

The Epistemic Significance of Grasping

Knowledge can be conveyed and communicated, made public and handed down, or shared on social media. We can and often do acquire knowledge by testimony – simply by registering what an interlocutor says. *Understanding*, by contrast, is not so easily transferable. We can learn a fact from a reliable source, and still fail to fully understand it. In this way, knowledge and understanding can come apart. In particular, knowing *why* some fact obtained does not seem sufficient for understanding why it did. We can learn the explanation of an event from a reliable source, and yet fail to understand why it happened (Pritchard 2012).

How can this be? A common reaction in recent work on understanding is to say that someone who knows the explanation of an event may nonetheless fail to *grasp* that explanation in the way requisite for understanding why the event happened (Strevens 2013; Grimm 2006, 2011; also Kvanvig 2003: 192 and Zagzebski 2001: 244). On the view conveyed by this diagnosis, grasping is what makes the difference between mere knowledge of an explanation and genuine understanding, between merely assenting to an explanation and making sense of it for oneself. This observation promises insight into the nature of understanding, but to make good on that promise we must move from the metaphor or ‘grasping’ to its theory.

It’s an open debate as to what grasping is, but two approaches currently stand out: acquaintance and dispositional theories. Acquaintance theories focus on our conscious awareness of explanations (Strevens 2013; Bourget 2015), while dispositional theories emphasize the ability to answer counterfactual questions (Grimm 2006, 2011 ; Hills 2009,

2015). One reason for the prominence of these two approaches is that they seem exhaustive. It's tempting to think that the mental state of grasping is constituted by psychological qualities intrinsic to that state (e.g. being a conscious state), or by psychological relations it bears to other mental attitudes (e.g. inferential connections to standing dispositions). There seems to be no third category grasping might fall into. This, however, is to make a substantial assumption: that grasping can be fully characterized in terms of psychological, as opposed to epistemic properties.

The central aim of this talk is to cast doubt on that assumption. I argue that grasping, like the understanding it grounds, cannot be analyzed in purely psychological terms. More specifically, I look at two promising versions of the acquaintance approach, and argue that neither secures the desideratum that grasping the explanation of p is, when all else goes well, sufficient for understanding why p . This, I suggest, is because these theories lack a crucial *epistemic* dimension. Thus, although the objection I develop in this paper addresses two particular theories, its upshot is general: whether a mental state counts as grasping essentially depends on its epistemic support.

Before I argue for this claim, though, I introduce the distinction that allows me to state my thesis more clearly: the distinction between psychologism and epistemicism about grasping. Psychologism about grasping, as I will understand it, is the view that whether a mental state constitutes a state of grasping is fully determined by some set of the (non-epistemic) psychological properties of that state. Epistemicism is the denial of that view, by way of the claim that whether a mental state constitutes a state of grasping depends in part on its epistemic properties.

In the remainder of the talk, I make my case by developing an inductive argument against psychologism about grasping. I consider two prominent psychological theories of grasping, argue that both are vulnerable to counter-examples, *and* argue that their vulnerability to these counter-examples is best explained by the fact that these theories ignore epistemic credentials. So, the bulk of my argument falls into two parts.

First, I take a close look at David Bourget's (2015) phenomenal theory of grasping, according to which to grasp a proposition is to have a phenomenal experience of that proposition. I then present two cases in support of the following claim: one can have a phenomenal experience of the explanation of p without understanding why p . In particular, a phenomenal experience of the explanation of p fails to provide understanding when it is *epistemically* defective. Counter-examples of this sort suggest that the phenomenal account is not the correct account of grasping. More importantly, for our purposes, these counter-examples suggest that the phenomenal account fails *because* it ignores epistemic features that are essential to grasping.

Next, I consider Michael Strevens's (2013) direct apprehension account of grasping. I grant that this account does not fall prey to the counter-examples raised against the phenomenal theory. Nonetheless, I argue that the direct apprehension account is vulnerable to its own variety of counter-examples: directly apprehending the explanation of p fails to provide understanding of why p when that mental state lack rational basis in non-testimonial epistemic reasons. This suggests that the direct apprehension account of grasping is inadequate and, again, that the reason why it is inadequate is that fails to take

into account necessary conditions on grasping that are epistemic in nature (viz. the necessary condition of being rationally based in a certain kind of epistemic reason).

Although my aims are ostensibly critical, the claim I put forward is not all negative. There is a positive thesis that emerges about what an adequate theory of grasping must look like. My contention, to wit, is that there are two distinct epistemic dimensions to grasping which any adequate theory of that mental state must accommodate: avoidance of epistemic defects of the sort I describe in the first half of my argument, and rational basis in (non-testimonial) reasons of the sort I describe in the second part. It remains to be seen to what extent these two apparent features of grasping can be accommodated within a unified account. If I am right, however, we can be quite confident that no purely psychological account of grasping will be able to do that.

References

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