' should be interpreted as synonymous with knowledge claims. What interests me is understanding itself, not the way we talk. So a cursory response to appeals to what we'd say or what would be correct to assert is this: hardly anything philosophically interesting will follow about the nature or value of understanding from such data.

To the great dissatisfaction of some, however, I won't engage in extended discussion about exactly what the standards of proper theory construction are in philosophy, since my stated goal concerns the nature and value of understanding rather than philosophical metatheory. I bring the issue up only to prevent simplistic appeals to ordinary intuitions about the conditions under which ordinary language will allow the predication of understanding in a given case. The proper response to such purported refutations should be the same as the response we give to those who claim that knowledge doesn't entail true belief on the basis of my daughter's exclamation after the last election: "I just *knew* Kerry would win!" The proper response is that when doing epistemology we are focusing on a particularly significant intellectual accomplishment, one which ordinary language makes visible to us on

occasion and through a glass darkly at least. Beyond that, ordinary language is the ladder we kick away having once climbed, to put the point enigmatically and hyperbolically.

Returning to the agenda and applying the above points to it, the point of note in the above is the difference in focus between the phenomena in question. We note, on the ordinary language side, that there is understanding-that, understanding-wh, and objectual understanding. There is also knowledge-that, knowledge-wh, and objectual knowledge. We also notice that in any given case in which we use an epistemically relevant variant of one term, we could have used the other. We could say either that Joe knows baseball or that he understands it; that Sara understands that her appointment is at 11 or that she knows it; that Zac knows biology or that he understands it. Given such interchangeability, it is very natural to be drawn to the conclusion that there is not a significant difference between knowledge and understanding, perhaps to the extent that the terms are interchangeable because synonymous. Such a hypothesis would have to explain away the propriety of other utterances, such as “I know Peter but I don’t understand him at all;” but such a task doesn’t seem to be any more insurmountable than defending the factivity of knowledge by explaining away my daughter’s exclamation that she just knew Kerry would win.

I don’t believe the synonymy claim can be sustained, but I also don’t believe that it matters for my purposes whether or not the terms are synonymous. What is important, as the above discussion of knowledge and understanding recounts, is the difference between two phenomena. The history of epistemology focuses on one such phenomenon, a phenomenon requiring a focus on elements such as quality of evidence, ruling out alternative hypothesis, not being right simply by accident, and not having gotten to the truth just in virtue of a certain kind of fortuity or luck. The other phenomenon we can

begin to focus on by attending to the language of objectual understanding, and here the focus is on the grasped relatedness of the items that constitute a body of information possessed by the individual in question. Regarding this latter phenomenon, it is not enough that the explanatory connections exist or that they could be discovered easily by the individual with only a little effort or reflection.

Understanding involves an already-possessed awareness of the explanatory and other connections involved in the subject matter in question, an already-mastered grasp that involves or generates the illumination of a subject we resort to the language of intelligibility and sense-making to convey. To understand first-order proof theory is to have made sense of the structure of the theory and for this structure to be intelligible and plain to one. This difference between knowledge and understanding leaves open the possibility of having lucky understanding where the kind of luck in question is the kind demonstrated to be incompatible with knowledge in the Gettier literature. Historical understanding, for example, can be achieved where one's sources and one's dyslexia combine in the right way to generate correct dates even though the sources are mistaken. In such cases, one's understanding can be displayed by one's ability answer correctly any question put to one regarding the subject matter in question. But such examples fit the model of classic Gettier cases where the information about the inaccuracy of the sources serves to undermine the claim to know.

If these points can be sustained, then the special problems that attend any account of the value of knowledge may not plague an account of the value of understanding, for if the features that constitute the nature of understanding are factivity plus the grasping of internal, structural relationships between pieces of information, then the value of understanding can be explained without fear of refutation from the ad hocery and gerrymandering endemic to proposals designed to ward off the Gettier problem. In

short, knowledge lacks the unique value under discussion here because of the Gettier problem; understanding doesn't, because one can be lucky in having understanding.

