



Book Review
Truly Understood, by Christopher Peacocke

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Book reviews

Truly Understood, by Christopher Peacocke. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, 356 pp.

Truly Understood (TU), Christopher Peacocke's latest book, is an interesting development in his on-going project of elucidating the nature of understanding and concept-possession. Since *A Study of Concepts* (The MIT Press, 1992 — SoC from now on), Peacocke has been slowly moving towards an account of understanding that accords an increasingly important role to reference and truth. An illustration of this process is provided by his characterization of logical concepts: back in SoC, Peacocke defended that a concept should be individuated by the conditions a thinker must meet in order to be credited with possession of it. In the case of conjunction:

(Possession Conditions-SoC) Conjunction is that concept C to possess which a thinker must find transitions that are instances of the following forms primitively compelling, and must do so because they are of these forms:

$$\frac{p \quad q}{pCq} \quad \frac{pCq}{P} \quad \frac{pCq}{Q}$$

(SoC. p. 6)

These possession conditions, which state what makes a certain use of the concept of conjunction rational, do not yet provide a semantic value for conjunction. For that, in SoC, we need an extra piece of information, a *determination theory*:

(Determination Theory) [T]he truth function that is the semantic value of conjunction is the function that makes transitions of the forms mentioned in the possession condition truth-preserving under all assignments to their constituents p and q. (SoC. 18)

In TU (p. 46; unless otherwise specified, all page numbers correspond to TU), the theory defended in SoC is classified as of Grade 1, in a scale of three degrees of involvement of truth and reference in theories of concepts. In Grade 0 theories, there is no involvement

whatsoever of truth and reference in the different tasks that a theory of concepts and understanding is designed to accomplish. Among others: the specification of justification conditions for the use of the concept, the individuation of the content of the concept, etc. Grade 1 theories are designed to meet the constraint that judgement should aim at truth. This is why a determination theory is needed for each concept: there must be an explanation of how justification-conditions for the deployment of a concept further the goal of entertaining only true contents.

Peacocke has since come to be dissatisfied with the theory defended in SoC — below I review some of the reasons for this — and his new theory advocates a ‘Grade 2’ involvement of truth and reference: possession- and justification-conditions for the use of *every* concept is inextricably intertwined with truth and reference. For example, now, the possession condition for the concept of alternation is, simply,

(Alternation-TU) [A] thinker’s grasp of the concept of alternation involves (and is perhaps to be identified with) his possession of an implicit conception with the content that any Thought (content) of the form A or B is true if and only if either A is true or B is true (p. 116f).

This elegant condition provides a straightforward link between concept possession and the ability to form true disjunctive judgements. The cost is renouncing to some cherished rationalist insights, having to do with the possibility of separating acts of successful linguistic or mental reference in two parts: a first part (Possession Conditions-SoC) having to do with the epistemic state of the thinker, in a way sufficiently open to introspection, or in any other way subject to conscious control (thus, the ‘primitively compelling’ character of the transitions involving conjunction); and a second part (Determination Theory) that bridges the gap between the sphere under the thinker’s control and the world, providing semantic values for Thoughts. In TU, Peacocke tries to salvage a substantial portion of this rationalist insight, while still defending the inextricable role of truth and reference in a theory of understanding and concept possession, for any concept.

The book kicks off by criticising proposals that try to offer a truth-independent elucidation of understanding — Grade 0 theories, in the terminology subsequently introduced. Dummett’s justificationist account of the meaning of sentences about the past is an example of

the attempt to ‘explain content in terms of what can rationally lead us to make a judgement with that content’ (p. 26). Pragmatism, on the other hand, aims at explicating contents in terms of the rational consequences of our judging those contents. Peacocke’s main criticism to both alternatives is that our conception of possible evidences for a content, and of the consequences of judging it, depend on the content itself — our ascertaining whether *p* is evidence for *q* may be a complicated process, which cannot be undertaken in the absence of a previous understanding of *p* and *q*. *Mutatis mutandis* for the consequences of judging that *q*.

Peacocke’s alternative account — introduced with the help of examples in chapter 1, and explicitly in chapter 2 — is that

(Possession Conditions-TU) Understanding of a concept may be identified with tacit knowledge of the concept’s *fundamental rule of reference* (FRR).

