

## “Understanding Knowing How”

Prepared for  
The OPA Annual Meeting, 2016

### 1 The View

Jason Stanley thinks that we should be intellectualists about knowing how. I argue here against his case for this view, focusing on his recent energetic defense of it in the 2011 monograph *Know How*.<sup>1</sup> Therein Stanley appeals to the validity of a general schema, viz. that “[f]or every S and F, S knows how to F iff, for some way w of F-ing, s knows that w is a way to F.”<sup>2</sup> Against this, I appeal to a counterexample. I further submit that the Stanley-style intellectualist must either accept the counterexample, or appeal to a distinction that it is the very point of intellectualism to resist. I close by reflecting on two ways that knowing how appears to be an epistemic capacity even if we reject intellectualism.

To get the relevant kind of knowledge in view, recall what it is to do something intentionally such as raising one’s hand on purpose. It is a kind of practical knowledge one

---

<sup>1</sup> Stanley (2011 A).

<sup>2</sup> Stanley (2011 A, p. 71). In the monograph, the language of the schema is quoted from Parvese and Stanley (2010).

exhibits in such cases, though not a very complex kind. What makes some held knowledge count as practical (I suppose) is its being directed at an intelligible kind of action, which this knowledge can be the source of achieving an instance of. In other words, a state of practical knowledge has a particular kind of in-built potential, realized, when it is realized, in an intentional or willful doing of a relevant action by the person whose knowledge it is. In order to track the phenomenon of knowing how correctly we need to acknowledge this, or so I think.

Here we can contrast a state of personally held theoretical or factual knowledge, for this kind appears to have, in itself, no such practical latency. A case or state of personally held theoretical or factual knowledge does not, it seems, aim at anything further beyond itself, which it is knowledge for or towards doing. I accept that a person's state of theoretical or factual *belief* that *p*, when held for good reasons, does aim at some further conditions beyond itself including, I suppose, truth. Let us suppose though that those further conditions come to be met. If so then the state of belief is thereby completed and thus plausibly counts as theoretical knowledge. By contrast with the above practical case we do not need to acknowledge practical latency, making reference to an action type, in order to properly characterize this kind of knowing. Let this suffice for now.

Stanley thinks there is no basic difference of kind here. On his view, both should be understood as consisting in someone's standing as a knower in relation to a proposition, where a proposition is a (possible) claim about how things are. Thus is he an intellectualist concerning knowing how.

## 2 Ryle's Regress

One argument against intellectualism is owed to Gilbert Ryle who lays it out in chapter one of *The Concept of Mind*.<sup>3</sup> Stanley begins his book by arguing forcefully against this Rylean line of thought, reconstructing it roughly as follows.

1. Intellectualism holds that all knowledge and so all *knowledge how* is propositional. (P)
2. If that were true,<sup>4</sup> then any acting out of one's knowledge how would require a prior competent act of calling to mind and considering the relevant proposition. (P)
3. If that were true,<sup>5</sup> it would be impossible to act out of one's knowledge how. (P)
4. But this is possible. (P)
5. SO: Intellectualism is not true.

Why does Ryle accept two? Presumably, he thinks there is simply no alternative for the intellectualist. Perhaps he thinks that if practical knowledge is propositional, and if one's understanding of that very proposition is then to be what explains what one subsequently does by being revealed as the source of what one does, the proposition must have been first explicitly considered by the agent just prior to the doing.

Why does Ryle accept three? Ryle seemingly thinks that an act of considering a proposition is clearly the sort of action one can do competently (or not) as much as any other sort. Considering a proposition is thus assimilated to other forms of action. And this seems correct. But if we also accept two, then any and every consideration of some proposition would require a prior act of consideration, which would require another, and so

---

<sup>3</sup> Ryle (2009, [1949]).

<sup>4</sup> That is, if it were true that all knowledge *was* characteristically propositional.

<sup>5</sup> That is, if it were true that any acting out of one's knowledge how indeed required a prior competent act of calling to mind and considering the relevant proposition.

on. And in that case competent action from grasp of a proposition could never get going—it would be impossible.

