

Luck and the Value of Communication

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Abstract

A familiar question in epistemology concerns what epistemically relevant value is added to true belief by justification or by any further Gettier-proofing conditions. This article demonstrates that there is an isomorphism between knowledge and the state characteristic of the audience's side of a successful Gricean communication event such that similar puzzles arise concerning the value of several conditions on communication. A novel understanding of the value of one of these conditions, audiences' attribution of informative intentions to signalers, is offered. However, it is argued that, although communication does also seem to require the satisfaction of a further anti-luck condition, this condition has no signaling-relevant value. It is concluded therefore that communication is not a uniquely valuable signaling event.

1 Introduction

Sometimes “communication” is taken to refer to events satisfying whatever standard of signaling success present purposes suggest. But much work in analytic philosophy of language implicitly takes the term to denote a *particular* kind of signaling event with a *particular* associated standard of success: broadly, we understand “communication” to mean something like *Gricean* or *ostensive-inferential* communication, which requires, among other things, that audiences recognize some of the speaker’s intentions. Where we understand the term in this way, we may well ask whether successful communication¹ is a uniquely *valuable* kind of signaling success. This paper observes that knowledge and communication are connected to one another in such a way that skepticism about the value of knowledge naturally suggests a kind of skepticism about the value of communication.

Several authors have argued that, despite our entrenched expectations, knowledge is not a uniquely valuable epistemic state (e.g. Kaplan 1985; Kvanvig 2003; Bonjour 2010; Papineau 2019). And just as there are multiple distinct arguments for knowledge’s not being distinctly valuable, there are multiple different plausible pictures of the relationship between communication and knowledge, as I will describe in §3. This paper doesn’t address all possible combinations of knowledge-skeptical arguments with pictures of the communication-knowledge relationship, but selects one such combination to explore.

More specifically, this paper proceeds by exploring the analogy between the state characteristic of the *audience* in a successful communication event, which we’ll call *understanding*², and that characteristic of the knower in a successful knowledge acquisition event. §2 lays

¹While I will speak, at times, of “successful communication” and “successful understanding”, I take this to be strictly speaking redundant, as I treat both “communicate” and “understand” as success terms.

²It bears noting that other claims are made on this term in adjacent literatures (indeed, in parts of the argument of Kvanvig (2003) that I mention only briefly in §6), and I don’t intend to invoke any of those associations here.

out some pre-theoretic reason to think that there is some interesting relationship between understanding and knowledge and §3 presents some possible explanations of the similarities pointed to in §2. All this is ultimately done in order to set up the project of applying Jonathan Kvanvig's (2003) argument about the *value* of knowledge (detailed in §4) in §5's discussion of the *value* of communication. Along the way I give a novel characterization of what makes the intention-recognition component of communication valuable. But the end result is the suggestion that communication is no more valuable qua signaling event than a transaction that satisfies only a subset of its conditions.

2 Evidence for a Knowledge-Understanding Connection

Some basic impetus for thinking that understanding and knowledge are interestingly related in *some* way comes to us from a literature responding to the following case from Brian Loar (1976):

1. Smith and Jones are unaware that the man being interviewed on television is someone they see on the train every morning and about whom, in that latter role, they have just been talking. Smith says 'He is a stockbroker', intending to refer to the man on television; Jones takes Smith to be referring to the man on the train. (p. 357)

Loar and subsequent commentators have the intuition that this case doesn't look like a successful case of communication. Loar brought this datum to bear on the debate between direct reference theorists and Fregeans: that Jones' arriving at the right referent is insufficient for successful communication, Loar argues, shows that some "manner of presentation" of the referent is, even on referential uses, essential to what is being communicated" (Loar 1976, 357).

But some commentators subsequent to Loar have focused on a different feature of the case: that Jones identifies the right referent seemingly by *luck*. Here then is a *prima facie*

point of similarity between knowledge and understanding: both are undermined by luck³. Moreover, providing an analysis of communication that rules out lucky cases appears to be challenging in ways very familiar from the post-Gettier (1963) epistemology literature. The following sub-section contains discussion of these further similarities.

2.1 Further similarities in the anti-luck literatures

Buchanan (2013) charged that Loar’s case is not actually evidence against direct reference views about the semantics of singular terms. Rather, per Buchanan, Smith did want Jones to arrive at the information that an object, *a* (where *a* is the man who happens to be both on television and the train), had the property of being a stockbroker—but he wanted him to do so on the basis of the observation that the salient man in the signaling context was the man on the television. Instead, Jones reached the same proposition on the basis of taking the man on the train to be the salient individual.

Buchanan is developing a point also made in Grice (1969), a general gloss on which is that, on top of the standardly required intention to have the audience arrive at some content (the *informative* intention) and the intention to have the audience see that the speaker has this informative intention (the *communicative* intention), the speaker also intends that they arrive at the content on the basis of some particular feature of the signal. Using a term favored by Schiffer (2017), Buchanan refers to these features as *inference base features*, or *ib-features*⁴.

