

# IS THERE PROPOSITIONAL UNDERSTANDING?

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**ABSTRACT:** Literature in epistemology tends to suppose that there are three main types of understanding – propositional, atomistic, and objectual. By showing that all apparent instances of propositional understanding can be more plausibly explained as featuring one of several other epistemic states, this paper argues that talk of propositional understanding is unhelpful and misleading. The upshot is that epistemologists can do without the notion of propositional understanding.

**KEYWORDS:** epistemology, understanding, knowledge, propositional understanding

## 1. Introduction

Understanding is a kind of cognitive achievement of which the object is “strikingly varied.”<sup>1</sup> For example, we make claims to understand the psychology of loved ones, the workings of machines, current events, the structure of languages, and academic hypotheses. However, in spite of the extent to which we obviously strive to understand, the epistemic state of understanding has remained an under-discussed topic in epistemology, and usage of the term is often surprisingly ambiguous. As Zagzebski observes, different uses of ‘understand’ seem to mean so many different things that it is difficult to even pick out the precise state that has been ignored, and this can lead to a vicious circle – in other words, “neglect leads to fragmentation of meaning, which seems to justify further neglect and further fragmentation until eventually a concept can disappear entirely.”<sup>2</sup> However, it is important that more efforts be made to remedy this. The disproportionate attention devoted to knowledge in particular is rather troubling when we consider that there are various compelling motivations for thinking that understanding seems just as valuable as knowledge (if not *more* valuable<sup>3</sup> than knowledge). Riggs

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen Grimm, “Understanding,” in *Routledge Companion to Epistemology*, eds. Sven Bernecker and Duncan Pritchard (New York: Routledge, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> Linda Zagzebski, *On Epistemology* (Belmont: Wadsworth, 2009), 141.

<sup>3</sup> For some observations and arguments to this effect, see Jonathan Kvanvig, *The Value of Knowledge and the Pursuit of Understanding* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), as well as Duncan Pritchard, “Knowledge, Understanding and Epistemic Value,” in *Epistemology (Royal Institute of Philosophy Lectures)*, ed. Anthony O’Hear (Cambridge:

asks “Why the longstanding bias in favour of knowledge, justification and the like at expense of understanding?” and adds “I suspect that at least one reason is that understanding is a harder phenomenon to account for and describe precisely than the aforementioned others.”<sup>4</sup> He is quite right about the enormity of such a task – there is more than one type of understanding, and there is no doubt that offering an account of any of these types is a challenging project.

One vital early stage of finding out more about the phenomenon of understanding will involve investigating what sort of conditions must be fulfilled in order for one to understand. Given that it is highly plausible that more than one sort of understanding is relevant to epistemology, preliminary explorations of understanding will also contrast the conditions one must meet to attain different *sorts* of understanding. My particular goal herein is to supply good reasons for us to set aside one certain alleged sort of understanding in such future epistemological investigations. I submit that the notion of *propositional understanding* is misleading, and that if it is allowed to play a substantial role in theorising about understanding then it is capable of muddying the waters of more substantive and significant topics concerning understanding (such as whether, and to what extent, it might constitute a more significant cognitive achievement than does any kind of knowledge).

To begin, I will briefly review the main types of understanding that can be found in contemporary epistemological literature. I will then move on to focus specifically on propositional understanding, trying to better define what is meant by the term when it is employed. Next, I will contend that what might seem to be instances of propositional understanding can more plausibly be explained as featuring one of a group of importantly different (but closely related) epistemic states. In showing this, I will support my view in part by appealing to considerations about the conditions under which, when pressed, we will tend to quickly retract these sorts of apparent attributions of propositional understanding.

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Cambridge University Press, 2009) and Dennis Whitcomb, “Epistemic Value,” in *The Continuum Companion to Epistemology*, ed. Andrew Cullison (New York: Continuum Publishing Corporation, 2011).

<sup>4</sup> Wayne Riggs, “Understanding ‘Virtue’ and the Virtue of Understanding,” in *Intellectual Virtue Perspectives from Ethics and Epistemology*, eds. Michael DePaul and Linda Zagzebski (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 19-20.

## 2. Attempting to define propositional understanding

Epistemologists interested in understanding often compare and contrast understanding with propositional knowledge.<sup>5</sup> If this project is to be undertaken, it makes sense to tackle the question of what properly distinguishes between different *sorts* of understanding rather early on in any investigation of understanding, in order to determine which one or more of these types is most likely to yield interesting results if compared with knowledge. The main types of understanding that we can draw from epistemological literature are as follows:<sup>6</sup>

*Propositional understanding or understanding-that:* “I understand *that* X,” e.g. “Andy understands that the meeting will be at 3pm.”