If this argument goes through intellectualism does not get off the ground, and Stanley knows this and rejects the argument. In particular Stanley rejects premise two, and I think he is correct to do so. It does not seem true that the intellectualist is forced to construe intentional action out of, or from, the knowledge of a proposition in that way. Putting some practical knowledge into effect, even for the intellectualist, is not (and does not require) explicit prior cognizing of it. The act of attending to what one knows, including what one knows practically, is not the same as knowing it, or acting from knowledge of it, and the former does not seem even to be required for the latter to obtain.

So far then, only a little progress has been made. Ryle's argument notwithstanding, we do not have a good reason to reject the intellectualist thesis. Neither though have we gotten any positive reason favoring it. The default view is still wherever it is originally.

### **3 Stanley's Considerations Favoring Intellectualism**

What then are Stanley's considerations favoring intellectualism? The central ones are as follows. First, Stanley emphasizes that there are number of related locutions, which are often used in interrogatives, and are worth paying attention to in this regard. (I illustrate with the case of knowledge of bowling. My presentation otherwise very closely follows Stanley's own in *Know How*, chapter two.)<sup>6</sup>

In ascribing states of knowledge, we will often find ourselves saying things like:

A) S knows how to bowl (really well).

And we will also say:

---

<sup>6</sup> Stanley (2011 A, p. 36-69).

- B) S knows what bowling is.
- C) S knows who bowled a strike.
- D) S knows why people bowl alone.
- E) S knows where the bowling alley is.
- F) S knows when the bowling alley opens.
- G) S knows whether the bowling alley is now open or not.

Stanley insists that there is an important cross-language commonality to notice here.

Typically it is a single verb in languages other than English ('wissen' in German, 'savoir' in French, and so on) which is used both to translate A-G, and which is also used to translate sentences of the form 'S knows that *p*.' Interestingly, according to Stanley, in cases of what we think of as knowledge by acquaintance (by contrast) a distinct verb is often used ('kennen' in German, 'connaître' in French, and so on). Call this consideration one.

A aside, there is clearly a way to model the B-G ascriptions by using a form of the 'that' locution:

- TB) S knows, of some game *g*, that *g* is bowling.
- TC) S knows, of some person *A*, that *A* bowled a strike.
- TD) S knows, of some reason *r*, that *r* is the reason people bowl alone.
- TE) S knows, of some location *l*, that *l* is the place the bowling alley is found.
- TF) S knows, of some time *t*, that *t* is the time the bowling alley opens.
- TG) S knows, of some bowling alley *b*, that *b* is now open or not.

I take it we should accept these as sensible if highly labored translations of what we began with. Suppose that we also accept that there is an imperfect consensus among linguists that we here have primitively but revealingly begun to model the semantics of what Stanley calls the *knowledge-wh locutions* for the original B-G.

Then, we might take it that there is an underlying unity to one kind of knowledge, which is here revealed by the ease with which we assimilate these distinct expressions to a singular syntactic shape. I would not deny this for the cases of B-G as I am happy to admit

that these are all cases of knowing that. But, strictly speaking, what follows as to the precise dispute we are interested in? So far as I can see, nothing.

Of course, if I *am already inclined towards intellectualism* I will be inclined to translate A like this:

TA: S knows, of some way *w*, that *w* is a way to bowl.

This is what Stanley prefers. Notice that if this is correct, we can peel off what follows the ‘that’ and be left with the makings of a propositional function ‘*w* is a way to bowl’ and this would match the other cases. But why think this is not just a feature of our adopting this particular formalism and one that hides as much as it reveals? After all, in colloquial speech, we would not be tempted to paraphrase ‘S knows how to  $\phi$ ’, for most action types, by saying that ‘S knows of some way *w*, that it is a way of  $\phi$ -ing’.

The linguistic evidence appears to be generally inconclusive. We can use different verbs to track the very same kind of state and we can presumably use the very same verb to track different kinds of states. Suppose we take it that there is basic difference in kind between the sort of knowledge state expressed in acquaintance cases and those in acknowledged *knowledge that* case, as Stanley does. That we use ‘knows’ in both cases provides no reason to undermine that plausible thought.