One may resist this separation of knowledge and understanding by claiming that I'm contrasting objectual understanding, not with the properly analogous objectual knowledge, but with propositional knowledge. One may then resist further by claiming that we correct for this difficulty and compare propositional understanding with propositional knowledge and objectual understanding with objectual knowledge, that the perceived differences between knowledge and understanding will disappear altogether.<sup>5</sup>

The answer to this objection begins by noting that what we want to say about the connections between the objectual level and the propositional level, we shouldn't pull objectual knowledge so far apart from propositional knowledge that we allow Gettier intrusion to play a role regarding propositional knowledge but give no place to such concerns regarding objectual knowledge. Such a distinction would allow an easy reply to the worry that my distinction between knowledge and understanding involves a failure to control for type, since we could identify objectual knowledge with objectual understanding and claim that this phenomenon is much different from the focus on propositional knowledge that characterizes the history of epistemology. But I think separating objectual knowledge from propositional knowledge in this way is too strong a claim. We should expect some relationship between these kinds of knowledge, and we should expect some relationship between propositional and objectual understanding.

Once we grant that there should be some relationship here, we can see more clearly how the worry noted above might be developed. What matters to my thesis is that there are two quite different

phenomena here, and that holding each clearly before one's mind, the difference in focus described above is ascertainable. In one case, something akin to non-accidentality (I'm happy to put the point in terms of underdetermination as well, though I haven't done so) is in focus; in the other, apprehended interrelationships dominate. But suppose we identify objectual understanding with explanatory understanding, i.e., with understanding why, and then claim that understanding why and knowing why are indistinguishable. If we tie understanding to knowledge at the level of explanation in this way, and then adopt the usual view that knowledge involving wh-complements can be identified with propositional knowledge, we are only one step away from eliminating the distinction between knowledge and understanding. All that is left is to note, as I did above, that we should expect some relationship between propositional and objectual levels both for understanding and knowledge. So, if objectual knowledge can thus be understood in terms of some collection of propositional knowledge, the argument is complete: once we pay attention to the relationships between various kinds of understanding and knowledge, we find out that we can go from objectual understanding to explanatory understanding expressed in terms of understanding-why, and then to knowing-why which in turn takes us to propositional knowledge and finally to objectual knowledge. Moreover the road just outlined goes both directions, and thus the purported distinction between knowledge and understanding disappears.

I claim, however, that there is no such road, and the place where the above story goes wrong concerns the relationship between objectual and propositional understanding. The central difficulty for the above view involves the possibility of indeterministic systems and our capacity to understand them.

Understanding incorporates explanatory connections (when they exist), and one relevant kind of explanation depends on the presence of causation (when it exists). In indeterministic systems, things happen that are uncaused, both deterministically and probabilistically. Though some theories of probabilistic causation, such as Wesley Salmon's mark transmission account,<sup>6</sup> imply the existence of causation even when the result in question is completely indeterministic, that is a defect of such theories rather than a strength. If the probability of an electron going to the left is precisely the same as that of going to the right (and there is no hidden variable to account for the difference), then whichever way it goes is the result of chance rather than of causation. Chance here is, of course, not to be reified into a further explanatory or causal factor: it is, instead, just a denial of the presence of deterministic or probabilistic causation. In such cases, the connection between causation and explanation is tight: if there is no cause of the electron going to the left rather than the right, there is no explanation why the electron went to the left either.

Given these points, here's what we must say about indeterministic systems and our understanding of them. Where S is some indeterministic system, we can have objectual understanding of the system even though we cannot interpret this understanding in terms of being able to understand why things happen as they do in S. We have no such understanding because there is no explanatory basis for it, and there is no explanatory basis for it because the events in question are irreducibly indeterministic in such a way that there is no causal explanation as to why the actual events occurred rather than some other events. So objectual understanding cannot be reduced to propositional understanding via appeal to 'wh'-complement attributions of understanding or explanations.

Once this argument is granted, we can achieve a more unified conception of understanding by

allowing these considerations to generalize to our understanding of deterministic systems as well. We may wish to hold that objectual understanding of such systems is constituted by some collection of propositional understandings, but we should not identify objectual understanding with propositional understanding. To do so would forego the possibility of a unified treatment of the relationship between the two with no theoretical advantage gained by the disunity.

We should also say some of the same things on the knowledge side, concerning the relationships between propositional and objectual knowledge. When we do so, we preserve the intuitive connection between these different kinds of knowledge, and doing so allows us to see that paying attention to the type of knowledge or understanding doesn't block the distinction between the two. In the case of propositional knowledge, something akin to non-accidentality is in focus; in the case of objectual understanding, apprehended interrelationships dominate. But because the different levels are related in important ways, we should not expect non-accidentality to disappear from view when we attend to the nature of objectual knowledge. If it did disappear from view, that wouldn't be a threat to the view that there are two quite different intellectual achievements to consider here, though it would make the terminology I have chosen a bit misleading. I think, however, we should expect enough of a connection between propositional knowledge and objectual knowledge that concerns about accidentality will not disappear in this way, and if they do not, we are still in a position to notice the important difference between two kinds of intellectual achievement, a difference I am calling the difference between understanding and knowledge.