³Here, as throughout, I use “luck” as a pre-theoretically intuitive description of what is going on here, but with no technical conception of luck or, relatedly “deviance,” in mind. Of course, as discussed in Pritchard (2005), there are certainly kinds of luck that do not undermine communication, just as they do not undermine knowledge. It being a matter of luck that the interlocutors met up when they did does not, for instance, seem to undermine the possibility of communication between them.

⁴Note that Buchanan doesn’t actually claim that the addition of the ib-feature requirement makes for

We should observe that this *ib*-feature requirement (IBFR) is related to the ‘no-false-lemmas’ (NFL) response to the Gettier problem (see e.g. Armstrong 1973; Clark 1963). Both suggest that a satisfactory analysis of their respective target phenomena can be reached by requiring that the *steps of inference* involved in each, not just these inferences’ *outcomes*, satisfy a fit condition: in the case of knowledge that of fitting the world (i.e. truth), and in the case of communication that of fitting the speaker’s intentions. What’s more, the IBFR view is vulnerable to objections closely related to those that plague the NFL condition on knowledge.

Peet (2017) points out that the IBFR, while working nicely to exclude some lucky cases, still admits others, like the following:

2. Smith and Jones are unaware that the man being interviewed on television is someone whom they see on the train every morning. Smith says ‘He is a stockbroker’, intending to refer to the man on television; Jones recognizes that Smith is drawing upon their common knowledge that there is a salient man on the television screen; but, seeing the similarity between the man on the television and the man whom they often see on the train, he thinks that Smith, who he assumes also recognizes the similarity, is talking about the man whom they see on the train. Now, Jones, as it happens, has correctly identified Smith’s referent, since the man on television is the man on the train; but he has failed to understand Smith’s utterance (Peet 2017, 381).

Not only does Jones reach the right proposition here, but his arrival there routes through an acknowledgment of the signal feature Smith had in mind. Still, thinks Peet, something incompatible with communicative success has taken place here. One might think that this doesn’t show us that Buchanan is wrong to posit an *ib*-feature requirement on communication; this case just shows us that speakers’ *ib*-feature intentions are normally more numerous or demanding than those we have associated with this particular case. Perhaps

a jointly sufficient set of conditions.

we just ought to have posited more ib-features in cases like 1 and 2 than we did above. As Peet sees it though, the problem with this line of thought is that “we can always construct a case in which the audience recognizes all of the speaker’s intended ib-features, and follows the intended inferential path as far as it goes, but then deviates wildly in such a way that they could easily have failed to recover the correct referent were it not for some coincidence” (Peet 2017, 381). The audience’s inferential path may display the elements of any posited set of ib-features, but so long as that set specifies *an inferential path that is less than maximally demanding*—that is, so long as it stops short of specifying an exact and exhaustive set of inferential steps that the audience is to pass through—it will not be enough to insulate them against communication-undermining luck. And further, the IBFR can’t specify an exact and exhausting set of inferential steps, it is argued, because speakers don’t typically have such maximally demanding ib-feature intentions ⁵.

In short, the most demanding IBFR consistent with the fact that speakers have less than maximally specific intentions still won’t provide a condition which, together with the standard conditions on successful communication, makes for a jointly sufficient set. Bearing this in mind, consider that the standard objection against the NFL analysis of knowledge is that there are Gettier-style cases that don’t involve the would-be knower’s passing through any false beliefs on their way to their conclusion (Clark 1963; Goldman 1976). The NFL condition puts some constraints on how the would-be knower arrives at their conclusion but, even taken together with a separate justification condition, is not maximally specific about how they reach any given belief, and leaves room for ways of doing so that are incompatible with knowledge. IBFR and NFL flow from the same instinct applied to different target phenomena, and they fail in neatly analogous ways.

Having seen that our analysis of communication can’t be luck-proofed by the addition of an analog to the No False Lemmas Condition, it would be natural to wonder if analogs

⁵Peet (2017) makes this argument with reference to a case from Heck (2014).

to the modal conditions on knowledge historically proffered in the epistemology literature might do any better⁶. Due to space constraints, I will simply note, without demonstrating, that a communicative analog to the SENSITIVITY condition (Nozick 1981)⁷ founders on counterexamples analogous to that familiar from Kripke (2011). And the standard objection to the epistemic SAFETY condition (Sosa 1999), which questions whether there is a non-arbitrary and non-circular way of saying what standard of world proximity is in place, applies directly to a communicative analog⁸

To review, we've seen that communication is vulnerable to being undermined by luck, just as knowledge is. We've also seen some suggestion that attempts to luck-proof the analysis of communication map onto such attempts with respect to knowledge, and that the analogy continues on through the objections to these attempts.