*Atomistic understanding or understanding-wh:* “I understand *why/when/where/what* X,” e.g. “Lauren understands why the building is closing down.”

*Objectual understanding or holistic understanding:* “I *understand* X,” e.g. “Mark understands human biology.”<sup>7</sup>

Of these types, Pritchard<sup>8</sup> thinks that the paradigmatic sort of usage will concern atomistic understanding, such as “I understand why the house burned down” or “I understand why Johnny is behaving in this way.” Objectual understanding, meanwhile, is the sort that Kvanvig awards primary focus to, describing it as obtaining “when understanding grammatically is followed by an object/subject matter, as in understanding the presidency, or the president, or

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<sup>5</sup> I will not justify this commonplace methodology here, given that my goal is just to expose the idea of propositional understanding as an unhelpful distraction from the philosophically interesting concept of understanding.

<sup>6</sup> Different types of understanding are more prominent in other areas of philosophy. For example, linguistic understanding deals with what it means to understand words. For some prominent and recent work in this area, see Harriet E. Baber, “In Defence of Proselytizing,” *Religious Studies* 36 (2003): 333-44 and Guy Longworth, “Linguistic Understanding and Knowledge,” *Nous* 42 (2008): 50-79.

<sup>7</sup> All of these types of understanding are discussed in Kvanvig, *The Value of Knowledge*. For another discussion of propositional understanding, see Berit Brogaard, “I Know. Therefore, I Understand”, unpublished draft (2005), [https://sites.google.com/site/brogaardb/brogaard knowledgeunderstanding.pdf?attredirects=0](https://sites.google.com/site/brogaardb/brogaard%20knowledgeunderstanding.pdf?attredirects=0) (accessed May 8, 2012). For work on atomistic understanding, see also Grimm, “Understanding,” and Alison Hills, “Moral Testimony and Moral Epistemology,” *Ethics* 120 (2009): 94-127. Further thoughts on the nature of objectual understanding can also be found in Grimm, and in Catherine Elgin, “Is Understanding Factive?” in *Epistemic Value*, eds. Duncan Pritchard, Alan Millar and Adrian Haddock (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

<sup>8</sup> See for example Pritchard, “Knowledge, Understanding.”

politics.”<sup>9</sup> However, since atomistic and objectual understanding are clearly worthy of much sustained attention, it is mainly propositional understanding with which I will be concerned herein – specifically, my focus will be on the question of whether there is some one epistemic state such that it is helpful for epistemologists to refer to this state as propositional understanding.

When thinking about the idea of propositional understanding, we might first wonder exactly what ‘proposition’ means in the context of discussing understanding as an epistemic state. As McGrath notes, the term is used throughout philosophical literature to refer to a rather wide variety of things – “the primary bearers of truth value, the objects of belief and other ‘propositional attitudes’ (i.e., what is believed, doubted, etc.), the referents of that-clauses, and the meanings of sentences.”<sup>10</sup> I think it is fair to say that the sort of work with which we are currently concerned treats propositions as the objects of propositional attitudes and the referents of that-clauses, and I will hereafter assume that this is the case. With this small preliminary issue addressed, we can move on to ask what precisely has been said in the aid of defining propositional understanding and the conditions under which we might come to have it.

Kvanvig first describes propositional understanding as obtaining “when we attribute understanding in the form of a propositional operator, as in understanding that something is the case.”<sup>11</sup> Similarly, Brogaard describes ascriptions of propositional understanding as being “ascriptions of understanding of something being the case.”<sup>12</sup> However, Pritchard observes that understanding (unlike knowledge) at least isn’t normally directly concerned with one proposition<sup>13</sup>, and Kvanvig later supports the idea that such understanding is not particularly common when he says that “understanding has as its standard object a body of information, but ordinarily not a single proposition” and also states that there are “no single proposition of which we ascribe understanding”<sup>14</sup> when we claim that someone understands a subject matter.

We can begin to get a clearer picture of what the epistemic state of propositional understanding is supposed to be when we look more closely at why those who believe there *is* such a thing as propositional understanding might share

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<sup>9</sup> Kvanvig, *The Value of Knowledge*, 191.