Once we have become clear about the distinction in question and in particular about the difference in focus accompanying each, we are in a position to assess the claim that understanding has a

special kind of value that knowledge does not. In order to understand the issue before us, we need to rehearse a bit the argument for the claim that understanding has a special kind of value that knowledge does not.

### ***Gettier Intrusion and The Value Question***

The fundamental problem with accounting for the value of knowledge involves explaining how what are traditionally termed the third and fourth conditions for knowledge generate a composite more valuable than true belief or justified true belief, respectively. Regarding the third condition, there is the now well-known swamping problem that plagues standard versions of reliabilism and threatens to undermine other views as well. The problem, at its core, is that to the extent that justification is conceived in instrumental terms relative to the goal of truth, the presence of truth swamps any value that justification might add. Once we've already assumed that a belief is true, learning that it also has a property whose significance is clarified in terms of an instrumental relationship to truth fails to teach us anything that would change or evaluative perspective on the belief in question.

In response to this problem, there are two quite different avenues to pursue in attempting to explain how justified true belief has more value than true belief. Some have held that virtue theories face this problem better than other versions of reliabilism.<sup>7</sup> Here I will not pursue the intricacies of this position, but will grant it. The other avenue is to characterize justification so that it is extrinsically, though not instrumentally, related to the goal of truth. This path is the one favored by most internalists.

Even if this problem can be avoided, however, there is a more debilitating one concerning the

fourth condition. As I and others have argued,<sup>8</sup> the better an approach to the Gettier problem is at carving cases of knowledge off from cases of non-knowledge, the more ad hoc and gerrymandered the proposal. The result is a condition which has no hope whatsoever of giving a decent answer to the question of what makes ungettiered justified true belief more valuable than justified true belief. As a result, the hope of defending the view that knowledge is more valuable than any proper subset of its parts is dim indeed.

Not so with understanding, however. When understanding comes to mind, the central elements in focus are ones concerned with structural relationships grasped by the possessor of understanding, unlike the central element of non-accidentality in focus when one is reflecting on the concept of knowledge. The point to note is the difference in focus between the phenomena in question. With knowledge, as the history of epistemology demonstrates, the focus is on elements such as quality of evidence, ruling out alternative hypotheses, not being right simply by accident, and not having gotten to the truth in virtue of a certain kind of fortuity or luck. With understanding, the focus is on the grasped relatedness of the items that constitute a body of information possessed by the individual in question. It is not enough that the explanatory connections exist or that they could be discovered easily by the individual with only a little effort or reflection. Understanding involves an already-possessed awareness of the explanatory and other connections involved in the subject matter in question. This difference between knowledge and understanding leaves open the possibility of having lucky understanding where the kind of luck in question is the kind claimed to be incompatible with knowledge in the Gettier literature. Historical understanding, for example, can be achieved where one's sources and one's dyslexia combine in the right way to generate correct dates even though the sources are mistaken. In

such cases, one's understanding can be displayed by one's ability answer correctly any question put to one regarding the subject matter in question. But such examples fit the model of classic Gettier cases, where the information about the inaccuracy of the sources serves to undermine the claim to know.

If these points can be sustained, then the special problems that attend any account of the value of knowledge may not plague an account of the value of understanding, for if the features that constitute the nature of understanding are factivity plus the grasping of internal, structural relationships between pieces of information, then the value of understanding can be explained without fear of refutation from the ad hocery and gerrymandering endemic to proposals designed to ward off the Gettier problem. In short, knowledge lacks the unique value under discussion here because of the Gettier problem; understanding doesn't, because one can be lucky in having understanding.