A FRR is a rule that provides a way for thinkers to access the reference of the concept. Possession Condition-TU provides an example of FRR. Another example:

What makes something fall within the extension picked out by the observational concept OVAL [henceforth, concept names are written in capitals — MM] is that it is something of the same shape as things are represented to be in the perceptual experiences of things as oval (p. 56)

These FRRs provide for two different components of a realist account of understanding. First, *the objective-perceptual component*: ‘mind-independent correctness conditions are intrinsic to the nature of perceptual experiences’ (p. 29). Second, *the identity component*: the understanding of what it is for an unperceived thing to fall under an observational concept is secured by relating that case to the case in which some perceived thing falls under that concept (p. 31). Indeed, on the one hand the FRR for OVAL involves a particular, mind-independent shape property that all and only oval things have; and on the other hand it provides a route for thinkers to access this property: its being the same property that is represented in our perceptual experiences of things as oval.

The *Main Thesis* introduced in chapter 2 is that the norms for use of any concept flow out of its FRR. Peacocke defends this claim by

providing some examples of norms that can be accounted for by relying on the FRR of the concept NOW. Chapter 3 is a forceful defence of a case in point: the simple FRR for the concept I,

(FRR-I) Any use of I in a thinking refers to the thinker of that thinking (p. 81)

is enough to explain the very rich normativity associated with the first person. First, it is shown how tacit knowledge of FRR-I may explain 'full self-conscious thought': knowledge on the part of the thinker that she has the property $\lambda x[x's \text{ use of } I \text{ refers to } x]$, in the presence of awareness that she is judging, e. g., that she is F. He then goes on to propose an explanation of immunity to error through misidentification — FRR-I enters in this explanation by enabling the intelligibility of thoughts along the lines of 'This body is mine' (p. 98), tacit knowledge of which explains that some predications of properties of one-self, in normal conditions, cannot be wrong for the reason that they are true of someone else. The chapter finishes with a defence of the impossibility of empty uses of *I*. Competent uses of *I* need only tacit knowledge of FRR-I which, against Evans, presupposes no independent ability of self-location in an objective world. In connection with the Main Thesis, it should be noted that the idea of *normativity flowing out of the FRR* is extremely vague. Judging from the arguments in chapter 3, it does not seem to amount to much more than defending that tacit knowledge of the FRR is necessary for knowledge of the normative claims in question. It is to be expected that subsequent work on the Main Thesis by Peacocke will clarify this point.

The central tenet of the book makes concept-possession conditions depend on tacit knowledge of the concept's FRR. Chapter 4 takes up the issue of the existence and significance of said implicit conceptions. Peacocke discusses and rejects several deflationary analyses. E. g. (p. 120f), understanding cannot be constituted by inferential dispositions (non-standard models of arithmetic are advanced as a counter-example). This is related to one of the points in which the account defended in SoC is found wanting: the simple appeal to the thinker's finding a transition primitively compelling does nothing to explain why this transition is rational (p. 116). On the other hand, counterfactuals associated with implicit knowledge (were the thinker presented with... she would judge that...) are to be explained by such knowledge, which thus cannot be constituted by them. Implicit conceptions, instead,

depend on suppositional imagination: an ability to run off-line a capacity of case-by-case imagining of possibilities and evaluating the value of the outcome. This account of implicit conceptions goes against SoC in yet another respect (p. 145): the A(C) requirement defended in SoC demanded that possession conditions for a concept did not use said concept within the scope of attitudes attributed to the thinker. Alternation-TU is a case in which such a requisite is not met. Peacocke suggests that violations of A(C) are unobjectionable because possession conditions are evaluated by thinkers which already possess the concept in question, suppositional imagination providing a way to assess the claim made by the possession conditions: we draw on our tacit knowledge in order to evaluate what is rational to do or judge in several situations; this yields information against which to assess the claim made by the possession conditions.

