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Confusion, Understanding and Success

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Abstract

The present paper examines a type of sceptical hypothesis put forward by Adam Carter that specifically targets understanding—the Confusion Hypothesis. After clarifying the nature and scope of that hypothesis, it discusses Carter’s favoured virtue perspectivist answer to the challenge it raises. It is argued that this answer is ultimately unsatisfying as it is unable to explain how a subject can obtain assurance that her grasp of a given body of information actually results from the competences she comes to appreciate as being reliable. A different answer that relies on the practical dimension of the specific grasp involved in understanding is then offered and is shown to avoid the problems faced by Virtue Perspectivism.

Keywords

understanding – confusion – scepticism – grasping – success

1 Introduction

Radical sceptical hypotheses are formulated to put pressure on our claim to possess a particular type of epistemic good. Descartes’s (1641/1990) evil demon hypothesis, for instance, can be used in the following argument to support the conclusion that contrary to what we tend to assume, we are in a state of ignorance regarding mundane facts such as the fact that we have hands:

(P₁) S does not know that she is not a handless entity that is being systematically deceived by an evil demon.

- (P₂) If S does not know that she is not a handless entity that is being systematically deceived by an evil demon, then S does not know that she has hands.
- (C) S does not know that she has hands.

As should be clear, this argument has a great level of generality. Virtually any belief concerning the external world can be a target.¹ This explains, at least partly, why such arguments have had a great deal of impact on epistemological theorizing and have influenced the conceptions of knowledge and doxastic justification that are still being debated. Meeting the sceptical challenge raised by such arguments requires, after all, explicating those notions in such a way as to show why (C) ought to be rejected (at least in some contexts of epistemic appraisal).

Historically, sceptical hypotheses have targeted our claim to possess knowledge. But in light of the recent debate concerning the nature of another possibly more valuable cognitive standing—*i.e.*, understanding—one can wonder how our claim to have an understanding of certain phenomena fares in light of sceptical worries. Of course, if, as Grimm (2006: 515) puts it, understanding is a species of knowledge, sceptical arguments such as the one just considered target both our understanding of phenomena and our knowledge of facts. Yet, there are reasons to think that understanding differs importantly from propositional knowledge. For instance, according to me (Belkoniene forthcoming b) and philosophers such as Kvanvig (2003), Pritchard (2008, 2009, 2010), and Morris (2012), understanding tolerates certain forms of knowledge-undermining luck and has therefore a different epistemic profile from knowledge. If this is correct,² then the question as to whether one can threaten our claim to understand certain phenomena by arguments designed to show that we are not in a position to secure propositional knowledge appears to be an open one. At any rate, if understanding is not a species of knowledge, there appears to be no obvious route from the type of sceptical argument just considered to the conclusion that we lack the understanding we take ourselves to possess.

In the present paper, however, my aim is not to discuss the extent to which the type of radical sceptical hypothesis put forward by Descartes bears on understanding. Instead, I intend to examine a type of sceptical hypothesis put forward by Carter (2019) which specifically targets understanding: the Confusion Hypothesis. In Section 2, I present this hypothesis and clarify its

1 Note that, in what follows, my concern are sceptical arguments targeting empirical knowledge.

2 See Grimm (2006), Khalifa (2013, 2017), Kelp (2017), and Boyd (2020) for critical discussions of that claim.

nature and scope. Section 3 examines the virtue perspectivist answer to the Confusion Hypothesis favoured by Carter and shows why this answer is ultimately unsatisfying. Finally, in Section 3, I offer a new answer to the sceptical challenge discussed by Carter.