Some demur on the point about Gettier, however. Consider the following case and argument from DePaul and Grimm:

Suppose that your source for World Cup soccer scores and analysis is a Jayson-Blair style news reporter who simply makes up all of his reports about the Cup whole-cloth. You have no particular reason to suspect this about him, moreover, so from your point of view his reports seem worthy of your default trust. Your source then claims (in a particular moment of reverie) that the United States defeated Italy 2 to 1, and that the winning goal was scored by the U.S. because the Italian goalkeeper slipped in the mud, an account that you then accept as true. In this case, moreover (what luck!), all of his claims turn out to *be* true; by chance, he has precisely described the way things actually unfolded during the game. Focusing now on the role

of understanding, we can also add the following: not only do you come to accept (based on his account) that the United States scored the winning goal because the goalie slipped in the mud, but you also (in some appropriately internal sense) “grasp” or “see” the explanatory relationship described by the reporter; that is, you “grasp” or “see” that the winning goal was scored *because* the goalie slipped in the mud. This is, to your mind, *why* the winning goal was scored.

According to Kvanvig, all the ingredients required for understanding now seem to be present: there is the internal “seeing,” for one thing, and there is also the truth of the connection seen (that is, roughly, the truth of the explanatory story). But do you now genuinely understand why the winning goal was scored? It seems not. Because the details were invented whole-cloth by the reporter, even though the connection that you “see” or “grasp” actually obtains, you no more understand *why* the winning goal was scored by the U.S. than you know *that* the winning goal was scored by the U.S.<sup>9</sup>

DePaul and Grimm claim that you don’t have propositional knowledge in this case, and that this lack translates into a lack of understanding concerning why the winning goal was scored on the basis of the same Gettier-like considerations involved in the case. In short, they wish to use an identification between understanding-why and knowledge-that to undermine what I have claimed about the special value of objectual understanding.

There are two points to note about this attempt. First, it should be noted that I have not identified objectual understanding with the short list of characteristics noted in the quoted passage. I have not said that understanding is simply a matter of some internal seeing of explanatory connections that in fact obtain. I have said that when we think carefully about objectual understanding, these are the

sorts of things that are in primary focus and in contrast to the notions of evidence and luck that are in focus when we think about propositional knowledge. But I have also said that justification plays a central role in objectual understanding as well. I did not stress this point extensively in my book on the subject, but it is a point that is important in this context. As I have already noted, there are at least two approaches to justification that I believe have good responses to the Meno problem, one a very subjective approach and the other a virtue approach. In order for the soccer game example to show that there are Gettier-like issues for justification, the case would have to be constructed so that the understanding in question involved beliefs that are subjectively rational. If that test is passed and the case is still worrisome, it would not immediately call for a revision in the claims I have made about the value of understanding, but instead would call for a more minor revision in terms of adding that the beliefs in question should be required to be intellectually virtuous as well, since such a characteristic of beliefs adds value to true belief. In the case above, it would appear to be quite simple to construct the case so that the beliefs in question are all subjectively rational, but it is not as easy to see how they count as intellectually virtuous. On the usual accounts of intellectually virtuous belief, the beliefs need to be reliable in order to be virtuous and on a natural reading of the example, the beliefs in question are not reliable.

I do not wish to rest a response to the case on this point however, so I am going to grant here that the beliefs in question are both subjectively justified and intellectually virtuous. In developing the response I want to give to the above case, I wish to begin by noting again that there is something correct and expected about the claimed identification between understanding -why and knowledge that, at least so far as ordinary language goes. To get a counterexample to the approach recommended

here, however, we need more than a case in which understanding is plausibly denied because of the kinds of features central to Gettier cases in the theory of knowledge. The reason we need more than this is because the theory in question here relies not so much on some purported difference in the appropriate linguistic uses of the terms in question, but rather on a difference in the phenomena at the objectual and propositional levels. In particular, for the soccer case above to threaten the account in question, we need to add to the case that objectual understanding is present in some way. As presented, the attempted counterexample relies instead on the claim that you don't understand why the winning goal was scored, and one mark of this is that you don't know that the winning goal was scored by the U.S. In order to consider carefully the merits of the example, then, we must change the case so that it attributes objectual understanding of some sort, and so that the objectual understanding in question is connected in some way to the failure to understand why the winning goal was scored.

As pointed out, the example doesn't involve any claim about objectual understanding, and it is hard to see what the object of understanding is supposed to be here. Perhaps, though, we could say the following: what is in question is your understanding of the results of the game.