For Stanley’s part, he treats it as a default assumption that all those ascriptions, including A, are part of a common class and so are to be treated the same way. I quote: “The default assumption is that [all] the ascriptions... are ascriptions of the same kind as ascriptions of the form [X knows that *p*]... This contrasts with ... [both] a. John knows Bill. [and] b. John knows the mayor of Boston.”<sup>7</sup> Presumably, Stanley take himself to be justified in claiming this as the default since he has spent the previous chapter undermining Ryle’s

---

<sup>7</sup> Stanley (2011 A, p. 36).

arguments against intellectualism. But that will not do, since the purported failure of Ryle's argument against intellectualism does not make the case for embracing intellectualism as the default view. If we begin either on the fence or with the opposite default assumption, when it comes to *knowing how*, nothing considered to this point should move us. What might Stanley say to shift the default in his direction?

He does emphasize that in all the A-G cases there are embedded questions, whereas in the last two cases (Bill, and the mayor) there are no such embedded questions. Call this consideration two. In each case of (A-G), there is indeed a clause that has nearly all the words one would need to use to ask the question mirroring what is being said to be known in the original ascription. Thus we might think that the ghostly presence of the interrogative gives us a reason to accept the thoroughgoing unity of A through G, and a clear contrast from the presumptive other sort of knowledge tracked by sentences like "John knows Bill". But this is not compelling either. That the sentence A has *something* in common with the rest of the sentences B through G (namely the ghost of an interrogative) simply does not indicate that there is some deeper commonality, namely that the relevant states of knowledge are all propositional in essence. Until we accept his default there seems to be no reason to regard this formalism as revealing what is really going on in cases of knowing how. One might naturally then conclude that whether we should accept Stanley's intellectualism depends on whether we share his precise theoretical commitments on the semantics of interrogatives.

Yet that is not the case according to Stanley himself. At the outset of his chapter three, Stanley strongly emphasizes that taking on the details of his particular theoretical commitments in semantics is not necessary for the basic defense of his view. Here's the quote "...it is important to bear in mind that the commitments about the fine structure of infinitival embedded questions that I here incur are not required in order to defend the thesis

that knowing how to do something is a kind of knowing that something is the case.”<sup>8</sup> He goes on to say this: “To defend the view that knowing how to do something is a kind of knowing that something is the case, it is sufficient to defend the validity of the following schema: “For every S and F, S knows how to F iff, for some way w of F-ing, s knows that w is a way to F.””<sup>9</sup> Yet, I submit, the appeal to the validity of this schema turns out to be highly unconvincing. I will argue for this in the next section by adducing a counterexample.

#### 4 Skilled Performance

This argument hinges on the nature of highly skilled or expert performance, on the part of an able-bodied person. It is clearly Rylean in inspiration but is my own construction. It is as follows:

1. An able-bodied person can be well informed with propositional knowledge concerning what it is for a person like her to bowl really well, including being informed of some way of doing it, without being able to actually (herself) bowl really well. (P)
2. An able-bodied person *knows how* to bowl really well, only if she is actually able to do so were the opportunity to present itself. (P)
3. So: An able-bodied person can be well informed with propositional knowledge concerning skilled bowling (including knowledge of a way to do it) where it is also true to say of her that she does not *know how* to bowl really well. (BY 1,2)
4. If Stanley is correct, it suffices for me to *know how* to bowl really well that I am informed, of some way w, that w is a way of doing it. (P)
5. If *knowing how* to bowl really well is constituted Stanley’s way, then any able-bodied person well informed with propositional knowledge which includes being informed of a way of doing it will thereby be able to bowl really well. (BY 2, 4)
6. But that’s not the case. (BY 1)

---

<sup>8</sup> Stanley (2011 A, p. 71).

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.