What we've neglected is consideration of one popular response to the foregoing issues in the analysis of knowledge. For the last twenty years, a popular way out of the frustrations of post-Gettier knowledge analysis has been the Knowledge-First approach (Williamson 2000). On this approach, It is a mistake to think that knowledge can be analyzed into more basic conditions, and so a mistake to think that the value of knowledge is derived from the value of such conditions. It will be my position in this paper that there is not a viable "Understanding-First" position to which the foregoing frustrations with the task of luck-proofing the analysis of understanding might drive us. One reason is that I think this strategy is in tension with a commitment to metaphysical intentionalism about meaning

⁶For more extensive discussion of the difficulties faced by potential modal conditions on successful communication, see Peet (2019).

⁷i.e. SENSITIVITY_{com} :if p were not (compatible with) the proposition intended by the speaker, then the audience would not have arrived at p.

⁸e.g. SAFETY_{com} :In all nearby worlds where S arrives at the proposition p, p is not inconsistent with what the speaker intended.

(i.e. the view meaning is grounded by or otherwise metaphysically derived from intentions). What a speaker intends is to bring about a certain kind of response in the audience—the response we’re calling understanding. But if understanding were deemed unanalyzeable, questions might arise as to whether the intentionalist had really reduced meaning to intentions, since these intentions would embed reference to the further unanalyzeable semantic notion, understanding.

In any case, we now proceed with the hope of having drawn sufficient attention to a set of similarities between the analyses of communication and knowledge sufficient to justify an analogical consideration of their values.

3 The Relationship Between Knowledge and Understanding

Why do we see the sort of similarity between knowledge and understanding that the foregoing lays bare? That is, why are both vulnerable to being undermined by luck in the way they apparently are? Why, moreover, does it seem like many of the cases that have shaped the post-Gettier dialectic in epistemology suggest analogous cases with respect to understanding? As follows are some possible relationships between understanding and knowledge that seem to stand a chance at explaining their observed similarities.

3.1 Candidate Knowledge-Understanding Relationships

Peet (2019) suggests a *teleological view* of the connection between the two⁹, on which a central function of communication is to give rise to knowledge. On such a view, the fact

⁹This gloss on Peet (2019) is based on claims like the following: “Linguistic communication allows for the acquisition of testimonial knowledge. This is one of its central functions” (1); “the inconsistency of knowledge-yielding communication with luck should come as no surprise, as knowledge precludes luck” (6).

that communication, like knowledge, is vulnerable to luck is explained by the fact that, without such a condition, communication could not serve this central function.

Potentially consistent with, though distinct from, a teleological view, is a class of views which I'll call *knowledge condition* views. On these views, the audience needs to know something in order to have understood. That knowledge condition views have a chance at explaining knowledge and understanding's shared vulnerability to luck is evident: understanding's vulnerability to luck is straightforwardly inherited from one of its conditions. Views of this class vary concerning *what* the audience has to know. Some possibilities are that the audience know (or audience and speaker commonly know) that the proposition entertained by the audience have the same truth conditions as that intended by the speaker (see e.g. Heck 1995), or that they have identified the same referent for any singular terms (Onofri 2018, 2019).

I won't arbitrate among these views concerning the relationship between knowledge and communication, and nor does the view of their relationship that I proceed with preclude any of these others being true as well. I enumerate these others to make it clear that making different decisions at certain theoretical choice points doesn't immediately undermine the big-picture observation of this paper: that understanding bears a relationship to knowledge such that skepticism about the value of knowledge suggests a skepticism about the value of communication.

However, in what follows I articulate a view distinct from the above. I will try to make visible the ways in which knowledge and understanding are *structurally similar*, and will suppose that their similar vulnerability to luck is a consequence of that structural similarity.

3.2 The Analogy

According to widely endorsed analyses of understanding, the receiver of a signal understands it just in case:

- A. she comes to bear some attitude, α , to a proposition, p ,
- B.
 - i. she bears α to p because she has received the signal,
 - ii. it is manifest to her that the speaker intended the signal to cause her to bear α to p , and
- C. p is (consistent with) the content the speaker intended to get across with the signal.

Condition A describes the audience's coming to bear an attitude toward a proposition. Whereas the formulation familiar from Grice (1957) would have this attitude be one of belief, the literature is well-populated by reasons to resist this— and the questions of precisely which attitude is the right one here will be irrelevant for our purposes. For this reason we abstract away from the matter, leaving α as a stand-in.

Condition C says that communication involves some kind of conformity of the object of the audience's α attitude to what the speaker wanted to express in the first place. Included in C is a parenthetical hedge against the possibility that communication can occur even where there is no one particular proposition that the speaker and audience both have in mind¹⁰; if this causes any consternation, the reader can suppose that the conformity relation between the propositions targeted by speaker and audience is just that of identity.

Condition B rules out cases where a speaker produces a signal intending to cause the audience to arrive at p , only for the audience to fail to notice the signal at all but coincidentally arrive at p just at that moment. It also rules out cases where the signal causes the audience

¹⁰For discussion, see Onofri (2018, 2019); Buchanan (2010); Bezuidenhout (1997).

to arrive at p without also coming to see that this was the speaker's intention¹¹.