2 The Confusion Hypothesis

Most philosophers involved in the current debate concerning the nature of understanding acknowledge that understanding requires some sort of grasping. In Kvanvig's view, for instance, understanding requires "the grasping of explanatory and other coherence-making relationships in a large and comprehensive body of information" (2003: 192). The thought, here, is that understanding does not merely require having a correct account of a given phenomenon. To understand a phenomenon, a subject must grasp the connections the phenomenon bears to the various elements of the account she possesses. Consider a biology student who is interested in understanding why mammals need oxygen to survive. Suppose that her biology teacher tells her that the cells of mammals use oxygen to perform their functions. To understand why mammals need oxygen to survive, it will not be enough for the student to form the belief that mammals need oxygen because their cells use that type of molecule to perform their functions based on what she is told. She needs, as Pritchard (2014: 331) puts it, to get a grip on the connections between mammals' intake of oxygen, the performance of their respective functions by their cells and their survival. In other words, the student needs to grasp the connections between the phenomenon she is interested in and the elements of the account that is provided by her teacher. And this, presumably, involves more than merely assenting to the proposition 'Mammals need oxygen because their cells use that type of molecule to perform their functions'.

Thus understanding requires a particular sort of grasp on the part of the understander and, one might expect, a sceptical hypothesis designed to target understanding specifically will concern that grasping component. Carter, who imagines such a hypothesis, relies on the following view of the grasping component of understanding:

Understanding a subject matter requires successfully grasping the coherence and explanatory relations between the propositions that make up that subject matter, where this requires (i) good inputs; (ii) grasping the *right* coherence and explanatory relations between these good inputs; and (iii) competently grasping the right coherence and explanatory relations between these good inputs. (2019: 7)

As any attempt to grasp a given body of information can fail requirements (i–iii), Carter points out that it is always possible that a confusing demon makes it such that one’s attempt to grasp a body of information fails those requirements while making it seem to one as if one was successful in meeting them—call this the Confusion Hypothesis. For instance, as any attempt to grasp the connections between mammals’ intake of oxygen, the performance of their respective functions by their cells and their survival can fail requirements (i–iii), it is always possible that a demon makes it such that the student’s attempt to grasp those connections fails these requirements while making it seem to her, e.g., by inducing in her a subjectively intelligible picture of those connections, that she was successful in grasping them. If such a demon intervenes, the student, while being under the impression that she grasps the connections at issue, is in fact confused concerning the account that was provided to her.

As outlined by Carter (2019: 6–7), the Confusion Hypothesis is structurally similar to Schaffer’s (2010) debasing demon hypothesis. Contrary to Descartes’s hypothesis, the Confusion Hypothesis is an obfuscating hypothesis. The confusing demon does not threaten understanding by systematically deceiving a subject regarding the external world but, instead, by obfuscating her own cognizing processes and, to better appreciate the nature of this obfuscating process, let me come back to the grasp that is involved in understanding.

Carter (2019: 5) draws a distinction between two possible readings of the term “grasping”: a success reading and a performative reading. Requirements (i–iii) are related to the first reading as they state the conditions under which one’s attempt to grasp the coherence and explanatory relations between the propositions that make up a given subject matter is successful. But how should one’s attempt to grasp a given body of information pertaining to a subject matter itself be conceived of? As argued elsewhere (Belkoniene forthcoming a), grasping a body of information in such a way as to understand a subject matter plausibly involves forming a conception of how the various elements comprised in this body of information depend on each other. Indeed, as outlined by philosophers such as Greco (2014), Grimm (2014), and Dellsén (2020), dependence relations are typically the kind of coherence and explanatory relationship that need to be appreciated by a subject for her to be able to understand a given subject matter and it is reasonable to think that in order to appreciate those relations, a subject needs to form some conception of them. In the case of the biology student just considered, it is plausible that what is required from the student is that she comes to appreciate how the performance of certain functions by the cells of mammals depends on their intake of oxygen. To that end, the student can, for instance, by building on background knowledge of

molecular biology, form the conception that oxygen entering into the production of ATP molecules is the way in which the performance of their functions by the cells of mammals depends on their intake of oxygen.³

One's attempt to grasp a body of information H pertaining to a subject's matter can therefore be conceived of as one's forming a conception of the way the elements of H depend on each other and, according to Carter, the conception a subject forms can fall short of qualifying as a successful grasp of H in at least three ways. First, the subject's conception can be based on bad inputs. In other words, the subject's conception can include elements that do not, as a matter of fact, belong to the body of information the subject attempted to grasp. Second, the subject's conception can consist of a conception of dependence relations that do not, as a matter of fact, obtain between the elements of the body of information the subject attempted to grasp. Finally, the subject's conception can fail to result from the type of competences—call those competences *g*-competences—whose exercise reliably results in an adequate conception of the way the elements of a given body of information depend on each other.