<sup>10</sup> Matthew McGrath, “Propositions,” in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2011 Edition)*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (2011), 1, URL= < <http://www.seop.leeds.ac.uk/archives/fall2011/entries/propositions/>>).

<sup>11</sup> Kvanvig, *The Value of Knowledge*, 191.

<sup>12</sup> Brogaard, “I Know,” 2.

<sup>13</sup> Pritchard, “Knowledge, Understanding,” 11.

<sup>14</sup> Kvanvig, *The Value of Knowledge*, 195.

the view that genuine instances of this sort of understanding are quite rare. In contrast to our highly commonplace ascriptions of propositional knowledge, consider that (purely comparatively speaking) it is not really all that often that we utter or hear sentences of the form “I understand that X” in conversation. Notice that this rarity seems particularly explicable when we consider that, at least frequently, sentences of this form actually just represent propositional knowledge. The sentence “it is time for dinner,” for example, seems to almost always be used to express the same notion regardless of whether preceded by ‘I understand that’ or ‘I know that.’ The same is true of many other statements, such as “we are leaving at four o’clock” or “this is where Peter lives.”<sup>15</sup> As Grimm<sup>16</sup> notes, most cases of “S understands that p” can be easily replaced by “S knows that p” without loss of meaning. Further, it seems that when uttering such sentences, we would generally be more likely to choose ‘know that’ rather than ‘understand that’ to precede them, especially if explicitly given the choice.

So, we can now see that perhaps propositional understanding is not a common epistemic state because ‘knows that’ and ‘understands that’ are often readily interchangeable, and in the main seem to represent propositional knowledge rather than something we would want to insist should be called genuine understanding. However, this leads us to wonder the following: when propositional understanding *does* occur in its alleged true form, what is it that in those particular cases distinguishes it from propositional knowledge? Kvanvig claims that these authentic, rare instances of the propositional form of understanding differ from propositional knowledge in that knowledge doesn’t demand that the agent grasp or appreciate the explanatory relations between the items in a body of information. This grasp is commonly thought to be necessary when it comes to objectual and atomistic understanding. For example, Riggs states that understanding of a subject matter “requires a deep appreciation, grasp or awareness of how its parts fit together, what role each one plays in the context of the whole, and of the role it plays in the larger scheme of things.”<sup>17</sup> In later work, Kvanvig<sup>18</sup> slightly expands on his original idea to claim that such relationships are so integral to understanding that any time we think about the nature of *any* kind

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<sup>15</sup> Some apparently obvious examples like these will later be called into question, but for the moment all that matters is that such sentences do not strike us as obviously importantly different in *most* cases (whether preceded by ‘I know that’ or ‘I understand that’).

<sup>16</sup> Grimm, “Understanding,” 3.

<sup>17</sup> Riggs, “Understanding ‘Virtue,’” 19.

<sup>18</sup> See for example Kvanvig, “Assertion, Knowledge and Lotteries”, in *Williamson on Knowledge*, eds. Duncan Pritchard and Patrick Greenough (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 140-60.

of understanding we immediately think of precisely these sorts of relationships, i.e. “the ways in which pieces of information are connected with each other.”<sup>19</sup>

Now, it is not immediately obvious that propositional understanding should require this grasp of relations in the same way that atomistic and objectual understanding so plausibly do. However, one way in which Kvanvig suggests that propositional understanding could require grasping these kinds of relations is to say that such understanding might “result via abstraction” from what could plausibly be thought to be the primary form (i.e. understanding of a subject matter). On this view, then, it seems that if you are to have propositional understanding, you must understand a subject matter that includes the relevant proposition. For example, if a police officer says “I understand that Jimmy used a knife to commit the murder,” he counts as having propositional understanding only if he also understands the relevant subject matter (perhaps that of this particular murder, or the particular crime scene at which the body was found), and if Wendy says “I understand that you won’t be at the celebratory barbeque,” she has propositional understanding only if she also understands the subject matter of your summer plans (or something along those lines). Similarly, if John says “I understand that red peppers are added at this point in the curry recipe,” he only counts as having propositional understanding if he understands the relevant recipe, or (say) Thai cooking.

This seems to be the only way to make sense of Kvanvig’s plausible idea that propositional understanding requires grasping coherence-making relations, but given that it requires one to have *objectual understanding* then it is not obviously a picture of a type of understanding that actually takes a *proposition* as its object (especially since Kvanvig also explicitly says that no understanding of singular propositions is ascribed when objectual understanding is ascribed). As such, it appears unhelpful for us to even call what the view describes ‘propositional understanding’ (as opposed to, say, calling this description merely an account of one of the things that people with *objectual* understanding can do).