If we add this claim to the example, then the force of the example depends on the connections that are involved in the case. There are three connections required for the counterexample to work against the claim I have made about understanding. The first is an implication between objectual understanding and understanding why, based on the phenomena in question. The second is a connection between understanding-why and knowing-why, and the third is between knowing-why and knowing-that. I believe objectual understanding involves grasping or apprehending whatever explanatory connections are present, but that isn't the same claim as the claim that objectual

understanding implies understanding-why. Whether that claim should be granted depends on the tightness of the relationship between knowing-why and understanding-why (one might question the reducibility of knowing-why to knowing-that, but I've already granted that point). The answer here is determined, I think, by whether we hold it be unrevisable that synonymy, or something close to it, holds between understanding and knowledge, once the type in question is controlled for. If we insist on synonymy, then the proper response is to deny that objectual understanding implies understanding-why. If synonymy is rejected, then in cases where one's objectual understanding involves realizing why certain things happen or are true, we can endorse the claim that one thereby understands why those things happen or are true. One doesn't know why, however, because to do so would require propositional knowledge, and one lacks such knowledge precisely because of the gettierizing feature of the case.

It is easy to imagine at this point the impatience in the critic's voice: "Look, if the terms are synonymous, there is simply no basis whatsoever for distinguishing between knowledge and understanding. To suggest otherwise, on whatever basis, is to succumb to confusion. Either they are synonyms or they are not. Only if they are not can your account get off the ground, so you better argue that they are not synonymous!"

The conclusion here is false. If there is such synonymy, there is still the difference between the propositional and objectual levels, and the difference in focus which I have been referring to using 'knowledge' for the former and 'understanding' for the latter would still exist. Perhaps the critic could still complain that I should pick different terms for the distinction, and I would honor such a request as soon as it is shown that the two terms are truly synonymous—that is, if it can be shown that there is no

difference in cognitive significance between knowledge claims and understanding claims, once the type in question is fixed. I don't know how to establish that point, and I doubt that it is true, so I will continue to refer to the distinction in question in terms of the distinction between knowledge and understanding.

I must admit, however, to having theory-infected responses to ordinary language claims at this point. When the example claims that you don't understand why because you don't know, I balk. But I also admit that ordinary language dispositions may not honor my balking, and so that those such as DePaul and Grimm who talk the way this example goes are not misusing language (much as it isn't a misuse of language to use 'knows' nonfactively). What I deny, however, and what I claim any interesting philosophical methodology ought to deny, is that philosophical conclusions can be read off of ordinary language in this way. The interchangeability of the terminology in question in ordinary language might indicate synonymy or it might just as easily indicate the lack of any significant interest or purpose that arises in ordinary life that would require distinguishing the two. In any case, whatever the correct explanation for the linguistic data here, the most anyone could legitimately claim would be that such data is defeasible evidence for certain philosophical conclusions. I don't know whether the data rises even to that level, but if it does, then the account presented here and the explanations offered constitute, I submit, just the kind of defeaters one would need to refuse to draw the conclusions these data suggest.

There is, however, a different way to press the example DePaul and Grimm employ. This approach grants the distinction between objectual understanding and its other forms, and doesn't commit itself on any identity between understanding and knowledge even when the type in question is held fixed. Instead, it focuses on cases of objectual understanding involving systems where

deterministic assumptions are at work or where whatever indeterminacies might exist are not relevant to the understanding involved. In such cases, one might grant that objectual understanding and understanding why are distinct, but maintain that the former is constituted by the latter. In such a case, a failure to understand why the winning goal was scored would undermine the view that one understood the outcome of the game, even if understanding the outcome were different in kind from some compilation of understandings-why.

Such a response puts pressure on the approach I am taking to insist that you do understand why the US scored the winning goal. DePaul and Grimm insist that you no more understand why this is the case than that you know that the US scored the winning goal, and we are all agreed that you don't know that.

You believe that the goalie slipped in the mud and that this slip is responsible for the US winning, but you only believe it on the basis of a report that is wholly the invention of a reporter. DePaul and Grimm ask whether this basis is sufficient for understanding why the US won and they report their own conviction that it seems not to be. But the only attempt at argument that I see is the comparison with knowledge-that. Such a comparison is best thought of, however, not as an argument, but as an invitation to the reader to reflect on one's own reaction and to note whether the reader's inclinations accord with the authors'.

So let me record my own inclination: I'm not inclined at all to think that you don't understand why the US won, though I do understand why others will be inclined to think so. The inclination to think so results from the interchangeability of knowledge locutions with understanding locutions in ordinary language. When such interchangeability is present, attempts at distinction often face

opposition.

