

Intellectualism and Testimony

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1. Testimony Objections

I do not know *how to* ride a bike (really).¹ Suppose a friend, who is trustworthy and a keen cyclist, takes pity on me and tells me how to do it. Will I thereby come to know how to ride a bike? Unfortunately, learning how to ride a bike is not that easy. As Poston (2015) discusses, it seems to be a datum that inferences like the following are bad inferences:

Bad

(1) Bill knows how to ride a bike.

(2) Bill tells Hannah how to ride a bike.

So, (3) Hannah knows how to ride a bike.

Similarly, Carter and Pritchard (2015: 810) discuss an example involving Roger who wants to know how to play David's special guitar riff. David, who is trustworthy and an expert guitarist, tells Roger how to play the riff (by telling him the complex finger movements involved and describing the precise way to use the 'whammy bar'). Carter and Pritchard (henceforth 'C&P') suggest that as a result Roger could come to "know *that way w* is the way to play David's signature riff" (2015: 810), but he would *not* come to know how to play this riff.

These examples suggest that the practical knowledge attributed by knowledge-how-to ascriptions (or "practical knowledge" for short) is difficult to transmit via testimony (even if we assume that standard conditions for the transmission of testimony are in place). However,

¹ I would learn but—like David Lewis (1998) and vegemite—why ruin a good example?

knowledge-wh and knowledge-that appear to be easy to transmit via testimony (assuming, again, that standard conditions for the transmission of testimony are in place). If Roger also wants to know *who* David's favourite guitarist is, *when* David will be performing, *why* David will be performing, or *where* David is performing, then he can easily gain such knowledge by David simply telling him who his favourite guitarist is, or when he will be performing, etc. And Hannah can easily come to know *that* Bill's bike has a flat tire from Bill's testimony that it does.

Does this contrast provide us with a good objection to *intellectualism*, the view that practical knowledge is a kind of knowledge-that? C&P (2015) and Poston (2015) both claim that it does,² and it is easy to see why. Intellectualists typically hold that knowing how to ϕ is a kind of knowledge-wh, which, like other forms of knowledge-wh, can be analysed in terms of knowing a proposition that answers its embedded question (see e.g. Brogaard 2009, Stanley and Williamson 2001, and Stanley 2011a, 2011b). However, the above examples seem to point to an important difference between practical knowledge and both knowledge-wh and knowledge-that, a difference that might be significant enough to conclude that intellectualism is false. The aim of this article is to show how an intellectualist can resist such objections by contesting the idea that practical knowledge is difficult to transmit via testimony.³

² See also Zagzebski (2009: 145) for a related argument concerning *understanding* how to ϕ .

³ Alternatively, one might try to contest the other side of the disanalogy claim. There are cases that suggest that some forms of knowledge-wh can be difficult to transmit, including knowing-where-to (Stanley 2011a), and knowing-what-it-is-like (Lewis 1998, Paul 2014). And, nonetheless, some philosophers still maintain that these forms of knowing-wh should be analysed in terms of knowing-that (for related discussion see e.g. Lycan 1996, Stanley 2011a, and Stoljar 2016). One could appeal to these points to support a similar position with respect to practical knowledge (i.e. that it is a kind of knowledge-that but one that can be difficult to transmit via testimony). However, such a response would be dialectically tricky and I will not pursue it here. Thanks to an anonymous referee for this journal for helpful discussion.

2. *An Intellectualist Response*

C&P and Poston assume that in their respective cases the speaker possesses (but just cannot transmit) the relevant practical knowledge that the hearer would need to possess in order to know how to perform the relevant action. But this assumption is highly contestable. To see why, it will help to distinguish the different ways of disambiguating a ‘S knows how to ϕ ’ ascription like (3) above (following Stanley and Williamson 2001):

- (3a) For some way w , Hannah knows that w is a way that Hannah could ride a bike.
- (3b) For some way w , Hannah knows that w is a way that one could ride a bike.
- (3c) For some way w , Hannah knows that w is a way that Hannah ought to ride a bike.
- (3d) For some way w , Hannah knows that w is a way that one ought to ride a bike.