3 Virtue Perspectivism: a Possible Way Out

How can a subject secure a more solid epistemic position when faced with the possibility of being confused by the demon imagined by Carter (2019)? Carter considers two alternative answers to that question. The first, called Rationalist Perspectivism, can be traced back to Descartes (1641/1990) while the second, called Virtue Perspectivism, to Sosa (2009).

According to the rationalist perspectivist, what a subject needs when faced with a sceptical hypothesis targeting her intellectual faculties is an infallible assessment that the deliverances of those faculties cannot be mistaken. To illustrate this position, Sosa (2009: 140) considers Descartes's take on the distinction between *cognitio* and *scientia*. In Descartes's view, what becomes manifest to an atheist mathematician through the competent exercise of her faculty of rational intuition cannot qualify as true knowledge—*i.e.*, *scientia*. It is mere *cognitio*. The reason for that is that the atheist mathematician is in no

3 Note that forming a conception of how the performance of certain functions by the cells of mammals depends on their intake of oxygen does not necessarily require an extensive knowledge of molecular biology. The grasp one has of a given body of information can vary in degree and there are no reasons to think that having a less than ideal grasp of a given body of information cannot allow one to secure a sufficient degree of understanding of that body of information's subject matter.

position to obtain a guarantee that the deliverances of her faculty of rational intuition are not mistaken. Contrary to the theist mathematician, the atheist mathematician is not in a position to rule out the possibility of being systematically deceived by the demon invoked by Descartes.

Sosa (2009) takes the structure of Descartes's solution to be essentially on the right track. That solution relies on the perspectivist thought that a subject's epistemic position can be improved by adopting a second-order perspective on the source of some epistemic good through the deployment of intellectual faculties whose epistemic pedigree, as Carter (2019: 9) puts it, does not itself need to be reflectively assessed. In his view, however, it is not required that the faculties whose deployment allows acquiring that second-order perspective provide the subject with an infallible assessment that the deliverances of the faculties deployed at the first-order level cannot be mistaken. As outlined by Sosa (2009: 194), while Descartes's Rationalist Perspectivism aims at validating certainties through a limited set of rational faculties, thereby inheriting the problems of classical foundationalism, Virtue Perspectivism focuses on a broader (fallibilistic) notion of knowledge.

Thus, according to Sosa's favoured approach, while it is true that the improvement of one's epistemic position critically depends on the adoption of a second-order perspective on the source of some epistemic good through the deployment of intellectual faculties, that second-order perspective should not be viewed as conferring absolute certainty regarding first-order deliverances. Through the exercise of fallible yet reliable competences such as one's perceptual faculties, a subject can adopt a second-order perspective on the source of a particular epistemic good which provides her with assurance against the type of doubt raised by sceptical hypotheses. For instance, through the exercise of her faculties of perception as well as her faculties of inductive and abductive reasoning, a subject can place her perception of a white wall in a second-order perspective and thereby come to appreciate the source of her knowledge that the wall is white as being reliable. But this, contrary to what Descartes claims, does not require that the second-order perspective constitute an infallible assessment that the deliverances of the first-order competences cannot be mistaken. Such certainty is not required to come to know that the competences whose exercise yielded the first-order epistemic good targeted by the sceptic are reliable.