In ordinary language, for example, it is rare to distinguish hearing from listening: I listen to sounds around me and I hear them; I was hearing a lecture yesterday and listening to it; etc. But sometimes people use these terms to distinguish two different phenomena. People sometimes say that you can hear without listening, in the sense that sounds are reaching your auditory faculty but you are not consciously trying to access the sounds in question. People also sometimes say that you are listening without hearing, in the sense that you are paying attention to the information conveyed verbally, but not taking it to heart in the appropriate way.

What should we make of these various aspects of usage? Not much, I think. The gloss on the use is more important than the terminology employed, and if someone else puts pressure on the idea that you can hear without listening by getting us to attend to interchangeability uses enough to make us balk at the description, we shouldn't attach much significance to that fact. What matters is the underlying phenomenon. In the soccer match example, DePaul and Grimm stress the way in which the information you possess is defective. In particular, you don't realize that the reporter invented the story of the winning goal. In fact, it is likely that you are assuming that the reporter is telling you what he knows to be true. In such a case, there is something you lack understanding of: you don't understand how you came to have the understanding you do have of the outcome of the game. If assumptions count as mental states and are involved in the story of understanding in the way beliefs are, we can say something stronger, and that is that your understanding of how you came to understand the outcome of the game is weak or non-existent, since it involves an important falsehood. In such a way, we can honor the existence of some defect of understanding without this defect filtering into the explanatory

understanding in question in the way it filters into the related propositional knowledge in question.

Even given such a response to the particular case in question, however, there is the more general question. Even if, because of the possibility of indeterministic systems, we distinguish objectual understanding from explanatory understanding, there is still the hypothesis to consider more directly that explanatory understanding is, in the deterministic case, that which constitutes objectual understanding. I am not certain at this point whether there is such a connection, but I'm inclined to think so. The point of the above response to the soccer example is to suggest a strategy for answering purported counterexamples involving explanatory understanding on the assumption that objectual and explanatory understanding are related in this way. The strategy is to acknowledge some defect in understanding that results from the deficiencies noted, but to distinguish understanding from knowledge because the defect has direct implications for the possession of propositional and explanatory knowledge itself, whereas the implications of the defect for understanding are less direct, as in the case above.

### ***Conclusion***

The account of understanding and its value presented above is thus defensible in the face of certain types of objections to it, but it is worth stressing in closing one mark of a purely theoretical sort in its favor. In recent years, Swampman cases have abounded in philosophy for various purposes, and one such purpose to which such examples have been used is to threaten the lessons of the Gettier literature. Swampman is a fully formed human being that arises by sheer accident out of the swamp as a result of some natural event such as a lightning strike.<sup>10</sup> In the epistemologically significant version of

the case, Swampman arises with incredible cognitive features. He is able to answer any question put to him about any subject whatsoever. He is not guessing. He is not making things up. He is testifying in the same ordinary way that you or I testify when we are trying to answer honestly and sincerely to questions we are inclined to answer. This example is intended to lead to the conclusion that the focus of the Gettier literature in finding some condition to rule out accidentality or luck is misplaced, since in the senses of these terms relevant to epistemology, Swampman's condition is accidental and lucky.<sup>11</sup> Instead, the difference between knowledge and true opinion may be disappear simply by adding more true beliefs.

The argument from Swampman has not induced wholesale reconception of the theory of knowledge, but no response to the example can be adequate without explaining what is so impressive about Swampman as well as what is missing. One possibility is the simple one that he has many more true beliefs than we do, about a broad and varied number of topics and subjects. That point is correct, but there are seems to be something distinctively epistemic about his condition as well, since there is quite a bit of awkwardness in asserting that we know so much more than Swampman does. My suggestion has two aspects to it. The first aspect is that Swampman has understanding even though he doesn't have knowledge. He understands all the topics and subjects about which you may care to query. That's the first part of my suggestion. The second part is that the language of understanding and knowledge is so often interchangeable in ordinary language that once we recognize the understanding possessed, it is awkward to deny him knowledge.<sup>12</sup> The phenomenon here is exactly that underlying the questions addressed above about the theory defended here. Knowledge and understanding, once type is controlled for, seem nearly interchangeable in ordinary language, leading to the conclusion that

one is gettierizable if and only if the other is.

My goal has been to provide the resources for avoiding this inclination. Careful attention to the phenomena in question should allow us both to see the temptation and avoid it. In avoiding it, we can see how to explain the admirability involved in Swampman's ability to answer questions based on information possessed. And it allows us to see Swampman's defects as well, because he can't have any understanding of how he came to be so blessed by the gods to have the first-order comprehensive understanding that he has. It also allows us to do something more. It allows us to see the special and unique value of understanding, a value that warrants expanding the conception of epistemology beyond a focus on the theory of knowledge its history displays.

