

We should conclude, then, that there are strong grounds for doubting that any version of epistemic antirealistism will be successful in explaining the value of knowledge. Semantic versions of such made dances out of too many philosophical luminaries in the early twentieth century for not knowing the meaning of the term 'knowledge', and cannot account for the possibility that people can know things without caring at all whether they have knowledge. Pragmatic versions lack these weaknesses, but they must try in vain to individuate pro-attitudes and value credited in a very fine-grained manner.

We are left, then, with no decent answer to the question of the value of knowledge, and we have pursued at considerable length the ways that might be suggested for answering this question, which first arises in the *Meno*. Such a conclusion is deeply unsatisfying. Stopping with the claim that we are simply wrong provides no insight, and no appeal to general human fallibility will pacify. If we are to maintain the position that there is no good answer to the problem of the *Meno*, we must do more. The next chapter is devoted to that task: here I will identify something of value in the general area of knowledge. I will show how to account for its value and how its value gives us most of what we wanted when we wished for an explanation of the value of knowledge.

## *Knowledge and Understanding*

We have been unable to unearth some unique value for knowledge, contrary to the ordinary conception of things. This result leaves us with somewhat of a dilemma, for it would be hard to defend the position that the common viewpoint is wholly without merit. Not that we are anywhere close to claiming such about the common view of knowledge, for our findings that true belief, subjective justification, and displays of intellectual virtue are valuable puts us already within the general locale of knowledge, even if knowledge itself is not uniquely valuable. Furthermore, nothing argued here suggests that knowledge is not valuable. What has been argued is rather a more specialized point: that the problem suggested by Socrates in the *Meno* concerning whether knowledge has more value than its subcomponents is a problem requiring a negative answer. Knowledge is valuable, to be sure, but its value is exhausted by the value of a subset of its constituents.

This result may be in part a product of a bit of myopia on the part of contemporary epistemologists, given the debates among philosophers of the ancient period about the best translation of the Greek term that is commonly translated 'knowledge'. For some argue that the term ought to be translated as 'understanding'.<sup>1</sup> Given this fact, it may be a mistake to identify the problem of the *Meno* with any question about the value of knowledge. It may be that the problem of the *Meno* could just as well have been put as a question about the value of understanding, and our failure to find a unique value for knowledge is a mere sidebar to the more successful pursuit of a unique value for understanding.

1. See Robert Fogelin, *Pyrrhonian Reflections on Knowledge and Justification* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), for discussion of this debate on how to translate ἐπιστήμη.

Such a result would have much to commend it. First, there is a way of looking at the relationship between knowledge and understanding so that understanding appears to be even more valuable than knowledge. Many in our information age wonder where all of our understanding has gone, replaced by knowledge of the sort celebrated on *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?* and *Jeopardy* and in games such as *Trivial Pursuit*. A head full of trivia and detail is an amazing thing, but nothing to be compared with the reach and sweep of a person of understanding, so if knowledge is a good thing, understanding is even better. Attending to the relationship between knowledge and understanding can give us hope in our pursuit of special and unique value for epistemic achievements, even though we have had to give up such hope regarding the cognitive achievement of knowledge. If we could account for the value and centrality of understanding in our cognitive lives, we could blunt the force of our negative conclusions concerning the value of knowledge. For one need not apologize for replacing a lifelong pursuit of knowledge with a lifelong pursuit of understanding.

Such a conclusion might also contribute to a quite radical change in the discipline of epistemology. Radical changes have already occurred in recent years in the discipline in response to a new attitude toward skepticism. The history of epistemology is primarily a story of conversations with the skeptic. Skepticism provides the impetus for the origin of the discipline and has dominated the efforts of epistemologists throughout the history of epistemology, either in defense of skepticism or by way of rebuttal. The result of this dominance is that the discipline of epistemology has focused on the concept of knowledge and whatever constituents it has, such as truth and justification.

As a result of ordinary-language philosophy and the commonsense philosophy traceable to Thomas Reid,<sup>2</sup> but defended with greater historical significance for contemporary epistemology by G. E. Moore,<sup>3</sup> skepticism has come to play a less central role in epistemology over the past half century or so. Instead of providing legitimate concern that we might not know very much or anything at all, skepticism came to be viewed as a clearly false position in need only of a proper explanation of its falsity. The standard assumption came to be, it would seem, that everyone with

good sense *knows* that skepticism is false; the only interesting question is *why* it is false.

The result of these movements has been a freedom of exploration in epistemology, unencumbered by any need to address constantly the arguments of the skeptics. The result has been a flourishing of investigation into topics such as the nature of justification, the role of testimony in warranted belief, and the social dimension of knowledge, as well as the Gettier-inspired plethora of attempts to characterize the nature of knowledge. New approaches to epistemological questions have been developed, too, including social epistemology, feminist epistemology, and virtue epistemology.