In Carter's (2019) view, the virtue perspectivist solution put forward by Sosa can be readily applied to cases involving a confusing demon. To see why, first note that what is in question for Carter is not whether the subject concerned by the Confusion Hypothesis actually grasps H in the way required to understand a given subject matter. What is in question, instead, is how a subject who

grasps H in the required way can secure a more solid epistemic position when facing the possibility of being confused by a demon. As just noted, when it comes to more classical sceptical hypotheses, virtue perspectivists claim that a subject can improve her epistemic position by adopting a second-order perspective on her own epistemic situation which allows her to appreciate the competences whose exercise yielded the first-order epistemic good as being reliable. Now, with respect to the Confusion Hypothesis, Carter's view is that:

What our chemist needs to bolster her understanding of organic chemistry in the face of sceptical challenge (*viz.*, a confusion hypothesis) is not certainty or God, but just *more understanding* directed to her own epistemic position—*viz.*, understanding of the sort that our organic chemist can gain through the deliverances of the very kinds of reliable faculties that we've already stipulated characterise her reliable (along all three dimensions, (i–iii)) p-grasping. This accumulated body of understanding can then furnish our chemist (no less than, by analogy, the ordinary perceiver, or the atheist mathematician) with a reliable kind of broad coherence with reference to which she can then reliably and competently grasp not *only* organic chemistry (as she did before), but now also her own *grasp* of it. (2019: 11)

According to this proposal, a subject who grasps H as a result of the exercise her g-competences can adopt, through the exercise of the very same competences, a second-order perspective allowing her to appreciate her grasp of H as reliable and thereby securing a reflective understanding of H's subject matter. This is because a subject who successfully grasps H along the three dimensions considered by Carter can come to understand her own epistemic position through the exercise of the reliable g-competences that allowed her to successfully grasp H in the first place.

Now, it is worth noting that the virtue perspectivist solution to radical scepticism just sketched here is a controversial one. In particular, philosophers such as Stroud (2004) argue that such a solution involves a circularity which prevents the second-order perspective within which the subject's epistemic position is placed to deliver any assurance against sceptical doubts.⁴ After all, according to the virtue perspectivist, it is by deploying and thereby trusting the very kind of competences that are the target of the radical sceptic that a subject places her own epistemic position within a coherent second-order perspective. My intention, however, is not to examine the supposedly problematic

⁴ See also Reed (2012).

circularity of this kind of solution to radical scepticism.⁵ Instead, I wish to outline that this solution is not fitted to address the doubts raised by obfuscating hypotheses of the sort considered by Carter.

Sosa (2009: 135) characterises reflective knowledge, as opposed to animal knowledge, as a knowledge which requires the knower to have a perspective on his belief from which she can appreciate the *source* of that belief as being reliable. Similarly, the reflective understanding Carter (2019) has in mind can be characterised as requiring that the understander adopt a perspective on the *source* of her grasp of H—the g-competences whose exercise yielded her grasp of H—from which she can appreciate or understand that source as being reliable. Yet, it is doubtful that adopting such a perspective on the source of her grasp of H is sufficient to allow a subject to grasp or understand her own grasp of H as being successful along the three dimensions considered by Carter. This is because appreciating her g-competences as being reliable leaves the question open as to whether a subject's conception of how the elements of H depend on each other results from the exercise of those competences.

Assume that a subject who grasps H along dimensions (i–iii) adopts, through the exercise of her g-competences, a second-order perspective on her own epistemic position that allows her to grasp or understand the reliability of the source of her first-order grasp of H. That is, suppose that she adopts a second-order perspective from which she appreciates the competences that yielded her grasp of H as reliable. Does this suffice to obtain assurance that she is not confused about H and that her grasp of H is successful along dimensions (i–iii)? To obtain such assurance, the subject must have some assurance that the conception she has of the way the elements of H depend on each other results from the exercise of her g-competences. For recall that to be successful along dimensions (i–iii), her grasp of H has to be *competent*. Yet, that a subject grasps or understands the reliability of what happens to be the source of her grasp of H does not entail that she grasps or understands that her grasp of H results from that source.

