UNDERSTANDING, KNOWLEDGE, AND
SCIENTIFIC ANTIREALISM

Kareem KHALIFA
Middlebury College

Summary
Epistemologists have recently debated whether understanding is a species of knowledge. However, because they have offered little in the way of a detailed analysis of understanding, they lack the resources to resolve this issue. In this paper, I propose that $S$ understands why $p$ if and only if $S$ has the non-Gettierised true belief that $p$, and for some proposition $q$, $S$ has the non-Gettierised true belief that $q$ is the best available explanation of $p$, $S$ can correctly explain $p$ with $q$, and $S$ can identify the features that make $q$ the best explanation of $p$. On this analysis, understanding is reducible to knowing that $p$ and that $q$ is the best available explanation of $p$.

Understanding how something works, why someone is in a bad mood, the structure of matter, the causes of a disease, etc. are all things that we immediately recognize as epistemically valuable. However, what is less clear is whether understanding’s epistemic footing is exhausted by its being a kind of knowledge. For instance, is understanding why someone is in a bad mood any different than knowing the causes of his mood?

Among epistemologists, there has been a recent upsurge of interest in the concept of understanding, and perhaps the most central of their questions is whether or not understanding is a species of knowledge. On the one hand, this presupposes answers to several other questions in the “epistemology of understanding,” e.g. whether or not understanding is propositional and/or factive (Brogaard unpublished, Elgin 2004, 2007, Kvanvig 2003, Riggs 2003, Zagzebski 2001). On the other, understanding’s relation to knowledge is presupposed in several other epistemological issues. In particular, some have urged that understanding should supplant knowledge as the primary aim of inquiry (Kvanvig 2003, Pritchard 2008, 2009, Riggs 2003).
In this paper, I use literature on scientific realism to provide a new argument that understanding is a species of knowledge. Understanding is widely regarded as derivative of explanation, and there has been a long-standing debate between realists and antirealists about the epistemic status of explanation. Given the amount of attention that scientific realism has enjoyed in the past three decades, discussions concerning realism provide potential insight into understanding’s status as a species of knowledge, and yet they have been largely ignored by epistemologists interested in this discussion.

Specifically, I shall argue that even on an antirealist construal, understanding is a species of knowledge. Such a tactic is dialectically effective, for antirealists are typically seen as hostile to explanation’s epistemic standing, which suggests that antirealists should be equally resistant to the idea that understanding is a species of knowledge. So the fact that understanding is a species of knowledge even for antirealists is a compelling reason to think it should be regarded as such by just about anyone. § 1 surveys the current epistemological arguments both for and against the claim that understanding is a species of knowledge. § 2 then provides an initial motivation for incorporating realism discussions into the epistemology of understanding. § 3 presents an antirealist model of understanding. §§ 4 and 5 then conclude by showing how this model nevertheless reduces to a kind of knowledge.

1. Background

Perhaps nobody has given a more sustained effort to discern whether understanding is a species of knowledge than Grimm (2006) and Pritchard (2008, 2009). While Grimm argues that understanding is a species of knowledge, Pritchard disagrees. Unfortunately, their discussions put the concept of understanding in a black box, and as a result, they are forced to rely on arguments lacking the kind of intuitive force that would compel a disinterested reader.

How do they reach their conclusions? Both agree that understanding why some proposition \( p \) is the case, like knowing it, involves a true belief both in \( p \), and in the propositions that constitute the understanding of \( p \). For instance, Grimm writes:

---

1. Here and throughout, all references to realism and antirealism refer only to their use in the philosophy of science.