

LSE-Groningen

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Understanding ‘understanding’
Comments on Franz Dietrich and Christian List

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Overview

- ➊ Recounting the result
- ➋ Understanding vs information
- ➌ Epistemology or decision theory?

① Recounting the result

D&L distinguish between information states, and states of understanding.

- Some things we know but do not fully understand: known properties outside the set of understood ones.
- Only the understood properties of possibilities are factored in when determining the utility of the possibilities.

① Recounting the result

D&L derive a theorem stating that two rather natural postulates,

- only the understood matters to utility, and
- properties not applying to a possibility do not matter to its utility,

together with richness are formally equivalent to:

- relative to each set of understood properties there is a unique utility ordering of possibilities.

① Recounting the result

Some thoughts about this framework and the rather nice result:

- the possibility of a change in understanding without a change in information, as with love and happiness;
- seemingly irrelevant alternatives becoming relevant, as with choosing your dessert.

② Understanding vs information

Can we not view this business with understanding as just another change in information? Or perhaps understanding is 'working out the consequences'.

- We are not logically omniscient, so finding out what our knowledge is or amounts to takes time.
- Recall the dirty faced ladies: this 'working out the consequences' may be viewed as gaining particular information as well.

② Understanding vs information

In the model of D&L, we might miss out on how these types of information interact.

- The idea that the key to understanding is 'experience' may obscure this interaction.
- If you allow a rich enough language, some reformulation of understanding in terms of propositional information always seems possible.

Then again, should we strive for that?

② Understanding vs information

D&L give a number of reasons for not telling an information-based story. But...

- lack of understanding can be modelled by a partition of things that a proposition might mean;
- we may have to rethink how to represent understanding as a proposition;
- loss of information is a problem for everyone.

③ Epistemology or decision theory

A final worry about what discipline we are in.

- There is something peculiar about modelling a typically epistemic issue, namely understanding, by the tools provided in decision theory, namely the definition of a utility function.
- Perhaps there is no clear distinction between beliefs and decisions?

③ Epistemology or decision theory

It may be too much to ask for an integral treatment of all the different preference changes relating to understanding:

- some are associated with information gain,
- some are related to a change in utility,
- some have to do with taking mind-altering drugs, and so on.

It is only fair that the some of these problems are solved on the side of belief representation.