One might argue that grasping or understanding the reliability of what happens to be the source of a subject's grasp of H involves grasping that her grasp of H results from that source. This is because, for a subject to appreciate the reliability of her g-competences through the adoption of a second-order perspective pertaining to her grasp of H, it is required that the subject appreciate the connection between the conception she formed of the way the elements of H depend on each other and the nature of her g-competences. Such a line

5 For answers to the problem of circularity raised for Virtue Perspectivism, see Sosa (2009: 195–210) and Carter (2020).

of argument however appears to be mistaken. To see this, consider the grasp a subject could gain of the reliability of her competence for logical reasoning. If virtue perspectivists are correct, then such a grasp is attainable. Yet, it is attainable even if, as it turns out, a debasing demon makes it such that all the conclusions believed by the subject fail to be based on the premises she considered in her reasonings. The subject's appreciation of the reliability of her competences for logical reasoning is simply independent from her appreciation or grasp that the conclusions she arrived at are truly resulting from the deployment of those competences. And the same goes for the appreciation a subject can gain of the reliability of her g-competences.

If those considerations are correct, then there are good reasons to suspect that adopting a second-order perspective on the source of her successful grasp of H cannot allow a subject to grasp her grasp of H as being successful along dimensions (i–iii). Even if the subject grasps the reliability of her g-competences and the deployment of those competences happens to be the source of the conception she has of the way the elements of H depend on each other, the hypothesis that her conception results from the deployment of those competences is on a par with the Confusion hypothesis. That is, even if these two conditions are satisfied, the subject has no reason (and therefore no assurance) to think that her conception results from the deployment of the capacities she grasps as being reliable rather than from the intervention of a confusing demon. By taking her conception of the way the elements of H depend on each other to result from the deployment of the g-competences she grasps as being reliable, the subject would merely be assuming the falsity of the Confusion Hypothesis.

Although the type of virtue perspectivist answer put forward by Carter appears unable to account for the way in which a subject can gain assurance that her grasp of H is competent—*i.e.*, successful along dimension (iii)—it might be argued that this answer still has the potential to account for the way in which a subject can gain assurance that her grasp of H is successful along dimensions (i–ii). After all, if the subject comes to grasp the reliability of her g-competences and her grasp of H in fact results from the deployment of those competences, one may think that from the second-order perspective she adopts, the subject can gain assurance that her conception of the way the elements of H depend on each other involves good inputs and tracks the right dependence relations. Yet, note that such assurance is conditional on having assurance that her conception of the way the elements of H depend on each other actually results from the deployment of the competences whose reliability she grasps. For, if there is doubt concerning the fact that a subject's conception of how the elements of H depend on each other results from the

deployment of reliable competences, then there is a doubt concerning the adequacy of that conception. Likewise, if there is doubt concerning the fact that a subject's conception of how the elements of H depend on each other results from the deployment of reliable competences, then there is doubt concerning the fact that the subject arrived at that conception by relying on the right inputs.

Threatening the connection between a subject's conception of how the elements of H depend on each other and the deployment of certain competences thus suffices to cast doubt concerning the fact that the subject's grasp of H is successful along any of the three dimensions considered by Carter. And, as just argued, the virtue perspectivist solution to radical scepticism appears poorly equipped to account for the way in which a subject can gain assurance regarding this connection. More generally, such an answer appears unsatisfying when it comes to obfuscating sceptical hypotheses, as such hypotheses essentially prey on the connection between certain successes and the deployments of competences that may be known or understood as reliable.

4 Forward Looking Perspectivism and the Confusion Hypothesis

The grasp required to understand a given subject matter has a practical dimension and I believe that it is the deployment of the competences a subject possesses in virtue of her grasp of H rather than the ones allowing her to grasp H successfully that should be examined when it comes to the Confusion Hypothesis. As I argued in Section 2, attempting to grasp H involves forming a conception of the way the elements of H depend on each other and, plausibly, having a conception that meets requirements (i–iii) puts a subject in a position to do certain things. As Elgin (2017: 33) puts it, “to grasp a proposition or an account is at least in part know-how to wield it to further one's epistemic ends.”