In spite of this loosening of the shackles fastened on epistemology by skepticism, there is a deeper way in which skepticism still dominates. For even in the new era of freedom, the concept of knowledge provides the focal point of epistemological inquiry. This point is well instantiated by virtue epistemology. Instead of a broad focus on cognitive achievements and excellences in general, virtue epistemologists have usually tried to make a place for the virtues in epistemology by defining knowledge or justification in terms of the virtues. I think that such a focus betrays remnants of skeptical shackles that have plagued the history of epistemology. For in the absence of such, epistemology would seem to have a large stake in inquiry regarding successful or valuable aspects of cognition, such as wisdom and understanding, regardless of the value such aspects have in addressing the skeptical challenge regarding knowledge.

It is worthwhile to contrast this aspect of virtue epistemology with G. E. M. Anscombe's early call for a return to the concept of virtue in ethics.<sup>4</sup> Anscombe not only proposes a kind of virtue ethics to replace standard utilitarian and deontological approaches, but also denigrates moral theories that focus on concepts such as right and wrong, good and bad. An analogue of such an approach in epistemology would be one that favored talking about the intellectual virtues and no longer focusing on the standard epistemologists' fare of knowledge and justification. Yet, no virtue epistemologist has entertained such a possibility. The shackles of skepticism remain intact, forcing inquiry into our cognitive successes and achievements to focus on questions of knowledge and justification.

Let me caution that I am not denigrating skepticism. I happen to think that skepticism is false, but I also think that it is a substantive

2. Thomas Reid, *Inquiry and Essays*, Keith Lehrer and Ronald E. Beardslossom, eds. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1975).

3. G. E. Moore, *Philosophical Papers* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1959). See especially "Proof of an External World," "Refutation of Idealism," and "A Defense of Common Sense."

4. G. E. M. Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy," *Philosophy* 33 (1958): 1-19.

philosophical thesis requiring serious argumentation: Moorian presentations of two hands are not sufficient in themselves to settle the issue. What I lament is a lack of diversity in epistemology, and one of my goals here is to present a theoretical foundation for greater diversity of interests in epistemology. In particular, understanding deserves much more attention than it has received. First, there is at least as much intuitive support for the idea that understanding has value beyond that of its subparts as there is for the idea that knowledge has such value. As we shall see, using conclusions from previous chapters, we have resources to explain this value. Second, understanding is a cognitive achievement distinct from knowledge. Though the nature of understanding is not often addressed, it is nonetheless commonly assumed that knowledge and understanding bear a direct and intimate connection, for the common assumption is that understanding of the theoretical sort is a species of knowledge. The assumption is, I believe, that the kind of understanding at issue when regarding our cognitive successes and achievements is some type of deep and comprehensive knowledge concerning a particular subject, topic, or issue.

I will begin my discussion of understanding by questioning this latter assumption, but I want to make one point before doing so. I want to point out how the plan I will follow in discussing understanding follows the lessons we have learned from Socrates in the *Meno*. Socrates' discussion, as I have argued, gives us two desiderata to guide our theorizing about cognitive achievements, one concerning the nature of such achievements and the other concerning their value. I will not present a complete theory of understanding here, but I will present enough of a theory regarding the nature of understanding so that we will be able to give an explanation of its value. The conclusion I will draw is that the problem of the *Meno* can be solved when it is conceived as a problem regarding understanding rather than knowledge. In order to get to that conclusion, I begin with the issue of the relationship between knowledge and understanding.

#### UNDERSTANDING, KNOWLEDGE, AND LOGICAL FORM

We can begin by asking about the logical form of attributions of understanding. Let us first distinguish between noun, adjective, and verb clauses involving this concept. In its noun form, we have examples such as

"My understanding was that you would be finished by now."

"My understanding of Heidegger is sketchy at best."

In its adjectival form, we have examples such as

"He is in an understanding frame of mind."

In its verb form, we have examples such as

"He understands quantum theory."

"She understands that Gore might have been president."

"They understand why Germany invaded Poland."

"We understand where you are coming from."

"You understand what it takes to be a marine."

"I understand how to make dynamite."

"Everyone understands when it is time to eat."

In passing, we should also note that there are grammatical forms in which "understanding" appears to be a one-place predicate. I saw a billboard recently that proclaimed "God understands," and we often say "I understand" in conversation. In each case, however, such statements are elliptical, with something assumed that is not said, and when the ellipses are removed, we will have instances of the forms just presented.