7. So: Stanley is not correct. (6,5,4 Modus Tollens)

One is, on reflection, unobjectionable. A person can be quite well informed about the skilled doing of something that takes skill (like really good bowling), be knowledgeable of a way of doing it, have relevant knowledge about herself, and thus have a good (accurate) answer about the way he or she would do it well if only she could. All of that can surely be the case even when it is also true that she does not know how to bowl well, and thereby counts as an unskilled or even as, as we say in Ohio, a lousy bowler.

Two is, it seems to me, also unobjectionable. Knowing how to bowl really well is a matter of being able to do it well, intentionally, if able-bodied and so inclined, and where circumstances otherwise cooperate.

Three follows. What of four?

Four is the crucial premise. And, if we take Stanley at his above quoted word, four presents a real problem for his theory. Recall the schema: “For every S and F, S knows how to F iff, for some way w of F-ing, s knows that w is a way to F.”<sup>10</sup> To be sure, we would first need to allow that F ranges over doing things well and not simply doings, but I assume Stanley would allow this since *knowing how to  $\phi$  well* is clearly in his target area.

Then the problem can be made clear. The biconditional goes both ways. So if we accept its validity, as he puts it, and we are committed merely to S’s knowing of some way w that it is a way to  $\phi$ , then we ought also be committed to the further thought that S knows how to  $\phi$ . But this dooms the account if what we have said above is correct. For at least

---

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

some states that *do* count as knowledge of a way to  $\phi$  well are insufficient to also count as states of knowing how to  $\phi$  well.

In the next section I explore how Stanley can be expected to defend the account against this line of objection.

## 5 Two Ways of Knowing of Ways

A defender will argue as follows. The intellectualist ought, she will say, to be committed only to the idea that any genuine case of *know how* is, at the end of the day, a relation of a knower to a proposition concerning a way which a relevant kind of action would get done by her. This is what it comes to.

On this view, the intellectualist does not need to be committed to the thought that every sort of having detailed propositional knowledge, including knowledge of a way to do it well, is thereby a genuine case of *know how*. In short, being well informed with some propositional knowledge concerning how one goes about doing something, by knowing a way of doing it, is necessary to have know how, but it is not in general sufficient for it. And this is so since there are two ways of knowing of ways in question.

Indeed, Stanley avails himself of the thought that there is a distinctively practical way of thinking of the propositions in question, and presumably other ways of knowing which are not so practical. Use a pinch of salt to consider the proposition *w is a way to bowl well*. The thought is that this proposition (and all the other similar ones), when and only when grasped or apprehended practically, by means of a practical way of thinking or practical Fregean mode of presentation, characterizes a state of knowing how to bowl well. So, the defender holds, the case of the lousy bowler, who nonetheless genuinely knows of a way to bowl well, is not as devastating as one might think. He or she—the lousy bowler—

must be interpreted as grasping or apprehending the proposition in a non-practical way of thinking, and thus the theory (intellectualism) is saved.

I am perplexed by this maneuver. Allow me to spell out what is troubling about it. Again, let us consider the schema the validity of which is supposedly sufficient to defend intellectualism.

‘For every S and F, S knows how to F iff, for some way w of F-ing, s knows that w is a way to F.’ What I want to worry about now is the proper interpretation of ‘knows’ in that schema. There seem to be two live possibilities. On the first possibility ‘knows’ means what it does in typical *knows that* locutions. Yet, as we have already seen, if we go that route, the schema is shown to be false. Suppose then that we go what appears to be the obvious other way. On this possibility ‘knows’ as it occurs in the schema is to be read a special way, wherein it would indicate ‘knows practically’ or (more pedantically) ‘knows in that particular way of knowing that is characterized as done via a practical mode of thinking’ and which we could symbolize by means of a subscripted p (knows<sub>p</sub>). Presumably, if these are the only live options, Stanley invites us to go that second route.

This route might appear to save the schema, and thereby save the possibility of asserting the theory with a straight face. But it does not save the attractiveness of the theory for it appears the case for intellectualism has just been undermined. That is, the defender of intellectualism has been forced, in articulating the case for holding on to the theory in the face of the purported counterexample, to reach for a distinctive kind of knowledge, not to be confused with the typical way we have of *knowing that*. Yet that there is such a distinctive kind—*knowing how*—is precisely what the opponent of intellectualism has been insisting on all along against the view.