These different interpretations stem from different readings of: (i) the covert pronoun (or ‘PRO’) in (3), which can be interpreted as a generic ‘one’ or as anaphoric on the main subject (i.e. Hannah); and (ii) the modality of the infinitival ‘to ride a bike’, which can be given either a deontic interpretation (‘ought’) or a non-deontic interpretation (‘could’).

Intellectualists identify practical knowledge with the knowledge attributed by the disambiguation of (3) where the infinitive is given its non-deontic interpretation and ‘PRO’ is anaphoric on the main subject, which is represented above as (3a).⁴ But, as Stanley (2011b) discusses, while the infinitives in (3) and (3a) have the same force (they are both dispositional or ability modals) they will likely be interpreted via distinct modal parameters:

In [3a], the modal parameter is one that takes the world of evaluation, and yields a set of propositions that characterize Hannah’s physical state after training for some time with a bicycle. In contrast, the

⁴ Intellectualists allow that there can be contexts in which (3) will be interpreted instead as (3b), (3c) or (3d). The idea here is not that (3) has to be interpreted as (3a), only that (3a) is the right interpretation to focus on when we are interested in the practical knowledge at stake in the debates between intellectualists and anti-intellectualists. And anti-intellectualists often agree with this point (see e.g. Poston 2015: 2).

natural modal parameter for the envisaged utterance of [3] is one that takes the world of evaluation, and yields a set of propositions that characterize Hannah's physical state at the moment. That is why the two utterances express different propositions—because the modals in the two sentences are interpreted via distinct modal parameters. (Stanley 2011b: 126)

Stanley's ideas here can be usefully represented as the suggestion that (3a) is most naturally interpreted as something like (3e) whereas the relevant interpretation of (3) is actually closer to something like (3f):

(3e) For some way w , Hannah knows that w is a way Hannah could ride a bike in circumstances where she is in the physical state she would be in after training to ride a bike.

(3f) For some way w , Hannah knows that w is a way Hannah could ride a bike in circumstances where she is in her normal physical state.⁵

The problem for Poston is that it does not follow from Bill's knowing how to ride a bike that he knows that that way is a way in which *Hannah* could ride a bicycle *in circumstances where she is in her normal physical state*. And if we assume that Hannah has never trained to ride a bike (which is the most natural way of interpreting the scenario), then it will not be the case that Hannah can ride a bike that way in her normal physical state. In which case, Bill cannot know this proposition about Hannah's abilities because this proposition is *false*.⁶ This

⁵ Following ideas in Hawley (2003), Stanley goes on to clarify that the modal parameter for the relevant interpretation of knowledge-how-to ascriptions takes the world of evaluation and yields a set of propositions specifying the subject's "physical *condition under normal circumstances*" (2011b: 128). In the quote above, Stanley is imagining that Hannah's current circumstances are normal but, as he discusses, that will not always be the case (e.g. if Hannah is injured).

⁶ We could imagine the scenario differently such that Bill fails to know the relevant proposition about what Hannah can do in normal circumstances for other reasons. For example, that the proposition is true but Bill fails to know it because he does not believe it, or does not justifiably believe it, etc. The point here is just that on the

shows us that Poston's argument against intellectualism is based on a false presupposition, namely, that if (1) is true then Bill possesses the practical knowledge that Hannah seeks. This point can be made explicit by replacing (1) and (3) of **Bad** with their interpretations as (1f) and (3f):

(1f) For some way w , Bill knows that w is a way *Bill* could ride a bike in circumstances where he is in his normal physical state.

(2) Bill tells Hannah how to ride a bike.

So, (3f) For some way w , Hannah knows that w is a way *Hannah* could ride a bike in circumstances where she is in her normal physical state.

It is worth emphasizing that, given this interpretation of (1) and (3), the inference is bad no matter what kind of speech act we imagine Bill as performing when he tells Hannah how to ride a bicycle. Consider the following interpretations we might give for (2) in line with the previous disambiguations of (3) into (3a)-(3d):

(2a) For some way w , Bill tells Hannah that w is a way that Hannah could ride a bike.

(2b) For some way w , Bill tells Hannah that w is a way that one could ride a bike.

(2c) For some way w , Bill tells Hannah that w is a way that Hannah ought to ride a bike.

(2d) For some way w , Bill tells Hannah that w is a way that one ought to ride a bike.