What kind of competences characterise a subject's successful grasp of H? In Hills' (2016: 663) view, grasping a given body of information amounts to having cognitive control over it. In particular, when a subject successfully grasps H, she is able to provide and follow certain explanations as well as to draw conclusions pertaining to H's subject matter. Likewise, Grimm (2006, 2014) emphasises that when a subject successfully grasps a given body of information, her grasp puts her in a position to answer “what-if-things-were-different?” questions concerning a subject matter. Generally, it is reasonable to think that successfully grasping a body of information H puts a subject in a position to engage in reliable reasoning (explanatory, counterfactual, probabilistic...)

concerning H's subject matter. For instance, a biology student who comes to understand why mammals need oxygen by means of the explanation provided to her by her biology teacher is, by virtue of her successful grasp of the account provided to her, able to engage in various kind of reasoning pertaining to mammals' survival. She can explain why mammals need oxygen as well as answering questions such as "what if oxygen was lacking in the cells of a particular mammal?"

Successfully grasping a body of information H thus endows a subject with certain competences. But how can the deployment of those competences provide a subject with assurance that she is not confused regarding H? Let me offer an answer to this question by considering a type of competences far more practical than the ones just considered.

Presumably, coming to know how to swim can endow one with the competence to swim.⁶ Now, coming to know how to swim requires having a cognitive grip on the way to swim (as opposed to being confused regarding the way to swim) and, as a result, it is possible to conjure a confusing demon to threaten one's claim to have a cognitive grip on the way to swim. For it is always possible that a confusing demon makes it such that one is under the impression of having a cognitive grip on the way to swim while, in fact, one is confused. How can one regain a more solid epistemic position when faced with the possibility of being confused regarding how to swim? In such a case, the answer appears to be the following: by swimming. By successfully swimming, a subject can assess her own grip on the way to swim and, I submit, the same holds for the grasp involved in understanding. Successful performances of the cognitive tasks that characterize one's grasp of H are ways for a subject to assess her own grasp of H and to thereby gain assurance that she is not confused regarding H.

Of course, successes can in principle be misunderstood and, one might argue, this puts some pressure on the claim that they can be adequately conceived of as ways to assess one's cognitive grip on the way to perform a particular task. Consider the following case due to Bengson and Moffett:

Suppose that Irina is seriously mistaken about how to perform a salchow. She believes incorrectly that the way to perform a salchow is to take off from the front outside edge of her skate, jump in the air, spin, and land

6 According to intellectualists about knowledge how such as Stanley and Williamson (2001) and Stanley (2011), coming to know the way to Φ —construed as a piece of propositional knowledge—is necessary for having the competence to Φ . Note, however, that in the present context I am not working under the assumption that such a view is correct. I am only relying on the claim that coming to know the way to Φ in the right circumstances can endow one with the competence to Φ .

on the front inside edge of her skate. (The correct sequence is to take off from the back inside edge and to land on the back outside edge of the opposite foot after one or more rotations in the air.) However, Irina has a severe neurological abnormality that makes her act in ways that differ dramatically from how she actually thinks she is acting. Whenever she actually attempts to do a salchow (in accordance with her misconceptions) this abnormality causes her to reliably perform the correct sequence of moves. So, although she is seriously mistaken about how to perform a salchow, whenever she actually attempts to do a salchow (in accordance with her misconceptions) the abnormality causes Irina to perform the correct sequence of moves, and so she ends up successfully performing a salchow. Despite the fact that what she is doing and what she thinks she is doing come apart, she fails to notice the mismatch. In this case, it is clear that Irina is (reliably) able to do a salchow. However, due to her mistaken belief about how to perform the move, she cannot be said to know how to do a salchow. (2007: 45)

Assuming that this scenario describes a genuine possibility,⁷ it shows that Irina can, due to a severe neurological abnormality, reliably succeed in performing a salchow although she fails to understand what she is succeeding in doing. Yet, how can one's successful performance of a salchow constitute a way to assess one's grip on the way to perform a salchow if it is in principle possible for one to be in Irina's situation? After all, it seems that Irina's successful performance of a salchow is typically not a way for her to assess her own cognitive grip on the way to perform a salchow.