In addition to not endorsing this specific idea of what propositional understanding would be (for the reasons just mentioned), I do not think there is

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<sup>19</sup> The notion of these relationships, which Kvanvig calls “explanatory and other coherence-making relationships” is complicated and tough to explicate (to the extent that a full account is still lacking in the current literature). Even coming close to offering a theory of what grasping involves and what precisely must *be* grasped requires giving at least partial answers to a long chain of interrelated questions. For some work on what the act of grasping coherence-making relationships involves, and on what exactly is grasped when one understands, see once again Grimm, “Understanding,” as well as Hills, “Moral Testimony,” and Michael Strevens, “No Understanding Without Explanation,” *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science* (2011 draft).

any obvious alternative account of propositional understanding that does not just collapse into an account of some other epistemic state. Rather, it is my position that ‘understanding’ that takes one proposition as its object is not a distinct breed of understanding at all. The notion of a type of understanding that *does* take one proposition as its object is a philosophically uninteresting (as well as misleading) construal of what it is to understand. In order to more convincingly show this, however, I must deal with several types of problem case in which it at first quite strongly appears that there is such a thing as propositional understanding.

### 3. Propositional knowing

Let’s begin by looking more closely at cases that turn out to only feature propositional *knowledge* even though some might appear at first glance as though they feature genuine propositional understanding. This will help us figure out how to diagnose such cases more readily, and tell us something about how to set them apart from other cases of apparent propositional understanding.

Now, we saw at the outset that many apparent attributions of propositional understanding seem to merely be attributions of propositional knowledge, given that most sentences of the form “S understands that P” can be changed to “S knows that P” without any loss of meaning. Keeping this idea in mind, consider that Brogaard argues against Kvanvig’s view that propositional understanding demands a grasp of coherence-making relationships by saying that you can assert your understanding that your flight was cancelled “without appreciating any explanatory or coherence-inducing relations in a larger body of information.”<sup>20</sup> I agree she is quite right that no grasp of coherence-making relations is required in this particular case, but I think that this is because such a use of ‘understand’ is actually also one of the uses that are synonymous with ‘know.’ Presumably, all that the agent is trying to ascribe to himself is something along the lines of a strongly justified belief that his flight has been cancelled. This case does not constitute a convincing counterexample to Kvanvig’s view, as it is simply a case of propositional knowledge (and, as we saw in section two, it is not at all clear what would demarcate propositional knowledge from propositional understanding were it possible to have the latter *without* also having some further sort of

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<sup>20</sup> See Brogaard, “I Know,” 6. Given that Brogaard thinks that propositional understanding *doesn’t* require grasping coherence-making relations, one might fairly wonder what it is about the plane case that she thinks indicates any kind of understanding at all. As it happens, her view seems to be that no kind of understanding is interestingly different from what she sees as its corresponding type of knowledge, though her reasons are not immediately relevant for our current purposes.

understanding and/or a grasp of coherence-making relations). However, I think the case is nonetheless instructive insofar as it can tell us more about what is going on when ‘understand that’ is used instead of ‘know that.’

Specifically, I think that these sorts of cases are simply instances of agents speaking somewhat lazily. While using ‘understand’ in this way usually allows speakers to roughly convey what they want to, this usage is not getting at the concept that epistemologists working on understanding are really interested in. Kvanvig makes a similar claim about what appear to be *non-factive* attributions of propositional knowledge – he thinks that such uses involve misspeaking, but concedes that if such uses become common enough then they will no longer be instances of misspeaking. However, by the same token so too will they have ceased to express anything about the concept of knowledge, and the word ‘knows’ will have come to express a different concept. I hold that what appear to be attributions of propositional understanding can be explained in a similar way. In the above case involving the flight cancellation, for example, the speaker is using ‘understand’ to refer to the concept of propositional knowledge (and we will shortly see speakers using ‘understand that’ to refer to other epistemic states). It seems that in Brogaard’s specific example, the utterer should probably have said “I know that my flight was cancelled” in order to express the intended thought.<sup>21</sup> Consider that if a fellow traveller were to ask something like “Wait, don’t you mean ‘know’? If you understand something here, you must have more information about the flight cancellation than we do!” then it is likely that the agent would retract and correct his statement to reflect simply *knowing that* the flight had been cancelled.