The above presentation of these conditions is meant to suggest an analogy between the audience's half of a communicative transaction, and knowledge. After all, knowledge too had (prior to 1963) classically been taken to be correctly analyzed in terms of three jointly-sufficient conditions which bear (more-or-less) neat analogy to those listed above: JUSTIFICATION, BELIEF, and TRUTH. Above, A is analogous to BELIEF, in that it specifies the bearing of some attitude to a content. C is analogous to the truth condition; it specifies a directional fit relation from the audience's entertained content to that intended by the speaker just as the TRUTH condition does between the content of the knower's belief and the way that the world is.

Lastly, B is the analog of JUSTIFICATION. This point is a little more complicated because exactly what JUSTIFICATION comes to is of course a matter of longstanding dispute. But whether specified in an internalist manner or an externalist one, what JUSTIFICATION does is put a constraint on how the belief is reached. Like JUSTIFICATION, B places a constraint on how the content-attitude complex specified in A came about. Note that the claim here is not that satisfying B just *is* justification for some belief like "the speaker means that p ." The claim is instead an analogical one: B is to A as justification is to belief.

A, B, and C are all, we will assume, necessary conditions on successful understanding. But of course, the upshot of §2 was that this analysis fails to give a set of jointly sufficient conditions, and that it's not clear what must be added in order to get to one. It will be important for us to have articulated the standard elements in the analysis of understanding, and to have made visible the structural similarity between understanding and knowledge, when we get to §5, below.

¹¹Note that B doesn't contain what would be needed in order to restrict cases of successful communication to those of successful *speaker meaning*, as articulated in Grice (1957)

4 The Value of Knowledge

In section §5 we will turn finally to the question of understanding's value; the last piece required before this is some exposition of the position that knowledge is not a uniquely valuable epistemic state, from which §5's discussion will take analogical inspiration.

Kvanvig's (2003) argument takes place in the context of the observation that, in order for the claim that knowledge is a uniquely valuable epistemic state to be supportable, we need to see two questions answered: 1) why is knowledge more valuable than true belief? And 2) why is knowledge more valuable than justified true belief?

The first question is familiar going back to at least Plato's *Meno*, in which Socrates and his interlocutor discuss why one would should prefer a guide who *knows* their way to Larissa over one who merely has true beliefs about how to get there. Where knowledge is understood to be justified true belief, this amounts to asking what value is added to a true belief by justification.

Any answer must navigate an apparent dilemma¹². On the one hand, where the value of a belief's justification is derived from its being instrumental in reaching truth, a belief that is already true would seem to have nothing left to gain from justification; this is the *swamping problem*. But, on the other hand, if the value of justification is not somehow derived from that of arriving at the truth, it's hard to say why the value in question is epistemic in nature— call this the *domain irrelevance problem*.

Kvanvig, thinks that this puzzle can be solved, though his way of doing so puts some uncomfortable pressure on the analysis of justification. The required analysis will posit a variety of justification which derives its value from a non-instrumental relation to true belief. The view of justification that Kvanvig thinks does this is subjective internalism, on which a belief is justified just in case it was formed according the agent's own standards

¹²For discussion of the original anti-reliabilist version of the dilemma, see Zagzebski (2004).

for truth-conducive inferential patterns.

How does subjective internalism escape the first horn of the above dilemma? Bear in mind that a belief's being subjectively justified doesn't necessarily make it more likely to be true; the agent might have some wild personal standards for how to form true beliefs (consider an agent who holds that birds' flight patterns, or the position of tea leaves in a cup, convey information about, say, future geopolitical events). Even for such an agent though, the epistemic value of their justification is secured because of its bearing a relationship to truth; justification still reflects the agent's "adopting intentional means to the goal of truth." Thus: "[this kind of] justification is extrinsically valuable in virtue of its relationship to the truth, though it is not instrumentally valuable on the basis of its relationship to truth" (Kvanvig 2003, 200). In summary, then, Kvanvig avoids both the swamping problem and domain irrelevance problem horns of the dilemma by positing that justification derives its value from a non-instrumental relation to true belief¹³.

Setting aside the first problem now, the trickier problem asks why knowledge is more valuable than justified true belief—this is the problem Kvanvig will say has no solution. Start by assuming that the only difference between knowledge and true belief is that knowledge involves the satisfaction of some fourth condition to rule out Gettier cases. The

¹³This strategy implicitly raises and answers a fundamental question for a theory of value: where s_1 is among the states countenanced by a theory's axiology as valuable in itself, what relation to s_1 is sufficient to render some further state, s_2 , also valuable? As Berker (2013) noted, epistemological theories have almost always implicitly given a consequentialist answer to this question—i.e. have said that the right relation is the *conducting* relation. But as Berker notes (2013, 281), Kvanvig's strategy here seems to suppose a non-consequentialist position. Discussion of epistemic consequentialism and its alternatives has abounded in the last few years (see e.g. essays in Grajner and Schmechtig 2016; Ahlstrom-Vij and Dunn 2018). While a rejection of epistemic consequentialism isn't uncontroversial, nor is it without recent support (e.g. Berker 2013, 2015; Andow 2017; Littlejohn 2018; Snow 2018; Roberts et al. 2018; Sylvan 2020).