## Endnotes

1. See *The Value of Knowledge and the Pursuit of Understanding*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).
  2. For consideration of the variety of attributions of understanding beyond those of central interest to epistemology, see chapter eight of *The Value of Knowledge and the Pursuit of Understanding*.
  3. Such a supposition mirrors a similar approach in the theory of knowledge, where the standard view is that knowledge-wh can be explained in terms of knowledge-that. See, e.g., Jaakko Hintikka, "Different Constructions in Terms of the Basic Epistemological Verbs: A Survey of Some Problems and Proposals", *The Intensions of Intentionality and Other New Models for Modalities* (Dordrecht, 1975), 1-25, David Lewis, "Whether Report", in Tom Pauli (ed.), *Philosophical Essays Dedicated to Lennart Aqvist on his Fiftieth Birthday* (Uppsala, 1982): 194-206, Steven Boer and William Lycan *Knowing Who* (Cambridge, 1986), James Higginbotham, "The Semantics of Questions", in Shalom Lappin (ed.), *The Handbook of Contemporary Semantic Theory* (Oxford, 1996), 361-383, Jason Stanley and Williamson, "Knowing How", *Journal of Philosophy* 98 (2001), 411-44.
- Jonathan Schaffer has criticized such an approach in the theory of knowledge, arguing for a contrastivist relationship between a given question and the reducing propositional content in question. See his "Knowing the Answer," forthcoming. Here I will ignore the interesting issues involved, since if the emendations required on the supposition that the contrastivist position is best do not affect the value issues here and are relatively easy to insert as modifications of what I say here, presupposing the standard view.
4. See, e.g., Kenneth Sayre, *Plato's Analytical Method*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969).
  5. See Berit Brogaard, "Can Virtue Reliabilism Explain the Value of Knowledge?", *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 36 (2006) 335-354.
  6. See Wesley Salmon, *Scientific Explanation and the Causal Structure of the World*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984). For critical discussion of Salmon's approach, see Phil Dowe, "Wesley Salmon's Process Theory of Causality and the Conserved Quantity Theory," *Philosophy of Science* 59 (1992), pp. 195-216, and "Causality and Conserved Quantities: A Reply to Salmon," *Philosophy of Science* 62 (1995), pp. 321-333; and Philip Kitcher, "Explanatory Unification and the Causal Structure of the World", in P. Kitcher & W. Salmon, eds, *Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science* Volume XIII (pp. 410-505), (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989).

7. See, for example, Ernest Sosa, "The Place of Truth," in *Intellectual Virtue: Perspectives from Ethics and Epistemology*, Michael DePaul and Linda Zagzebski, eds. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); John Greco, "Knowledge as Credit for True Belief," in *Intellectual Virtue: Perspectives from Ethics and Epistemology*, Michael DePaul and Linda Zagzebski, eds. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); and Wayne Riggs, "Beyond Truth and Falsehood: The Real Value of Knowing that P," *Philosophical Studies* 107 (1), 2002, 87-108 and "Reliability and the Value of Knowledge," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 64 (1), January 2002, 79-96; as well as chapter 4 of *The Value of Knowledge and the Pursuit of Understanding*.
8. See especially Timothy Williamson, *Knowledge and Its Limits*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).
9. Michael R. DePaul and Stephen Grimm, "Review Essay: Jonathan Kvanvig's *The Value of Knowledge and the Pursuit of Understanding*," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, forthcoming, pp. 21-2 typescript.
10. Richard F. Foley, "Knowledge is Accurate and Comprehensive Enough True Belief," in *Warrant in Contemporary Epistemology: Essays in Honor of Plantinga's Theory of Knowledge*, Jonathan L. Kvanvig, ed., (Savage, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996).
11. For an excellent discussion of the variety of notions of luck, accidentality, and chance, and the differences between these concepts, see Duncan Pritchard, *Epistemic Luck*, Oxford, 2003.
12. Though, as Alvin Goldman reminded me in conversation, it is not awkward to attribute knowledge in the weak sense of the term in which knowledge can be identified with true belief alone. For discussion of the distinction between strong and weak types of knowledge, see Goldman's *Epistemology and Cognition*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986).