The same sort of explanation applies (in the vast majority of cases) to statements such as “I understand that you are the person I should speak to about setting up an appointment” and “I understand that you need me to pick up some milk on the way home.” This imprecise use of ‘understand’ to mean ‘know’ often works just fine in everyday conversation, but should not be taken to be importantly informative about the epistemic state of understanding with which epistemologists are concerned. After all, the nature and value of the ascribed epistemic state in such cases should surely be identical to that of propositional knowledge.

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<sup>21</sup> I say this with the caveat that this is my contention about the plane case *unless* the speaker is trying to express his comprehension of *why* his flight was cancelled, in which case Brogaard’s example becomes an instance of what we will see in a section five – a case of apparent propositional understanding in which what is meant is an attribution of *atomistic or objectual understanding*.



#### 4. Hedging

Now, some cases featuring sentences of the form “I understand that X” do not seem at all explicable in terms of linguistically lazy references to propositional knowledge. For example, it seems as though Joan can say to her sister “I understand that the train leaves at seven o’clock” while both readily lacking knowledge and being aware that she lacks knowledge. So, since what is being attributed here is clearly not propositional knowledge, is the state referenced in such sentences what we should properly think of as genuine propositional understanding?

I think that these sorts of cases can be also be explained in such a way as to make it obvious that they do not feature genuine understanding (albeit for different reasons than those highlighted in the previous section). Specifically, I think what is present in the above example (and those like it) is not understanding but rather hedging for reasons of doubt. Since we have stipulated that in the train example Joan is aware that she lacks knowledge, I think it is plausible that she is using “I understand that the train leaves at seven o’clock” to convey something closer to “I think that the train probably leaves at seven o’clock but I have at least some cause to be hesitant about whether I am correct to think this.” If pressed, it seems likely that she would further explain her thoughts by revealing her doubt about the train times (explaining, perhaps, that she has not checked the most recent timetable changes, or offering other grounds that would make sense of her hesitancy to claim to have knowledge). Assuming again that the relevant agent does not (and would not claim to) have knowledge, the same sort of explanation can be given for an utterance like “I understand that the party will be a relatively small affair” in response to an anxious question about whether a party will be intimidating in its largeness, and a person’s saying “I understand that they don’t ask for ID” to her underage friend who wonders whether he will be allowed to enter a particular bar. The former agent, if pressed, would say something like “I have only heard of a few people saying that they have been invited, but I can’t be sure,” while the latter might offer something along the lines of “I was never asked for ID when I was your age, but the policies may be more strict now.”

However, consider the following case that doesn’t quite fit into the same category: Carl comes home much later than he previously claimed would be the case, and he asks his partner what is bothering her. She reproachfully replies “Well, I understand that we have an agreement about calling each other at times when one of us will not be coming home until after 1am.” In such examples, it is not the case that the speaker feels unsure about whether she is correct – indeed, we can stipulate that she strongly remembers striking such an agreement and is

unhappy that Carl failed to hold up his end of their deal. This means that this is not an instance of hedging for reasons of doubt. Further, while the speaker may well have propositional knowledge and may well (in different circumstances) be willing to claim to have this knowledge, she is not here lazily using ‘understand’ to mean ‘know.’ Perhaps, then, this could be a case of legitimate, philosophically interesting propositional understanding?

Instead, I think that although these sorts of utterances do not feature hedging for reasons of doubt, they nonetheless involve hedging of a different kind. They are intended to at least slightly soften the potentially confrontational claim that one party’s behaviour did not meet the other party’s expectations (perhaps, in this specific case, out of a desire to be air a grievance and receive an apology without starting a fight).<sup>22</sup> If the speaker were to have her claim to understand questioned, she would be likely to rephrase her claim in some way that reflects that her choice of words is less about having *understanding* and more about her intention to communicate justified unhappiness without baldly accusing Carl of wrongdoing.<sup>23</sup> This second type of hedging relates to social conventions and the successful navigation of interpersonal relationships (and will therefore occur not just with romantic partners but also in the workplace, with family, with strangers, and so on). Another example might be of an employee politely prompting her boss by saying “I understand that we have established that my hours are to be reduced,” or of a son saying to his mother “I understand that you are willing to end my being grounded now that I have done all of the household chores for a week.”<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> I base these examples on very roughly similar cases from Kvanvig, *The Value of Knowledge*, 191, who uses such cases for the alternative purpose of explaining away apparently *non-factive* uses of understanding. Grimm, “Understanding,” 3, also agrees that there are cases where ‘understanding that X’ is used to suggest ‘an openness to correction’ (which fits with my first proposed kind of hedging, i.e. hedging for reasons of doubt).