## 6 Closing Speculations

Suppose we now consider things from another direction by way of conclusion. At least with intellectualism some might say, it is obvious that *knowing how* counts as knowledge, since nothing could be more knowledge than knowledge that. But if knowing how is *sui generis* in the way I have suggested, then what is its real nature and what genuinely intellectual capacities are exercised in its case?

There are a couple of basic points to make. I am disposed to appeal first to the thought that in performing at least many skilled actions intentionally, or willfully, one of us is simply and obviously unleashing or exercising knowledge. This can be seen to be so, I take it, in that education, in a full blown sense, is required to get some of these skills in place at all. For instance, take the action of adequately constructing a proof in some system of sentential logic. This looks to me to be a case where one gets knowledge and through one's education. Further it is apparently practical knowledge one gets in such cases, and it can be subsequently unleashed or exercised more or less at will in the competent construction of a proof. Since education simply is coming to knowledge, the will would seem to be epistemic in that exercises of the will can simply be exercises (or unlashings) of our latently practical knowledge.

Suppose though that the critic has been reading some Hume and insists that the will just does not seem like a particularly epistemic capacity in itself. The will, this critic might claim, is essentially a capacity to undergo motivating drives and these things are, as the Humeans say, noncognitive. If that seems right, then accepting that knowing how is intimately connected to the will, is not a reason to treat knowing how as robustly a form of knowledge for the will is not properly an epistemic capacity. This might seem to open the door for intellectualism again. The thought would be that only by accepting some form of

intellectualism can we vindicate the view that knowing how is genuinely knowledge. In response, there is a second maneuver worth making.

My sense is that the best answer here makes appeal to a special variety of knowledge of particulars that Anscombe insisted on in *Intention*.<sup>11</sup> For Anscombe, knowledge of one's own intentional actions in the typical cases both a) comes with acting intentionally, and b) is not justified by observational evidence (mediated by perception or proprioception for example). There is, she thinks, a kind of knowing what one is up to, in the typical cases of  $\phi$ -ing intentionally, that is unique in that it is neither observationally justified by the knowing actor nor like our knowledge of conceptual truth, or truths of logic, or math, which are similarly not justified by appeal to observation. The picture is this: we come to knowledge of these particulars *in* exercising the will in typical intentional actions. For at least some relevant cases, I know what I am doing (intentionally) in doing it intentionally. Hence the will is a capacity for *generating* a kind of knowing as well as a capacity for going from already understood *knowledge how* to relevant doing. If this is right, the will is epistemic in a way that is independent from the area of controversy.<sup>12</sup>

Given all this, I think we should resist Stanley's intellectualism.

---

<sup>11</sup> Anscombe, (2000, [1963]).

<sup>12</sup> See Setiya (2012).

## Sources Consulted

- Anscombe, G.E.M. (2000, [1963]): *Intention*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press).
- Fantl, J. (2014): Knowledge How. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2014 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = [<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2014/entries/knowledge-how/>](http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2014/entries/knowledge-how/)
- Fridland, E. (2013): Problems with intellectualism. *Philosophical Studies* 165: 879-891.
- Pavese, C. and Stanley, J. (2010) Speaking of practical knowledge. *Proceedings of Semantics and Linguistic Theory* 20.
- Ryle, G. (2009, [1949]): *The Concept of Mind*, (New York: Routledge).
- Setiya, K. (2012): Knowing How. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* CXII, 3: 285-307.
- Stanley, J. (2011 A): *Know How*, (New York: Oxford University Press).
- \_\_\_\_\_. (2011 B): Knowing (How). *Nous* 45, 2: 207-238.
- Stanley, J. and Williamson, T. (2001): Knowing How. *Journal of Philosophy* 98: 411-44.
- Tanney, J. (2009): Rethinking Ryle: A Critical Discussion of *The Concept of Mind*. In G. Ryle, *The Concept of Mind*, (New York: Routledge).