exact nature of this fourth condition is, as discussed in a previous section, extremely elusive. And of the many candidate fourth conditions put forward, Kvanvig makes the following observation:

In each case, such approaches offer something of value that might be used to explain the value of knowledge, but each such approach faces immediate difficulty concerning the nature of knowledge. Counterexamples to the initial formulation of the approach force alterations in the approach, and the alterations are guided exclusively by concern over the nature of knowledge, resulting in emendations of the original suggestion that *appear entirely ad hoc from the point of view focusing on the question of the value of knowledge...* When we look carefully at the variety of failed attempts to satisfy the twin desiderata concerning the nature and value of knowledge, we do not find signs of progress. We find, instead, a repeated pattern in which progress with respect to one desideratum is balanced by greater weakness with respect to the other (Kvanvig 2003, 138-139, italics mine).

Kvanvig isn't pessimistic about the possibility of eventually finding a fourth condition which, together with the three classical ones, generates all and only the right predictions about which cases count as knowledge. He just thinks that the evidence thus far suggests that this condition, whatever it is, will describe the presence of some feature that would contribute no additional epistemic value where true justified belief was already in place.

So whereas he thinks that the first of the problems concerning the value of knowledge is answerable by some accounts of justification, Kvanvig argues this second problem is unsolvable: knowledge really has no epistemic value over that of a proper subset of its components.

5 The Value of Communication

As with knowledge, we can distinguish two different value problems for communication. A few comments are necessary in light of the fact that our framing has had to do with the *audience-side* event, understanding, rather than with communication per se. In keeping with our treatment so far, we will strictly speaking be asking about the relative value of understanding. But my assumption is that, holding fixed the speaker-side of the transaction, the event-type with a more valuable audience-side component is the more valuable. Thus, the discussion here will entail conclusions about the value of communication, not just of understanding.

While the second value question, in which we will ultimately be interested, asks what the value of understanding is over the value of ABC, the first value problem asks what the value of ABC is over the value of AC; that is, what is the added value of an audience's arriving at the speaker's intended content, p , on the basis of the signal and with its being manifest to her that the speaker intended the signal to cause her to entertain that p ?

It is often claimed that intention recognition is what enables the complexity and efficiency of human signaling acts. But immediately apparent is that, while an audience's recognizing the speaker's intentions (Bii), say, might be *conducive* to their entertaining the content the speaker had in mind (AC), this instrumental value will not be able to vindicate either B condition. If the audience already satisfies AC, then there's no need to stack further conditions on top that will probabilify the satisfaction of AC—they're already satisfied! This is the swamping problem, re-emerging with respect to communication.

So at least one horn of the dilemma asserts itself with respect to communication just as it did for knowledge. But one might think that the domain-irrelevance horn of the dilemma doesn't have an analog here; whereas we were concerned that some attributions of value to justification wouldn't cast it as valuable in a way distinctive of the *epistemic* domain, what is the proprietary domain of value for understanding, communication and related

events?

We may say that this is the *signaling domain*—though we shouldn't mistake this label for a full answer to the question. Whereas in the epistemic domain the fundamental goal is truth, what is the fundamental goal of signaling? It won't do to characterize this goal in a way that is narrowly appropriate only to the sort of ostensive-inferential communication distinctive of humans, since such communication is meant to be only one event-type within this domain. And if one takes a naturalistic view of signaling, then the goal of signaling can't be specified in a way that excludes consideration of the way that non-human animals, or even non-sentient beings like plants, can fill either sender or receiver nodes of a signaling transaction. The goal of signaling, per se, can not be to induce a mental state, such as an attitude toward some content.

Familiar from the literature advancing naturalistic perspectives in epistemology, is a way of talking about signals as instigating the “flow,” “spread,” or “transmission” of information between systems whose states bear some (often asymmetric) dependence relation to one another (e.g. Lewis 1969; Dretske 1981; Millikan 1984; Skyrms 2010). Regarding the familiar questions that this characterization raises—what exactly is information? What is it for a system to bear some information? How are systems to be individuated? And is the dependence we're talking about here causal, or else a matter of metaphysical or logical necessitation, or something else?—answers have of course varied. But the discrepancies between particular naturalistic accounts will be unimportant for our purposes: I think we can say something helpful, even while leaving terms like *system*, *information*, and *dependence* less than fully interpreted. We will proceed with the bare idea that the characteristic goal of states or events in the domain of signaling is the spread of information, where this minimally involves information present in System 1 coming to be present in System 2 as a consequence of some specific relation of dependence between the two.