Among these various uses are some that are of special interest for theoretical purposes and thus of special interest to epistemology broadly conceived in terms of the study of cognitive, as opposed to practical, successes and achievements. Among the different grammatical forms in which the concept of knowledge occurs, epistemologists focus on knowledge that something is the case, ignoring for epistemological purposes knowing how and other grammatical forms that are not as central for theoretical purposes.

For such purposes, it is not wise to ignore all grammatical forms other than understanding that something is the case, however. For, given purely theoretical purposes, claims such as *He understands quantum theory* are certainly relevant. My suggestion, therefore, is that we focus on understanding in two central uses: when understanding is claimed for some object, such as some subject matter, and when it involves understanding that something is the case.

If we consider the other uses, we can see that a number of them can be explicated in terms of these two central uses. For example, understanding why, when, where, and what are explicable in terms of understanding that something is the case. In each such case there is some truth that explains the special kind of understanding in question, and the person's relationship to that truth can be explicated in terms of understanding that something is the case. For example, understanding why something is the case requires

understanding that a certain explanation is correct, and understanding what happened requires understanding that such-and-such happened. So quite a bit of the diversity noted previously can be explained in terms of the uses on which I will focus.

What gets left out, most significantly, is understanding how. That is as it should be, for such understanding is relevant more to practical purposes than to theoretical ones, just as knowing how is more relevant to the former than to the latter.

An initial supposition about understanding and its relationship to knowledge is that both imply truth, that both are factives. To say that a person understands that  $p$  therefore requires that  $p$  is true. There is a minor difficulty with this idea, however, for there are hedging uses of the concept of understanding. Suppose I've been told that you are angry with me, and I decide to try to remedy the situation by speaking with you about it. Not wholly convinced of the truth of the claim, I might say, "I understand that you are angry with me." In such a case I am hedging a bit on the truth of the claim that you are angry with me, so what I say can be true even though you are not, in fact, angry with me. Such a hedging use bears important connections to the noun form of 'understanding', where saying that your understanding of something is such-and-such need not imply truth. In the example, if you reply that you are not, in fact, angry with me, I might respond by saying that my understanding must have been mistaken.

There are uses of the concept of knowledge that are nonfactive as well. We sometimes talk about the present state of scientific knowledge, but such language does not imply that present theories are true. In addition, we sometimes say, "I just *knew* I was going to fail," as an expression of surprise at having succeeded. And undergraduates are increasingly given to claiming that it used to be known that the earth is flat, even though we now know that it isn't.

Our interest in the nature of knowledge or understanding requires some sorting, then, among common uses of the term. In both cases, I think the best explanation is to take the nonfactive uses to involve either misspeaking or the expression of propositions that do not involve the concepts of knowledge or understanding central to epistemological inquiry, related as it is to theoretical concerns. When undergraduates say, "It used to be known that the earth is flat," they may be misspeaking. If such expression becomes common enough, they will cease to be misspeaking, but in the process they will have ceased to express a proposition involving the concept of knowledge. Instead, the word 'knows' will have come to

express a different concept. Again, when a person claims in surprise, "I just *knew* I was going to fail," the intended proposition is one about how psychologically certain that person was about being headed for failure.

Just so in the cases of nonfactive uses of 'understanding' and its cognates. In the nonfactive uses, the idea communicated is that the person believes, and perhaps has good evidence for believing, that something is the case. For example, when a person says, "My understanding is that you weren't home till after midnight," the intended proposition is one about the beliefs, perhaps justified beliefs, of the speaker. In such uses, the speaker intends to cushion the force of a bald accusation, an assertion that seems too strong to be appropriate.

I want to focus here, however, on the factive uses of 'understanding' and its cognates, for these uses are more relevant to the theoretical project of epistemology. Among such uses are two primary ones: propositional understanding and objectual understanding. The propositional sort occurs when we attribute understanding in the form of a propositional operator, as in understanding that something is the case, and the objectual sort occurs when understanding grammatically is followed by an object, as in understanding the presidency, or the president, or politics, or the English language. Objectual understanding is, of course, not straightforwardly factive, for only propositions can be true or false. Still, the uses I wish to focus on are ones in which facticity is in the background. For example, to understand politics is to have beliefs about it, and for this objectual understanding to be the kind of interest here requires that these beliefs are true.

Understanding, in these forms, is importantly related to knowledge, enough so that it is plausible to think that understanding is a species of knowledge. In the senses relevant to our inquiry, both attitudes are factive, and in some contexts, the terms seem virtually synonymous. For example, it is hard to draw a distinction between saying that one knows or understands the American political process. The synonymy view is false when applied across all contexts, however, for it is possible to have knowledge without having understanding. One can know Bill Clinton, for example, without understanding him, and we can contrast knowledge of a number of facts about a subject matter with understanding of it. To be a species of knowledge, however, the two-way entailment required of synonymy need not obtain. All that is needed is that understanding implies knowledge, and that view has much to recommend it. If one understands a body of information, this would seem to require knowledge of that information; and if one understands that the 2000 presidential election

was at stake in Florida, it is hard to see how such understanding could obtain without knowing that the election was at stake in Florida.