In part II of TU, the theory of understanding developed in the first four chapters is put to work in the elucidation of our concepts of mental states. In Chapter 5, Peacocke starts by noticing a possible problem with the FRR of PAIN. An identity condition that says that for something to fall under PAIN is for some body part to instantiate the property pain-experienced-by-me-now, fails to distinguish between someone else being in pain and *me* feeling pain in someone else's body part. In order to resolve this ambiguity we need to introduce the notion of a subject. For something to fall under pain is for some subject to be in the same state I am when I'm in pain (p. 175). The concept of subject and the concept of conscious state have FRRs that make essential reference to one another. This is called the Interlocking Account.

Chapter 6 takes up the concept of perception. It is individuated by a Core Rule, that warrants judgements that I perceive that p on the basis of a perception with the content that p (p. 208). One of the possession conditions of the concept of seeing is following the Core Rule — other conditions involve the concept I, present in the thought that I perceive that p. Chapter 7 discusses mental action. Peacocke defends that many of our conscious thoughts are mental actions (p. 245), and that we know about those actions in much the same way in which we know about other actions: by a specific kind of awareness (action-awareness) that is to be distinguished from, e. g., mere awareness of bodily movement. I have found Peacocke's repeated denial that action-awareness is a form of perception — and, thus, that his account is a perceptual account of self-knowledge — difficult to understand. The fact that

action awareness is supposed to be caused by the trying that partially constitutes the action, and the fact that he takes the time to defend his account from Shoemaker's criticisms directed at perceptual models of introspection seem to provide further evidence that the distinction between action-awareness and other kinds of perception is not very substantial. In any event, this is a minor point, and his defence of the perceptual/action-awareness account of action self-knowledge is interesting in its own right.

Finally, chapter 8 discusses our ability to represent thoughts, in the light of the debate about the Fregean hierarchy of concepts.

As this most cursory summary of the book shows, TU covers an extremely wide ground, and the discussion, if not always wholly successful, is always very illuminating. There is, nevertheless, a basic question to be asked about this Peacockian project of making an elucidation of understanding depend on fundamental *rules* of reference. The whole book presupposes a interlocutor that belongs in the same broadly neo-rationalist quarters whence Peacocke himself comes. The description on the book jacket is telling in this respect: 'Peacocke develops a positive general theory of understanding (...) which contrasts sharply with conceptual-role, inferentialist, and pragmatist approaches to meaning (...)'. It is natural to feel curious about the possible answers to challenges coming from the opposite end of the philosophical spectrum, and theories that accord an even more central role to reference in content and understanding elucidation that Grade 2 theories are ready to acknowledge.

We have seen how TU represents a change of views in many important respects from Peacocke's classic SoC. There is, nevertheless, a respect in which he has not changed his mind: the right way to individuate concepts is on the basis of their cognitive significance:

(Cognitive Significance) Concepts C and D are distinct if it is possible rationally to judge some content containing C without judging the corresponding content containing D. (p. 60)

I wish to argue that, for a large number of concepts, FRR-based individuation does not serve well the purposes of Cognitive Significance. Consider the concept RAIN, which is individuated by the following FRR:

(Rain-Here) What makes something fall within the extension of the concept *rain* is that it is an event of the same type that is required for the correctness of a thinker's judgement *It's raining here now*, where the present-tense, local predication of rain is to be further elucidated. (p. 57)

It is very implausible that no thinker whose way of thinking of rain does not depend constitutively on Rain-Here does not share our very same concept of rain. For example, there may be thinkers whose grasp of a rain concept is constituted by an FRR from which Rain-Here may be inferred. Take the case of a Martian exometeorologist: she observes Earth through her telescope from ever-dry Mars, and develops a concept of rain, which allows her to judge contents involving rain in pretty much the same way in which we do. She may, of course, come to appreciate the truth of Rain-Here, but her knowledge of this principle is in no way constitutive of her grasp of the concept RAIN. It is, nevertheless, implausible to deny that she the very same concept of rain that we do. The FRR she relies upon is something like:

(Rain-There) What makes something fall within the extension of the concept *rain* is that it is an event of the same type that is required for the correctness of a thinker's judgement *It's raining there [pointing to some area on Earth] now*, where this predication of rain is to be further elucidated.