So if, in response to the first horn, we drop the idea that Bi or Bii is valuable because of an

instrumental relation either bears to AC, we may indeed run into a problem that constitutes a second “domain irrelevance” horn of the dilemma: if the value of either B condition isn’t related to the spread of information, it’s not clear how its value is distinctively signaling-relevant.

Finding our way out of this dilemma will require dealing separately with Bi and Bii. Recall that Bi requires that the receiver bear α to p *because* of the signal. Bi thus looks like one way of satisfying the requirement that, in order for something to count as a signal, there has to be a sort of dependence between the sending and receiving systems; here that relationship is specified as a mediated causal one (i.e. the speaker causes the signal to occur and the signal causes the audience to arrive at the requisite content). In short, the addition of Bi to AC is what is required in order to give us an event in the domain of signaling at all, and so the value of Bi vis-à-vis that domain is not hard to explain.

Slightly harder to account for will be the value of Bii. Luckily, just as the analogy between communication and knowledge suggested the dilemma, it may also suggest a way out. We just have to construct a response to this apparent dilemma that mirrors Kvanvig’s. Along these lines, I will argue that Bii has its value because it bears a relation to information transfer, but not an instrumental relation. Rather, it represents an *intentional commitment to information transfer on the audience’s part*.

We saw that, at first glance, it might look like Bii is a substantive suggestion about how to go about meeting AC, and moreover a substantive suggestion aimed at making AC objectively more probable. Were this true, Bii would bear an instrumental relation to AC and its value would be swamped. But I don’t think this is how Bii is best understood. For one thing, Bii doesn’t specify that the audience proceeded in a rational or otherwise prescribed way from the signal to the content she arrives at on its basis—so the satisfaction of Bii actually *doesn’t* seem to make it more likely that the audience satisfies AC.

I think that we should instead see Bii as requiring that *the audience grasps the consti-*

tutive norms of a signaling act and has committed to them. The satisfaction of Bii may be seen this way because the speaker's informative intentions are determinative of what the signal's meaning is¹⁴. Recall that the key feature of subjective internalist justification that allowed it do the work that it does in Kvanvig's argument is that it requires that the agent intentionally orient themselves toward the truth, intentionally adopting, and so at least implicitly acknowledging, truth as the goal of the action in which they're taking part. In the communicative case, the audience's allowing what proposition they arrive at to be dependent on the speaker's intentions is like a would-be knower's acknowledging that having true beliefs is a matter of their mental state's fitting the world; it is just part of understanding the nature of the activity. The signal and the speaker's state (which, in the case of paradigmatic human signaling is at least partially constituted by their informative intentions) are the first half of a signaling transaction, without which the notion of information transfer is incoherent.

The foregoing is consistent with the paradigm we committed to above, on which signaling acts per se don't require intentions. It's true that merely understanding the nature of information transfer doesn't require the acknowledgement of intentions, because information transfer can take place with a system incapable of intentional states at the signaler node. But this is correct in the same way it is correct that taking belief to be a project in which one fits one's mental state to the world does not require the acknowledgement of mountains; it is correct in general but neglects the fact that understanding the existence of such a direction-of-fit norm for beliefs *about the height of the world's tallest mountain* does require such an acknowledgment. Signaling event-types that are intentionally initiated by

¹⁴I assume here that the meaning of the signal is to be equated with utterance meaning, and not sentence meaning, which the speaker may not have any privileged access to. And for our purposes here we can even concede that utterance meaning may have some determinants beyond speaker intention; so long as intentions remain among the determinants, this point stands.

minded individuals are such that the audience's taking the speaker to have intentions, and treating them as decisive of her success, is just an element of committing herself to the goals of the activity—the activity of engaging in that signaling-event type.

If the foregoing is correct, then Bi and ii derive their value from the value of achieving information transfer (dodging horn 2) without their being merely instrumental in it (dodging horn 1). So ABC is more valuable than AC.

A last thing it bears noting before proceeding to the second value problem for communication is that my way of evading the first value problem is less expensive than Kvanvig's, although taken directly from his playbook. Many will regard the subjective internalist conception of justification as an implausible claim about the analysis of knowledge, however helpful it might be for answering the value problem. Whereas Kvanvig allowed the necessity of an answer to the value problem to drive his analysis of knowledge, I have not done this with respect to communication. I think that my conception of the value of B helps makes sense of the value of the components of communication, *as traditionally analysed*, rather than motivating some new analysis. My claims about the relative value of communication are constructed as analogs of Kvanvig's, but are not straightforwardly undermined by the rejection of his positions concerning the value of knowledge—my position does not require, for instance, that one accept a subjective internalist conception of justification.

Finally, on to the second problem of value for communication: understanding appears to require the satisfaction of ABC *plus* some further luck-proofing condition. And as we saw earlier, attempts at articulating precisely what this anti-luck condition is have not yielded an obviously successful candidate.

