

# Is anything knowable on the basis of understanding alone?

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As we've seen, a central source of interest in the analytic/synthetic distinction is the desire to claim that some sentences express claims which are knowable in virtue of understanding alone — which are such that anyone who understands them is (at least) in a position to know them, or be justified in believing them. This was in part to make the a priori safe for empiricists, and in part to give an explanation of how certain sorts of philosophical knowledge could be possible. In this chapter from *The Philosophy of Philosophy*, Williamson argues that this is all based on a mistake: there are no sentences which are knowable solely in virtue of being understood.

## 1. SOME LINKING PRINCIPLES

The proponent of the idea that some sentences have a special understanding-related epistemic status can be understood as saying that, for those sentences, there is a necessary connection between understanding them and X — where X is some epistemically interesting attitude toward that sentence, or the thought it expresses. We can generate different linking principles by choosing different values for X. Among the linking principles Williamson discusses are:

[UA] Necessarily, anyone who understands S assents to it.

[UK] Necessarily, anyone who understands S knows it.

[UJ] Necessarily, anyone who understands S is justified in believing it.

Williamson argues that all of these links fail, in the sense that there is no sentence which makes any of them true.

Williamson is careful to distinguish principles like these, which are about sentences, from the corresponding principles about thoughts. He argues, plausibly I think, that these pairs of principles will stand or fall together, so in what follows I will just focus on the principles about sentences.

## 2. PROBLEMS WITH THESE LINKING PRINCIPLES

### 2.1. *False analytic sentences?*

Given that knowledge implies truth, [UK] implies

[UT] Necessarily, if anyone understands S, S is true.

Hence, whatever is sufficient to make a sentence analytic had better also be sufficient to make that sentence true.

This might seem pretty obvious. But as Williamson argues, it poses some difficulties for the friend of epistemic analyticity. For example, one might think that a sentence is analytic if it follows from the stipulation that was used to introduce the term. But it seems fairly plausible that, if “true” was introduced by a stipulation, it was something like the stipulation that every instance of the following schema be true:

S is true iff T

instances of which are obtained by replacing the schematic letter ‘S’ with a name for a sentence, and ‘T’ with a sentence, such that the former is a name for the latter. But if we let ‘Sentence 1’ be a name for the following sentence:

Sentence 1 is not true.

then among the instances of this schema is

‘Sentence 1 is not true’ is true iff Sentence 1 is not true.

which, by substitution, implies

Sentence 1 is true iff Sentence 1 is not true.

which is a contradiction.

(This is related to our discussion of “tonk” and Boghossian on analyticity, and the fact that one can try to stipulate the truth of a class of sentences without succeeding in doing so.)

### 2.2. *Deviant views without lack of understanding*

This sort of example is of course not the sort of thing which can show that no sentence satisfies any of the linking principles sketched above. One can always defend these principles by finding an alleged epistemically analytic sentence which is true, like, for example,

(1) Every vixen is a vixen.

Ask first: is [UA] true of this sentence? Williamson gives two examples designed to show that it is not:

- Peter, who thinks that universal generalizations are existentially committing and endorses a conspiracy theory according to which there are no foxes.
- Stephen, whose views on vagueness commit him to the claim that some instances of this generalization are neither true nor false, and hence that this sentence is itself neither true nor false.

One might say that neither really understands (1) — that is, they don't understand it as having the same meaning that we understand it to have. The only plausible way of defending this view is to say that neither really understands “every”.

But, as Williamson notes, we can imagine each to be a philosopher who has published articles defending their views about the logic of “every”; and we can imagine each to be emphatic in their intention to use the word with its ordinary, English meaning. As he puts it: “They seem like most philosophers, thoroughly competent in their native language, a bit odd in some of their views.” And, in general, as Williamson says, giving an incorrect theory of the meaning of a word cannot be sufficient for using it with a deviant meaning.

A real-life example of this phenomenon is McGee on modus ponens:

Opinion polls taken just before the 1980 election showed the Republican Ronald Reagan decisively ahead of the Democrat Jimmy Carter, with the other Republican in the race, John Anderson, a distant third. Those apprised of the poll results believed, with good reason:  
If a Republican wins the election, then if it's not Reagan who wins it will be Anderson.  
A Republican will win the race.  
Yet they did not have reason to believe:  
If it's not Reagan who wins, it will be Anderson. (McGee 1985: 462)

One might retreat from [UA] to a principle about our dispositions to accept sentences:

[UDA] Necessarily, anyone who understands S is disposed to assent to it.

Two versions of [UDA], based on the distinction between “personal level” dispositions and “subpersonal” dispositions.

The examples already discussed are sufficient to refute the former, since we can imagine that our example subjects cannot be induced, no matter how, to change their minds. The

appeal to sub-personal dispositions makes assumptions, which seem likely to be false, about how logical reasoning works in human beings. (And even if the assumptions are true, they seem to be contingently true, which is not what we need if we're defending a modal claim like [UDA].)

### 2.3. *Synonymy and knowledge thereof*

Any objection to the idea that [UA] holds for (1) a fortiori holds for

(2) Every vixen is a female fox.

But new problems arise here as well, which are parallel to those raised above. Can't one, as Williamson suggests, hold the view that some immature male foxes are also vixens without failing to count as a competent user of "vixen", whose speech and beliefs can be reported by others in the linguistic community? Couldn't someone truly say, e.g., "That guy thinks that some vixens are male!"

### 2.4. *From [UA] to [UK] and [UJ]*

How can we extend this argument against [UA] to [UK] and [UJ]?

The argument against [UK] seems immediate, since if you don't assent to something, you don't believe it, and hence don't know it.

[UJ] is trickier. Can we imagine variants of the examples of Peter and Stephen according to which they not only failed to believe, but also would not be justified in believing, (1)?

Another respect in which [UJ] is trickier is that what we want if we're defending epistemic analyticity is not just the claim that everyone who understands the sentence would also be justified in believing it, but rather that they are so justified solely in virtue of their understanding of the sentence.

## 3. EPISTEMIC LINKING PRINCIPLES WITHOUT PSYCHOLOGICAL LINKING PRINCIPLES

One might at this point have the following reaction: perhaps no sentences are such that understanding alone guarantees assent; but this does not imply that understanding is not sufficient for justification, or warrant, in the case of some sentences. Williamson turns to this topic in §8.

Williamson suggests that the proponent of this idea should formulate their thought as:

[KU'] Whoever knows S in the normal way does so solely on the basis of their understanding of S.

For the proponent of [KU'] who accepts the foregoing argument against [UA], Williamson poses a dilemma: what state does "their understanding of S" refer to? Two candidates: (i)

the property of understanding S; (ii) “the facts that realize this particular subject’s understanding of the sentence.”

The arguments against [UA] are already effectively arguments against [KU'] + (i), since these cases show that simply understanding the sentence is not sufficient for knowledge.

The problem with [KU'] + (ii) is different. If we’re allowed to explain the subject’s knowledge in terms of everything that the subject brings to bear in dealing with S, then we’re presumably including the subject’s logical views and capacities. But it is no surprise that we can know, e.g., (i) on the basis of understanding *plus logical abilities*. This makes (1) no different from any other sentence; for any sentence, we can know that it is true only by understanding it and bringing to bear capacities relevant for evaluating that sentence — whether those be logical abilities, or some other sort of ability.