<sup>23</sup> The second most likely answer that such a speaker would give would be to (instead or in addition) attribute to themselves some form of *atomistic* understanding (such as, in the Carl case, understanding *why* they struck their agreement about calling) or maybe even objectual understanding (such as understanding the rules of their romantic relationship). This alternative sort of retraction of claims to have propositional understanding will be discussed in the next section.

<sup>24</sup> Interestingly, there seems to be another way in which specifically *past tense* claims about propositional understanding can feature something in the neighbourhood of hedging. Here, I am thinking about self-exculpating and face-saving statements like “I understood that such activities weren’t against the law” or “I understood that she wasn’t seeing anyone at the time I asked her on a date.” Such speakers are usually trying to defend their having had a belief that

## 5. Atomistic or Objectual Understanding

Finally, we should turn to a group of cases that feature agents of whom it is substantially more plausible to say that they have understanding. Consider, for example, an expert in scientific lab work. It does not at first seem at all inappropriate to say of him something like “He understands that he must be careful around these chemicals” without hedging in any way and also without intending to attribute mere propositional knowledge. Similarly, if Clint is very close to his wife of ten years it seems as though we might in some cases fairly say “Clint understands that Anna is happier now that she has a new job” without any intention to hedge and yet still be attributing something more substantial than propositional knowledge.

I think that one key to seeing the way in which these sorts of examples are not really representative of some distinctive epistemic state properly called propositional understanding is to focus on the extent to which the person handling chemicals and the thoughtful husband would not sum up their understanding with reference to just one proposition. Specifically, I think that the speakers in these cases (and cases like them) really mean to attribute *atomistic understanding* or *objectual understanding*. So, take an example of what might appear to be propositional understanding, such as “She understands that Gore might have been president.” If the case involves an associated grasping of the coherence-making relationships relevant to *why* it is the case that Gore might have been president, it turns out to really feature atomistic understanding of why it is possible that Gore might have been president, and perhaps additional objectual understanding of the subject matter constituted by the relevant presidential election (if the subject of the sentence grasps enough of the coherence-making relationships relevant to the election). This means that when we say that the man handling particular chemicals understands that he must be careful around those chemicals, we could well be attributing to him atomistic understanding of why he needs to be careful around the chemicals, or objectual understanding of handling dangerous chemicals more generally (or even some other, larger subject matter that is relevant, such as chemistry). Similarly, when someone says that Clint understands that Anna is happier now that she has a new job, it is likely that what is meant is really that Clint has the awareness of his wife’s psychology required to have understanding of *why* she is happier now that she has his new job, or that Clint understands something like the subject matter of

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turned out to be false, suggesting that they had a highly justified false belief and are not to blame for not having known the truth.

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his wife's career aspirations. Note once again that it seems plausible that the speakers would rephrase their claims in ways similar to those I have just described here if pressed on the matter of exactly *what* they understand. They would be unlikely to simply staunchly insist "That Anna is happier now!" or "That he must be careful around these chemicals!"

## 6. Concluding Remarks

It is easy to make the unhelpful assumption that each type of understanding stands in contrast with a corresponding type of knowledge. By looking specifically at what propositional understanding might be, we have seen that the idea that there is such understanding (in an epistemologically interesting sense) is implausible. Firstly, the most sensible picture of what propositional understanding might be does not clearly describe a type of understand that actually takes a proposition as its object. Secondly, attributions of propositional understanding are largely (i) synonymous with attributions of propositional knowledge, (ii) cases of hedging for reasons of doubt, (iii) cases of hedging for reasons of social convention, (iv) really attributions of atomistic understanding, or (v) really attributions of objectual understanding (where (iv) and (v) both involve more than just one proposition and also seem to involve grasping coherence-making relationships). Further, I would contend that any other types of cases where propositional understanding is attributed will also be cases in which a widespread willingness to retract and rephrase such claims will show that something other than propositional understanding is what is really being attributed.

At this point, driven by the conviction that there is no such thing as genuine instances of propositional understanding, I suggest that we abandon the idea that this is an important breed of understanding that warrants further, in-depth consideration as part of the project of investigating the nature of understanding. Without the unhelpful and confusing notion of propositional understanding in play, we will be much better placed to make real progress in discovering what is distinctive about the cognitive achievement of understanding, and this in turn will help us to learn more about why it might be particularly valuable.