What we should now consider, for any proffered anti-luck condition on understanding, is not whether it makes for a complete *analysis* of understanding (as we've seen, none do), but rather whether a state that satisfies it *in addition to satisfying ABC* is any more valuable than one only satisfying ABC. Consider modal conditions like SENSITIVITY_{com}

and SAFETY_{com}. If what we care about is the *actual* spread of information, why should we care about whether this spread also takes place in the next world over? Certainly, neither represents any further individual orientation toward the project of signaling success, so they can't be vindicated in the way the B condition was. One thought might be that that a certain modal robustness of the correlation between what the signaler intended and what the audience arrived at could just be constitutive of information transfer or genuine "reception" of a signal. It's not unheard of to build a modally robust correlation between sign and signified into what it means to *be* a signal (as in e.g. Dretske 1981), though that is different from building modal demands into what it is to have *received* (information via) a signal. But in any case, this suggestion amounts just to saying that there is some modal condition already implicit in condition Bi (i.e. the audience bears α to p because she has *received the signal*), and does not vindicate the signaling-relevant value of a further condition beyond A-C.

Consider also IBFR; why would arriving at the intended content on the basis of the intended features matter from the point of view of value? As before, it won't do to appeal to the satisfaction of this condition making the satisfaction of the others more probable, as this runs straight into the swamping problem; and it won't do to allow it to have a value that isn't somehow related to the one distinctive of the signaling domain, which is to spread information. Now at first glance it may seem like there is an escape hatch here similar to the one we just used to vindicate the B condition; allowing one's response, as an audience, to depend on speaker intentions is after all something we regarded as valuable in a way that dodged both horns of the dilemma. But the intentions invoked in IBFR aren't the right kind. The reason that acknowledging the speaker's intention that the audience arrive at the proposition p counted as intentionally orienting oneself to the goals of the signaling activity was that this intention—the informative intention—was what was determinative of the meaning of the signal. But the speaker's other intentions concerning *the way* the receiver is to arrive at p are not determinative of the content of the signal; so a condition

like IBFR can't be vindicated this way¹⁵.

The argument here, like Kvanvig's, doesn't pretend to be deductive: that there are other ways in which extant or future anti-luck conditions on understanding might navigate the dilemma is not impossible, for all that's been said here. But lacking such a candidate, or a demonstration that the mentioned candidates contribute more to the value of the event than has occurred to us here, the remaining conclusion deserves consideration: that whatever the further condition(s) on understanding are, they add no value signaling-relevant beyond the value already present in ABC. Understanding then, and communication by extension, is no more valuable than the state satisfying only a proper subset of its conditions. Communication is just not a uniquely valuable signaling achievement.

5.1 Some Objections and Replies

5.1.1 Why not center on the speaker?

In the search for a unique value possessed by communication, we might be tempted to turn to the idea that understanding uniquely satisfies the speaker's intentions. Whereas when we attempt to reach true beliefs about the world, our doing so is not prefigured by any intention by the world to be known, what the audience side of a successful communicative transaction achieves is that which was intended by the speaker. And so an alternative response to the value question for communication emerges where an analogous response wouldn't have been possible in the case of knowledge: perhaps the unique value of understanding lies in the fact that it uniquely satisfies speaker intentions. I don't embrace this possibility.

The first thing to note is that, just as no fully successful audience-side anti-luck criterion has

¹⁵This conclusion might be troubling for someone who thinks that IBFR is a plausible condition on communication, even if one doesn't think that its addition makes for a jointly sufficient set of conditions. Note that I am offering no argument against IBFR's being part of the analysis of understanding—I remain agnostic on this issue. I'm only alleging that it contributes no further *signaling-relevant value*.

been articulated by the literature, nor is there a promising speaker-side anti-luck condition (i.e. one articulating a speaker's intention that the signal be transmitted non-luckily) on offer. But even supposing that such a speaker-side condition were articulated, and supposing that it was satisfactory to allow the audience-side event to inherit its value from the value of speaker intentions¹⁶, we would only have referred the second value problem over to the speaker's side— it would still remain to be explained why it was valuable that the speaker had this anti-luck intention; and if the intention's value couldn't navigate our now-familiar dilemma, nor could the value of the audience's satisfying it.

5.1.2 Why do we aim for communication?

It's natural to ask why, if understanding, and so communication, is not a uniquely valuable kind of signaling event, it is the one we aim for—or at least take ourselves to be aiming for—and the standard we hold others to. Roughly I think: a) it's not totally clear that we really do aim for, or hold others to the standard of, understanding rather than ABC and b) even if we do, there are explanations of this fact available that don't rely on communication being uniquely valuable qua signaling event.

Part a) of my response takes some further inspiration from epistemology, specifically Kaplan (1985) where he notes that “given our conception of knowledge, all we can do by way of seeking knowledge is seek justified belief and hope that this justified belief will satisfy whatever other conditions a justified belief must satisfy in order to qualify as knowledge” (361). That is, particularly if the successful fourth condition on knowledge turns out to be a more sophisticated cousin of the modal conditions we've seen offered before, it's really not clear what a person could *do* to aim at knowledge beyond aiming for justified belief.