So, the proposal with which we begin is as follows. When propositional understanding is attributed, knowledge of the proposition in question is implied, and when objectual understanding obtains, knowledge is implied as well. In some cases, the implication may go in the other direction as well, but the view in question is committed only to a one-way entailment.

If understanding is a species of knowledge, and not identical with it, what does understanding add that knowledge can lack? The central feature of understanding, it seems to me, is in the neighborhood of what inter-nalist coherence theories say about justification. Understanding requires the grasping of explanatory and other coherence-making relationships in a large and comprehensive body of information. One can know many unrelated pieces of information, but understanding is achieved only when informational items are pieced together by the subject in question.

One might even propose a more radical thesis, to the effect that a change occurs metaphysically when understanding is achieved. Whereas knowledge can have as its object individual propositions, understanding may not. It may be that when understanding is achieved, the object of understanding is an "informational chunk" rather than a number of single propositions. In such a view, propositional understanding is not the primary form of understanding, but results via abstraction from this primary form.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps something similar occurs in ordinary perceptual experience. Though one might know a number of propositions, even together with other propositions concerning the explanatory and other coherence-making relationships between the information in question, this propositional knowledge would not constitute understanding, in this view, until a change in the object of such cognitive achievement occurs.

I will not press the metaphysical point here, however, for it is not central to the issues I want to raise about the connection between knowledge and understanding. So, for present purposes, I want to focus on this crucial difference between knowledge and understanding: that understanding requires, and knowledge does not, an internal grasping or appreciation of how the various elements in a body of information are related to each

other in terms of explanatory, logical, probabilistic, and other kinds of relations that coherentists have thought constitutive of justification.

One can see something of this character played out in Plato's philosophy if Kenneth Sayre's account of it is close to correct. Plato raises the question in the *Theaetetus* concerning the nature of knowledge, ending vaguely with the suggestion that what distinguishes knowledge from true belief is expressed by the concept of a λόγος. On Sayre's account, this suggestion is developed in the *Sophist* in terms of the method of collection and division,<sup>6</sup> a simplified account of which is to identify the object in question in terms of genus and species, beginning with the most general kind to which it belongs, identifying it via kind and differentia until the object itself is completely identified. Such an account of the nature of knowledge is, however, far too psychological. One can know that Fido is a dog without engaging in any such psychological process relating to kinds and differentia.

If we remember the debate about whether to translate *επινοεῖν* as 'knowledge' or 'understanding', however, we can make much more sense out of this proposal. For if we are talking more of the nature of understanding than of knowledge, the objection that the account is too psychological loses its force. For understanding requires, in its very nature, the grasping of explanatory connections between items of information, and if the proper form of explanation is as Plato saw it in the method of collection and division, then the theory presented looks like a good start toward a theory of understanding. It is a good start because it focuses on the question of whether the person has seen the right kinds of relationships among the various items of information grasped.

Moreover, if we turn more epistemological attention to the nature of understanding rather than focusing exclusively on the nature of knowledge, we may find a more natural home for coherentism, for coherentism may offer more promise in the exploration of understanding than as a theory of some component of knowledge, that is, justification. A central problem for coherentism regarding justification is the possibility of justified inconsistent beliefs. Such a possibility is one of the lessons of the Preface and Lottery Paradoxes discussed earlier and the related paradox concerning human fallibility: If you know that you are fallible, then you will be justifiably confident that some of your beliefs are false, which together with your other beliefs entails a contradiction.

5. Nicholas Asher has defended such an idea with respect to propositional attitudes such as belief within the context of Discourse Representation Theory, but here I restrict the view to understanding. See his "Belief in Discourse Representation Theory," *Journal of Philosophical Logic*, 5 (1986): 127–89, and "A Typology for Attitude Verbs and Their Anaphoric Properties," *Linguistics and Philosophy*, 10 (1987): 127–97.

6. Kenneth Sayre, *Plato's Analytical Method* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969).

Some have proclaimed these paradoxes the death song of coherentism,<sup>7</sup> but that is premature. Recently, William Lycan has suggested the idea of compartmentalizing beliefs and requiring coherence in the compartments.<sup>8</sup> In the paradoxes, the preface belief and the fallibility belief would be in separate compartments from the rest of one's beliefs, so inconsistency of this sort doesn't undermine coherentism. It does diminish global coherence and hence justification, according to Lycan, but it doesn't eliminate it entirely. Only inconsistency within a compartment could do that.