To address the question raised by the situation described by Bengson and Moffett, it is necessary to come back to what distinguishes the rationalist perspectivist answer to radical scepticism from Sosa's Virtue Perspectivism. Recall that according to Descartes, what a subject needs to regain a more solid epistemic position when faced with a radical sceptical possibility is an infallible assessment that the deliverances of some faculties deployed by the subject cannot be mistaken. Now, what cases such as the one put forward by Bengson and Moffett show is that one's successful performance of a salchow cannot constitute an infallible assessment that the faculties one deployed to secure a cognitive grip on the way to perform a salchow cannot be mistaken. However, such a case does not show that one's successful performance of a salchow cannot constitute a reliable way to assess one's grip on the way to perform a salchow. As noted by Carter (2019: 11–12) with respect to the Confusion

⁷ See Gaultier (2017) for a critical discussion.

Hypothesis, the cases that ought to be considered here are cases in which, *ex hypothesis*, the subject is in a position to understand her own success due to her grip on the way to perform a certain task and my claim is that succeeding in performing that task is a reliable way *for that subject* to assess her cognitive grip on the way to perform that task.

The *prima facie* plausible claim that a subject's successful performance of a certain task is a way for her to assess her cognitive grip on the way to perform that task is thus not shown to be false by the type of cases considered by Bengson and Moffett. Although Bengson and Moffett's case describes a genuine possibility, it is reasonable to think that for a subject who has a cognitive grip on the way to perform a given task and who is thereby in a position to understand her success in performing that task, the successful performance of that task is a reliable way to assess her own grip on the way to perform it. This in the sense that her success in performing that task is such that it provides her with assurance that she is not confused regarding the way to perform it. And, as already suggested, the same holds for the grasp involved in understanding due to its practical dimension. Grasping a body of information H along dimensions (i–iii) puts a subject in a position to engage in certain reasonings pertaining to H's subject matter and successfully arriving at certain conclusions concerning that subject matter is a reliable way for a subject who grasps H along dimensions (i–iii) to assess her grasp of H. Arriving at the conclusion that were oxygen lacking in the cells of a particular mammal, that mammal would not be able to survive, is, for instance, a reliable way for a biology student who comes to understand why mammals need oxygen by means of the explanation provided to her to assess her own grasp of that explanation. Arriving at that conclusion does not amount to an infallible assessment that the deliverances of her g-competences cannot be mistaken as the student could be in a situation akin to the one Irina is in. But given the fact that the student grasps the explanation that is provided to her and is thereby in a position to understand her own success in drawing the right conclusion concerning the counterfactual scenario she comes to consider, drawing that conclusion constitutes a reliable way for her to assess her own grasp of the explanation by means of which she understands why mammals need oxygen.

The proposed elucidation of the means by which a subject can regain a more solid epistemic position when faced with the Confusion Hypothesis is importantly different from the one put forward by Carter. In Carter's (2019) view, to gain assurance that one is not confused concerning H, a subject who understands a given subject matter needs to adopt a perspective on the source of her grasp of H from which she can appreciate that source as being reliable. In that, Carter's solution is a backward-looking perspectivism. In contrast,

the proposal just put forward is a forward-looking perspectivism according to which it is through the deployment of the very competences the understander possesses by virtue of her grasp of H that she can come to appreciate her own grasp as being successful along dimensions (i–iii)—*i.e.*, that she can obtain assurance that she is not confused concerning H.

One important virtue of such a forward-looking perspectivism is that it does not fall prey to the type of considerations put forward in the previous section. Recall that the challenge for Carter's preferred solution is to explain how gaining an appreciation that what happens to be the source of one's grasp of H is reliable can allow a subject to appreciate that that which she appreciates as being reliable is in fact the source of her conception of how the elements of H depend on each other. Now, that challenge does not arise for the forward-looking perspectivist solution just put forward. This is because, that solution does not rely on the idea that assurance against the possibility of being confused concerning H requires adopting a perspective on the source of the subject's grasp of H. It is through the deployment of the competences a subject possesses in virtue of her grasp of H that she can come to appreciate her grasp as being successful and, as a result, that appreciation does not depend on any insight into the actual connexion between what happens to be the source of her grasp of H and her conception of the way the elements of H depend on each other. If a subject's attempt to grasp H has to meet requirements (i–iii) in order to be successful, then the successful deployment of the competences a subject possesses in virtue of her grasp of H constitutes, for that subject, a reliable way to assess her own grasp of H along those three dimensions.