Imagine now a person who, aiming to be a good understander, is attentive to the intentions

¹⁶One might have further doubts on the grounds that it is a very odd story on which value flows from intentions to their satisfactions, rather than vice versa.

of agents in her environment, which involves always trying to be diligently alert to the presence of signals and to the informative intentions that accompany them. We of course might say more about what this diligent alertness will require, and no doubt a lot of it will have to do with being a good epistemic agent (e.g. making good inferences about signaler intentions on the basis of evidence). But all that would be by way of unpacking the actions already listed, rather than enumerating more. And I take it that's because there aren't really more to be listed—there's nothing more we could ask an agent to do, by way of being a good signal audience, beyond trying to infer the signaler's signaling-relevant attitudes and their contents. This seems to indicate that all that's encompassed by the standard of understanding to which we hold ourselves and others, is that we do our darndest to satisfy A, B, and C. Communication per se may require more than this, but that simply suggests that aren't really *aiming* at communication, even if we *hope* for it—the gap between non-understanding satisfaction of ABC and understanding itself is not one that can be closed by anything under the audience's agential control.

Part b) of my response starts by noting that nothing I have argued for has strictly ruled out the possibility that communication's anti-luck criterion might have extrinsic value in relation to purposes beyond the goals of the signaling domain. For instance, one might revert to the position discussed in §3, that communication's incompatibility with luck is useful because it allows communication to give rise to a further luck-incompatible state like knowledge¹⁷.

Of course, if one accepts the value-skeptical argument not only about communication, but about knowledge too, then this move will raise the related question of why knowledge, if not uniquely epistemically valuable, is what we aim for. Very generally: why would we

¹⁷What *is* incompatible with my view is the idea that knowledge production is the characteristic goal of signaling event-types as such—but this doesn't mean there aren't signaling event-types that are knowledge-conducive.

prefer unlucky states, even when the luck makes no difference concerning any positively articulable value?

Papineau (2019, 2) has suggested that because “the concept of knowledge is both phylogenetically and ontogenetically primitive”, our retaining a practice of privileging this anti-luck concept will be explainable by a story about our cognitive evolution, without being *justifiable* in terms of any positively articulable value we now have. ?, 194 and others connect luck aversion to our attachment to the idea of epistemic achievement by the agent, whereas “luck undermines genuine achievement”— even while arguing that a certain kind of luck is inescapable, and so a certain aspiration for agential achievement futile (see also Pritchard 2003, 2005). I take no position on which of these is the correct explanation, but I do think it is interesting to consider the extent to which these explanations of luck aversion might apply to communication as well— if so, they provide a direct explanation of why we might retain the concept of communication that needn’t even route through the premise that the phenomenon has value vis-à-vis the epistemic domain.

6 Conclusion

If we have offered reason to think that communication has no distinctive value qua signaling transaction, there remains the prospect, which I have not argued against, that it is unique among signaling phenomena in the value that it has vis-à-vis *other* domains of value. For instance, satisfaction of the Bii condition on communication (as well as the IBFR) is clearly valuable for the purpose of mind-reading and all the social facility it enables. And further anti-luck conditions, as we have said, may be what allows communication to give rise to the further luck-proof state, knowledge, which may or may not be uniquely epistemically valuable itself.

While not then clearly motivating an abandonment of communication as a target phenomenon of lay significance and theoretical interest, our conclusion remains significant.

This is because, upon drawing conclusions about the relative value of communication, we're positioned to appraise the value of other signaling events.

An element of Kvanvig's argument left untouched by the foregoing discussions says that there is an under-appreciated epistemic state that is more valuable than either JTB or knowledge—confusingly for our purposes, this is the state that he calls understanding, and which we might disambiguate by calling understanding_K . understanding_K involves justified true beliefs (which needn't constitute knowledge) about a range of suitably related pieces of information, plus the agent's grasping the “explanatory connections” or “coherence relations” between these pieces of information (Kvanvig 2003, 185–203). That understanding_K is more valuable than knowledge follows, Kvanvig has argued, from some of the same considerations that gave rise to his appraisals of justification and knowledge. The communicative analog of understanding_K is the event of an audience's satisfying ABC with respect to each in a series of signals and moreover grasping the coherence relations between the individual signals—that is, what we normally think of as the audience's tracking discourse-level information structure. Now, the value of tracking this structure is most intuitively cashed out in instrumental terms, since determinations of information-structural relations appear to guide the interpretation of a huge number of linguistic phenomena, from quantifier domain restriction to syntactic disambiguation to implicature derivation and a lot more, and so to enable the audience to correctly interpret the signal. But perhaps conclusions analogous to Kvanvig's concerning understanding_K motivate a reconsideration of whether signaling achievements related to information structure tracking have also a non-instrumental connection to signaling-relevant value. In any case, the foregoing inquiry is designed to make such possibilities more susceptible to investigation.

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