Such a strategy faces problems, however. If failure of global coherence diminishes justification, then we might be able to increase the overall coherence of our belief system by coming to believe that we are infallible. Lycan might reply that the benefit of consistency brought by this belief may be countered by failure of fit with other beliefs, such as the belief that we have had false beliefs in the past or that it is generally a part of the human condition to make cognitive errors. This failure of fit between these beliefs and the belief that we are infallible might result in a lower level of overall coherence of the system than the inconsistency that the infallibility belief removed. Still, we could remedy this failure of fit incoherence by abandoning those beliefs or adopting some further explanation of why things are different now than in the past and why what is generally true about human beings doesn't apply to us (after all, we all do this in one way or another anyway). But surely we would not be more justified in our beliefs about ordinary phenomena such as the weather, politics, science, and the like if we made all these adjustments. We would have eliminated inconsistency and incoherence but failed to produce any positive effect on the quality of justification.

In addition, it is hard to characterize the concept of a compartment to yield the proper results in all these paradoxes. In the Preface and Infallibility Paradoxes, compartmentalization can be done in terms of object-level beliefs and meta-level beliefs, between beliefs that are not about (other) beliefs and beliefs that are about beliefs. On this way of compartmentalizing, the belief that it is raining is an object-level belief, because its content is not about any belief, whereas the belief that I believe that it is raining

is a meta-level belief because its content is about a belief. We might also compartmentalize here by level, leaving this last example as a first-level meta-belief, whereas my further opinion that I believe that I believe that it is raining would be a second-level meta-belief.

This way of compartmentalizing may work for the Preface and Infallibility Paradoxes, for it sorts the sources of inconsistency into separate compartments. In the case of the Preface Paradox, the statements that comprise the body of the book would be object-level statements, whereas the preface statement that some claims in the book are false would be a meta-statement. In the Infallibility Paradox, the belief that I am fallible would be a meta-belief as well. The case of the Lottery Paradox is different, however. In this case, the inconsistency arises in virtue of a number of particular beliefs to the effect that each ticket will lose and a general belief that some ticket will win, all of which are object-level beliefs. To compartmentalize in a way needed to handle the Lottery Paradox, one will have to keep these general and particular beliefs in different compartments.

Yet, sometimes the inconsistency between one's general beliefs and one's particular beliefs is decisive, implying lack of justification, as when you are convinced that telling this particular lie in these circumstances is morally acceptable when you also believe that lying is always wrong in such circumstances. In such a case, each of these beliefs is a defeater of any justification the other possesses. The most natural way to account for such is to keep the beliefs in the same compartment, but a coherentist can't always do that and use the idea of compartmentalization to escape the Lottery Paradox.

The issue of how to compartmentalize takes on a different flavor when coherentism is employed in a theory of understanding. Theoretical understanding has as its standard object a body of information, but ordinarily not a single proposition. So when we say that a person understands Special Relativity Theory, there is no single proposition of which we ascribe understanding. Rather, there is a larger body of information, composed perhaps of propositions, regarding which we ascribe understanding. This point suggests that standard ascriptions of understanding come compartmentalized already, and the worry of having to draw artificial boundaries to avoid the difficulties that plague a coherence theory of justification may not be as pressing. So the first lesson to learn is that broadening our vision of topics suitable for epistemological investigation may allow us to find useful niches for theories that may have turned out to be inadequate concerning the standard epistemological fare of knowledge and justification.

7. See, e.g., Richard Foley, "Justified Inconsistent Beliefs," *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 16 (1979): 247–57.

8. See, e.g., Lycan's "Plantinga and Coherentisms," *Harvard in Contemporary Epistemology: Essays in Honor of Plantinga's Theory of Knowledge*, Jonathan L. Kvanvig, ed. (Totowa, NJ: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996), p. 10.

Using coherentist ideas to help explicate the nature of understanding elucidates another difference between knowledge and understanding. Whereas it is awkward to speak of degrees of knowledge or of some knowledge being better or worse than other knowledge,<sup>9</sup> understanding comes in these forms. Some people have a better understanding of a subject matter than others, and others have a greater degree of understanding.

One might attempt to explain away this relativity in the same way we explain away talk of degrees of truth, for we also say that some people's views are closer to the truth than others'. Such a move is not necessary regarding understanding, however, for the two cases are significantly different. The common form of understanding in terms of some large body of information has no analogue when it comes to truth, for the concept of truth has primary application to propositional contents. If we attend to this difference, then we have two bases on which to explain the relative nature of understanding. First, justification itself comes in degrees, so two bodies of information regarding the same subject matter might differ in the degree of coherence they display. Second, the two bodies of information might differ in terms of the amount of information contained regarding the subject matter. In both of these ways, understanding can be a matter of degree, and in that way understanding is different from knowledge and from truth.