It is not plausible to say that, when she thinks 'it's raining again' she entertains a thought with a different content from our 'it's raining again'. Apparently, not even Cognitive Significance demands that we postulate a difference in content here: the Martian exometeorologist will find rational roughly the same rain-involving judgements that we find rational because, from tacit knowledge of either one of Rain-Here or Rain-There, together with other general knowledge about identify of types of events *here* and *there*, the other principle may be inferred. A similar point may be made about the 'now' component in the FRR — appealing, maybe, to historians of meteorology from an ever-dry future.

A possible answer is retreating to the following FRR:

(Rain-somewhere) What makes something fall within the extension of the concept *rain* is that it is an event of the same type that is required for the correctness of a thinker's judgement *It's raining somewhere some-time*, where this predication of rain is to be further elucidated.

But this is obviously too close to the following, let us call it, *Grade 3 FRR*:

(Rain-Grade 3) What makes something fall within the extension of the concept *rain* is that it is an event of rain.

Which is disallowed by Peacocke and would, indeed, amount to abandoning fundamental rules of reference as individuating concepts — in Rain-Grade 3 all the individuating work is done by the property of *Being an event of rain*.

We do not need to appeal to exotic scenarios involving Martians to make the point: most of us have acquired the concept AARDVARK in a way which makes it implausible to think that the judgement *There is an aardvark here now* plays a fundamental role in its individuation. I, for one, have never seen an aardvark, except in the Wikipedia. This is not to say that I am oblivious to the fact that aardvarks are the creatures that must be here now for a judgement with the content *There is an aardvark here now* to be correct. The point is simply that knowledge of this fact does not seem to play any fundamental role in my grasp of AARDVARK. Also, this is compatible with defending that each thinker should use some route or other to access the reference of a concept. Again, this is compatible with there not being any such unique, stable route for a concept inter- or even intra-thinker.

An alternative to the Peacockian account of concept individuation is simply to agree that concepts are individuated by the properties they refer to — by the way, *pace* Peacock, there is no risk of collapse of the distinction between concept and property, even if there is a one-to-one relation between them, as long as we are clear on the basic distinction between representation and represented.

Under this assumption, the relation between rules of reference and reference is, then, to be explicated along the lines Peacocke helps himself to when talking about the state of affairs consisting in our taking certain movements and behaviours as expressions of pain:

Very likely the best explanation of the occurrence of such states of affairs is that the actions and movements in question really are expressions of pain, say, and their being perceived as such by a second conspecific is an instance of a kind of situation that is self-perpetuating in a species. (p. 197)

Explanations of roughly the same form could be given. e.g., for the mechanisms that allow us, given experience of what it is like to

perceive rain here now, to figure out what it would take for rain to be somewhere else some other time. Paraphrasing Peacocke:

Very likely, the best explanation of the occurrence of such judgements of what would be evidence for rain elsewhere, given experience of rain here now, is that this putative evidence is in fact evidence, and the mechanisms that lead to judge that this is so are self-perpetuating in a species.

This is, admittedly, extremely unspecific, and much more work would need to be done in order to explain how these mechanisms go about doing what they do. But, if I am right about the idleness of postulating Rain-Here (as opposed to, e. g., Rain-There) as the FRR individuating the concept of rain, this may be the most promising route to explain entitlements having to do with the concept of rain.

The criticism I have been rehearsing comes from what one could call a Grade 3 type of theory of understanding: aiming at truth is *the* most important goal of judgements, and rational transitions are one of the self-perpetuating mechanisms we have stumbled upon while trying to conform to the goal. It is maybe frivolous to predict that, after this very interesting book, Peacocke's subsequent development may take his account of concepts even closer to Grade 3. So I will not.

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Existential Dependence and Cognate Notions, by Fabrice Correia. Munich: Philosophia Verlag, 2005, 171 pp.

This fine volume is the first book-length study of existential dependence. It provides a novel and a systematic work entirely devoted to the topic and Fabrice Correia examines the notion of dependence as nobody has done before. Intuitively, x depends on y iff the existence of the latter is needed for the former to exist. The most widespread accounts reduce this intuition to an existential link between the two objects, to the effect that x depends on y iff it is necessary (or essential to x) that if x exists, so does y . Though this is seemingly a good rendering, it encounters a number of problems, as Correia shows. A