CHARACTERISING UNDERSTANDING & THE UNDERSTANDING SUBJECT

Sven Delarivière

Abstract:
Understanding is a desired aim in any discipline and a valued trait for anyone involved in it. But if understanding is so highly valued, then it would also be worthwhile to have a characterisation of what it is, exactly, as well as who it applies to. When we attribute understanding to someone, is there a systematic way to reveal what that should mean? This is a question with important implications for how we recognise, evaluate and interact with students, scientists or any other candidate for understanding. Furthermore, it is a question where philosophy can offer some conceptual headway. As such, the research question of this PhD is, in its broadest form, “When should we attribute understanding and why?” with the aim to offer a consistent, normative (but open-ended) conceptual characterisation for epistemologists (etc) to talk about understanding and the understanding subject.

The first part of my dissertation focuses on what characterises the concept of “understanding;” which systematic feature we take as the defining condition for attributing “understanding;” how we deal with discipline-bound variations in understanding the same object, how we may express the dimensions and degrees of quality, and what difficulties and opportunities we face in evaluating any subject. In answering such questions, we need to take a consistent approach. With that in mind, I employ an approach which takes understanding to be synonymous with contextually salient abilities, and I defend the plausibility of its methodology and its fruitfulness over those of other approaches.

The second part of my dissertation focuses on what characterises an entity befitting of an understanding attribution. Traditionally, philosophers have taken for granted that the relevant entity must always be an individual human. But could other entities be a worthy candidate for understanding-attributions? The ability approach does not, in principle, rule it out. Recent discussions in social epistemology have taken seriously the question whether some epistemic properties may be suitably attributed (to a lesser or equal extent) to entities other than human individuals, such as groups (collective epistemology), artefacts (android epistemology) or individuals in conjunction with “external” components (extended epistemology). The rising
debate in social epistemology shares similarities with developments from cognitive science (e.g., distributed, extended, and artificial cognition) and philosophy of mind (e.g. theories of agency, collective intentionality, active externalism and emergence), where there is already a widespread literature and several developed frameworks and analytic toolboxes. But so far these developments have only to a very limited extent influenced the epistemology literature. Furthermore, the literature is fragmented into discussions about epistemic agency and subject demarcation of differently composed entities and focusing on different properties (knowledge, beliefs, intentionality). I argue that the interpretationist approach to epistemic subjecthood can unite the demarcation principles at work in the particulars, as well as illuminate what the explanatory role of epistemic agency amounts to and how it fares in explaining entities beyond human individuals.