#### UNDERSTANDING IS NOT A SPECIES OF KNOWLEDGE

The preceding ideas about understanding also set the stage for arguing that understanding is not a species of knowledge. First, note that knowledge, too, can be ascribed relative to a body of information: A person can be said to know Special Relativity Theory just as much as she can be said to understand it. We have noted that knowledge is typically not a relative concept, as is understanding, and we might try to use that fact here to show that understanding is not a species of knowledge. Such a conclusion would be hasty, however. For when we speak of objective knowledge, it is not unusual to resort to the language of relativity in describing it. We can coherently say, "He knows Descartes's philosophy much better than I do," so there is no basis here to distinguish between understanding and knowledge.

9. For an alternative view that defends what I term "awkward," see Stephen Cade Heberington, *Better and Worse Knowledge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

There is an interesting difference between understanding and knowledge of a subject matter, however. I think we are more inclined to try to explain knowledge of a subject matter in terms of knowledge of the truths involved in that subject than we are to explain understanding in terms of such individual propositions. At the very least, the objective type of knowledge ascription is obviously related to more standard knowledge ascriptions that relate a person and a proposition. Perhaps we can fully explain knowing a body of information in terms of knowing truths,<sup>10</sup> but at the very least, we should endorse the claim that knowing a body of information involves knowing a number of the truths that make up that body of information. So, if understanding is a species of knowledge, then understanding a body of information will also involved knowing a number of the truths that make up that body of information. We thus have a condition of adequacy on the claim that understanding is a species of knowledge; a condition of adequacy I will argue is false.

Note that the crucial features just discussed concerning understanding draw attention to things other than what is central to knowledge. What is distinctive about understanding has to do with the way in which an individual combines pieces of information into a unified body. This point is not meant to imply that truth is not important for understanding, for we have noted already the factive character of both knowledge and understanding. But once we move past its factivity, the grasping of relations between items of information is central to the nature of understanding. By contrast, when we move past the factivity of knowledge, the central features involve nonaccidental connections between mind and world. So our first glances at the two phenomena suggest the possibility that the logical connection proclaimed by the standard view, the view that understanding is a species of knowledge, is incorrect.

Moreover, consideration of particular cases of understanding suggests the same. Consider, say, someone's historical understanding of the Comanche dominance of the southern plains of North America from the late seventeenth until the late nineteenth centuries. Suppose that if you asked this person any question about this matter, she would answer correctly. Assume further that the person is answering from stored information; she is not guessing or making up answers, but is honestly averring

10. The issue here is the well-known one of whether *de re* belief can be explained in terms of *de dicto* belief, about which much has been written. My formulation of the connection between objective knowledge and propositional knowledge in the text is crafted to avoid this debate, ancillary as it is to the relationship between knowledge and understanding.

what she confidently believes the truth to be. Such an ability is surely constitutive of understanding, and the experience of query and answer, if sustained for a long enough period of time, would generate convincing evidence that the person in question understood the phenomenon of Comanche dominance of the southern plains. But does she have knowledge? Ordinarily, yes; but it is not required. For, on the usual theories of knowledge, all those answers could be given from information possessed and still fail to be known to be true, because the answers might only be accidentally true. For example, most history books might have been mistaken, with only the correct ones being the sources of the understanding in question and with no basis in the subject for preferring the sources consulted over those ignored. Such a case fits the model of a standard type of case found in the Gettier literature (in particular, the fake barn case), where such accidentally true beliefs are not justified in the way needed for the beliefs to count as knowledge.

Such possibilities may lead one to wonder about the wisdom of ascribing understanding on the basis of the correct answers given to the questions asked. Correctly answering the questions doesn't entail the presence of understanding; after all. At most, it only constitutes very good evidence of it, evidence that might be defeated. We might find out, for example, that the person is guessing and being lucky every time. As noted previously, however, I stipulate that the case is one where the person is not guessing, that she is revealing honestly the convictions she has, the data she has, and the grasped explanatory connections involved in the large body of information possessed. Moreover, the capacity for answering is counterfactual supporting, as I have described it: Ask anything about the phenomenon, and one would get a correct answer from information possessed.

Given these parameters, reservations about ascribing understanding should be put aside even in the cases where knowledge ascriptions should be withheld. For understanding does not advert to the etiological aspects that can be crucial for knowledge. What is distinctive about understanding, once we have satisfied the truth requirement, is internal to cognition. It is the internal seeing or appreciating of explanatory and other coherence-inducing relationships in a body of information that is crucial for understanding. When we think about knowledge, however, our focus turns elsewhere immediately if we have learned our lessons from the Gettier literature: We think about the possibility of fortuitousness, of accidentality, of being right but only by chance. We focus, that is, on what kinds of further external connections there are between mind and world, beyond the fit required for the belief to be true.