One might resist the claim that the proposed elucidation of the means by which a subject can regain a more solid epistemic position when faced with the Confusion Hypothesis is truly a form of perspectivism. For a main tenet of perspectivism is that assurance against radical sceptical hypotheses is gained by adopting a second-order perspective on one's epistemic position, and one's success in performing a certain task can hardly be conceived of as adopting such a perspective. After all, even if arriving at the conclusion that were oxygen lacking in the cells of a particular mammal, that mammal would not be able to survive, constitutes a reliable way for a subject to assess her grasp of a given body of information, arriving at that conclusion does not amount to adopting a perspective on one's epistemic situation. Yet, it should be noted that the competences that are possessed by a subject in virtue of her grasp of H are competences whose deployment allows her to gain an understanding concerning H itself that is reflective on its own right. Indeed, engaging in certain reasonings pertaining to H's subject's matter thanks to one's grasp of H does not merely amount to learning more truths about that subject matter.

It amounts to appreciating the scope, depth and explanatory power of H as a possible account of that subject matter and, as a result, the deployment of the competences a subject possesses in virtue of her grasp of H allows her to gain an understanding of why H should be relied upon as a possible account of H's subject matter. By answering questions such as "what if oxygen was lacking in the cells of a particular mammal?" a student comes to appreciate the relative strengths of that account and thereby to understand why that explanation should be relied upon to account for mammals' need of oxygen. Hence, the successful deployment of the competences a subject possesses in virtue of her grasp of H is tied to a reflective perspective that the subject can adopt on her own understanding and, in particular, on the vehicle of that understanding: the body of information she grasps. By coming to understand why H should be relied upon as an account of H's subject matter, a subject can obtain the assurance that she is not confused concerning H. This is because gaining that further understanding involves the successful deployment of the competences she possesses in virtue of her grasp of H—successful deployment which in turn constitutes a reliable way to assess her own grasp of H.

5 Conclusion

In the present paper, I examined a specific sceptical hypothesis—the Confusion Hypothesis—and the virtue-perspectivist answer offered to the challenge it raises. According to the Confusion Hypothesis, it is always possible for a demon to make it such that a subject is under the impression that her attempt at grasping H in the way required to understand a given subject matter was successful while, in fact, she is merely confused concerning H. When faced with the possibility of being confused by such a demon, Carter (2019) argues that a subject can, thanks to the very competences that allowed her to grasp H in the first place, adopt a perspective on the source of her grasp from which she appreciates that grasp as reliable. However, according to the considerations put forward in the present paper, adopting such a perspective cannot suffice to provide a subject with assurance that she is not confused concerning H. This is because adopting a perspective on what happens to be the source of one's grasp of H leaves the question open as to whether one's conception of how the elements of H depend on each other actually results from the exercise of her reliable competences. In light of this particular problem, I argued that the means by which a subject facing the possibility of being confused by a demon can regain a more solid epistemic position should rather be conceived of relative to the competences the subject has in virtue of her grasp of H. More

precisely, I argued that the successful deployment of the competences a subject possesses in virtue of her grasp of H constitutes a reliable way for that subject to assess her own grasp of H.

The forward-looking perspectivist solution to the Confusion Hypothesis offered in the present paper thus explicates the reflective perspective from which a subject can obtain assurance against the sceptical possibility in terms of successful performances rather than in terms of beliefs formed concerning the source of a given epistemic good. While my main focus has been understanding and the grasp it involves, parallels have been established between the type of challenges discussed here and sceptical challenges targeting different epistemic standings—in particular, know-how. It remains to be seen if the strategy sketched here can be applied more generally.⁸

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