The basic idea here is that although knowledge is incompatible with a certain kind of epistemic luck, understanding is not. Upon learning of the disturbed etiology of beliefs about the Comanches, as in the case imagined here, we might say that a person has true beliefs or even justified true beliefs, but no knowledge, if we have heeded our lessons from Gettier. We would not, at least we should not, say that because of these factors, she is lucky to have the knowledge that she has, for knowledge rules out this kind of luck. But we needn't say the same about the claim of understanding. If the etiology were as imagined, one would be lucky to have any understanding at all of the Comanche dominance of the southern plains. So such understanding would count as understanding not undermined by the kind of luck in question.

These remarks must contain a caveat about the lessons of the Gettier literature, which I include because some epistemologists think that knowledge can be understood in terms of true belief alone. We have already seen Sartwell's defense of such a view in a previous chapter and have chronicled some of its weaknesses, so I will devote no further attention to it here. There is, however, a more interesting version of the same thesis in a recent paper by Richard Foley.<sup>11</sup> Foley asks us to imagine an individual who answers correctly any question we might ask about any subject matter. The individual is not guessing; he is asserting his true convictions. Foley concludes that in such a case we should all grant that such an individual knows a lot more than you or I. Furthermore, Foley claims that this conclusion should be granted even if the individual in question has all of his true beliefs sheerly by chance. Perhaps he is a Swampman, formed in the marsh as a result of a random strike of lightning, arising cognitively formed with all the true beliefs in question.

Foley takes his example to show that all the standard responses to the Gettier problem are misconceived, for they all imply that Swampman has no knowledge. For those tempted by Foley's theory, my argument against understanding being a species of knowledge will be suspect. But I think there is a more palatable response than abandoning the Gettier tradition entirely, as Foley's theory requires. My response to Foley is to grant that there is something epistemically extraordinary about Swampman but to deny that such extraordinariness needs to be explained in terms of

11. See Crispin Sartwell, "Knowledge Is True Belief," *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 28, 2 (1991): 157–65; Richard Foley, "Knowledge Is Accurate and Comprehensive Enough: True Belief," in *Merant in Contemporary Epistemology*, pp. 87–96.

knowledge.<sup>12</sup> To make such a rejection palatable, we need to explain what is epistemically extraordinary about Swampman, and if we distinguish rightly between knowledge and understanding, I think we can find such an explanation. Because understanding is by its very nature highly internal, constituted by seeing and grasping information and its significance, the fact that Swampman has an extraordinary range of true beliefs and can answer all the questions we might put to him shows that the understanding he possesses vastly exceeds our own. He is cognitively superior to us in this very important way, even though he may know quite a bit less than we do.

#### THE VALUE OF UNDERSTANDING

Given this sketch of understanding, can we do better in accounting for its value than we were able to do for the value of knowledge? Here we need to return to the notion of subjective justification, the value of which was defended earlier. Subjective justification obtains when persons form or hold beliefs on the basis of their own subjective standards for what is true or false. They follow the marks of truth defined by their own subjective perspective on the world. As we have seen, this sort of justification is valuable because it is constituted by adopting intentional means to the goal of truth. On this view, justification is extrinsically valuable in virtue of its relationship to truth, though it is not instrumentally valuable on the basis of its relationship to truth.

Given this notion, we are in a position to explain the value of understanding, conceived of in terms of a body of information together with the grasping of explanatory connections concerning that body of information. Such a description involves those features distinctive of coherence theories of justification without the liabilities that accrue to coherence when it is applied to the entire system of beliefs. It is, in short, compartmentalized holistic coherence that is distinctive of understanding, and to the extent that coherence is plausible as a theory of justification, it is even more plausible here because of the compartmentalization that

is assumed. In particular, inconsistency within a body of information is inconsistent with understanding that body of information.

One might worry here about theories that are themselves inconsistent: Can't one understand naive set theory, for example, even though it is inconsistent? There is a difference between understanding the claims of the theory and the understanding involved in taking the claims of the theory to be true. One can understand naive set theory in the sense of grasping the axioms and (some of) the theorems that follow from these axioms without endorsing any of the claims as being true. So in this sense, one can understand inconsistent theories, because one can have such understanding without having any inconsistent beliefs.

What is ruled out by the factive character of the kind of understanding of interest in theoretical contexts is any understanding that depends on the existence of inconsistent beliefs. We might honorifically ascribe understanding to people who unwittingly find themselves having such beliefs, much as we honorifically talk about the present state of scientific knowledge (even though we know that some of what falls under that rubric is false). Nor do I wish to claim that there is no legitimate use of the term 'understanding' that is not factive, for I have already noted uses such as the hedging uses of the term that are nonfactive. I am inclined to treat such cases in terms of pragmatic rather than semantic features of language, much as I would want to explain the cognitive significance of talk of the present state of scientific knowledge in terms of nonsemantic, pragmatic features of the concept of knowledge. From that perspective, cognitive achievements, however laudatory, do not constitute real knowledge or real understanding without the presence of truth.

There is still something of a problem here, though, for it is hard to resist the view that understanding may be correctly ascribed even in the presence of some false beliefs concerning a subject matter. For example, suppose the false beliefs concern matters that are peripheral rather than central to the subject matter in question. We might want to talk of slight imperfections in understanding or of slightly defective understanding, but that is different from saying that there is no understanding present at all because of the falsehoods involved.

The view I am defending needs to be altered slightly to accommodate this idea, but it need not be abandoned entirely. When the falsehoods are peripheral, we can ascribe understanding based on the rest of the information grasped that is true and contains no falsehoods. In such a case, the false beliefs are not part of the understanding the person has, even though they concern the very material regarding which the person

12. It is also worth noting that at the 2002 Rutgers Epistemology Conference, Foley presented his new view of knowledge but in discussion recanted. When pressed by the audience, Foley added another requirement to his theory: that a person must be in a position to know, must not be isolated from the world in a way that prevents the possibility of knowledge. Of course, Foley would not employ such language in a full explanation of his theory, because it would then be circular, but it is instructive to note that he now recognizes that an account of knowledge solely in terms of a comprehensive grasp of truth is inadequate.

has understanding. So in this way, the factive character of understanding can be preserved without having to say that a person with false beliefs about a subject matter can have no understanding of it.

For understanding, there is a need for truth and for explanatory and other coherence relations to obtain between the various beliefs involved in the achievement of understanding. Yet, the mere existence of such connections is not enough, for there is a psychological requirement concerning the coherence relations involved in understanding, to the effect that the person in question must grasp them. The way in which all the information fits together must be part of what the person is aware of. We thus get the following explanation of the value of understanding. The distinctive element involved in it, beyond truth, is best understood in terms of grasped coherence relations. Such coherence relations in this context contribute to justification. Such justification is subjective, because the person in question must grasp the marks of truth within that body of information in order to grasp correctly the explanatory relationships within that body of information. Such justification is not merely subjective, however, for the awarenesses in question must be correct in order for the factive element of understanding to obtain. Moreover, to have mastered such explanatory relationships is valuable not only because it involves the finding of new truths but also because finding such relationships organizes and systematizes our thinking on a subject matter in a way beyond the mere addition of more true beliefs or even justified true beliefs. Such organization is pragmatically useful because it allows us to reason from one bit of information to other related information that is useful as a basis for action, where unorganized thinking provides no such basis for inference. Moreover, such organized elements of thought provide intrinsically satisfying closure to the process of inquiry, yielding a sense or feeling of completeness to our grasp of a particular subject matter. In sum, understanding is valuable because it is constituted by subjectively justified true belief across an appropriately individuated body of information that is systematized and organized in the process of achieving understanding, and subjectively justified true belief that is systematized in this way is valuable.

#### CONCLUSION

There is another way in which an epistemological project that focuses more on understanding than on knowledge has axiological advantages. If we recall William James's assessment of our cognitive fears in terms of the

fear of being duped and the fear of missing something important,<sup>13</sup> it is not difficult to see how understanding is superior to knowledge in addressing these fears. Because both concepts are factive in character, both are equally adequate for addressing our fear of being duped, but the same cannot be said for the fear of missing something important. Whereas knowledge can be piecemeal, understanding requires more completeness. Thus, it is not possible for one to miss something important about which one has perfect understanding. Moreover, the concept of relative understanding tracks what is important in a body of information, so that failure to grasp significant items within that body of information renders a person lacking in understanding. It is only when information is less important within that body of information that one can be credited with understanding in spite of such a failure of perfect understanding.

This discussion about understanding is a sketch rather than a complete theory of the nature of understanding. Yet, brief as it is, it forms the basis for a positive answer to the issues in the *Meno* directed at the concept of understanding. Our discussion shows enough about understanding to give us confidence that a complete theory of it can successfully address both desiderata on a good epistemological theory. We can be confident, that is, that a complete theory of the nature of understanding will also give us resources for accounting for its unique value, and having this feature is another way in which understanding is superior to knowledge.

13. William James, "The Will to Believe," in *The Will to Believe and Other Essays* (New York: Longmans, Green, 1897).