If Bill performs any of the speech acts described in (2b)-(2d) he tells Hannah something true and something he could know to be true. However, in each case Bill would not have told Hannah the kind of proposition she needs to know in order for (3f) to be true. And the same point applies if Bill tells Hannah that w is a way that *Bill* could, or ought to, ride a bike.

most natural interpretation of this bike scenario (where Hannah has never trained to ride a bike) the relevant proposition will fail to be known because it is false.

Imagine instead then that Bill says to Hannah “this is a way you can ride a bike” (perhaps as he demonstrates that way by riding his bike). It follows that (2a) is correct but Bill’s utterance could be interpreted in at least two different ways depending on the modal parameter used to interpret his use of ‘could’, giving us the following interpretations of (2) corresponding to (3e) and (3f):

(2e) For some way w , Bill tells Hannah that w is a way Hannah could ride a bike in circumstances where she is in the physical state she would be in after training to ride a bike.

(2f) For some way w , Bill tells Hannah that w is a way Hannah could ride a bike in circumstances where she is in her normal physical state.

If we interpret Bill’s utterance in a way that gives us (2e) (which would be the most natural interpretation) then Bill says something true (for Hannah could ride a bike in that way after training to do so), and something he could know to be true. In which case, Hannah could gain this knowledge from Bill’s testimony (if she did not have it already). The problem is, again, that Hannah would not thereby possess the knowledge she needs in order for (3f) to be true, which is the knowledge the intellectualist identifies with practical knowledge.

Suppose instead then that we interpret Bill’s utterance in a way that gives us (2f). Bill would thereby have told Hannah a proposition of the right form but he would be saying something false. If Hannah has not yet trained to ride a bicycle, then she has not yet developed the relevant dispositions and skills required for her to succeed in riding a bike in that way in her normal physical state, and merely listening to Bill’s testimony won’t help her to acquire those dispositions. However, we choose to interpret (2) then the point remains that Bill lacks the knowledge that Hannah seeks, and Hannah will lack this knowledge both before and after Bill’s testimony.

Similarly, in C&P's guitar case, David does not possess the practical knowledge that *Roger* would have to possess in order for the relevant interpretation of 'Roger knows how to play David's signature guitar riff' to be true. For the relevant way to play David's signature riff is *not* a way that Roger could play the riff in his normal physical state, given that he has not yet trained himself to perform the relevant finger movements etc.

Importantly, the reply here to such cases is very different from one that says that Bill and David cannot transmit their practical knowledge because that knowledge involves some special mode of presentation (a reply suggested by Hawley 2010 and Stanley 2011b: 129). C&P (2015: 811-814) and Poston (2015: 10-12) both criticize replies of that kind. But those criticisms are irrelevant here. The reply here does rely on the idea that in possessing practical knowledge one knows a proposition that is about oneself and what one can do in normal circumstances.⁷ But it does *not* rely on the idea that such a proposition will involve some

⁷ This idea may seem to be in tension with Stanley and Williamson's (2001: 416) claim that a pianist who loses her hands in an accident would know how to play the piano but lack the ability to do so. Stanley (2011b: 128) tries to avoid such concerns by appealing to the fact that modals are highly context sensitive and, as such, the explicit modal in an 'S can [/has the ability to] ϕ ' ascription might be interpreted via a distinct modal parameter from the implicit ability modal in the corresponding 'S knows how to ϕ ' ascription. Stanley (2011b: 128) suggests that the pianist "is no longer able to play the piano" because this explicit ability modal is interpreted via a modal parameter "that is determined by how things are at the actual world" but she knows how to play the piano because there is a way such that she "knows that it is a way that she *could* play the piano in...normal situations in which she had arms" (my emphasis). Stanley could also claim that while an 'S knows how to ϕ ' ascription does not entail an *unqualified* 'S can [/has the ability to] ϕ ' ascription it still entails a *qualified* 'S can [/has the ability to] ϕ in normal circumstances' ascription because the qualification shifts the modal parameter to match that of the implicit modal in the 'S knows how to ϕ ' ascription (and he seems to rely on this idea in the previous quote). For discussion of related issues (from a somewhat different perspective) see Glick (2013: 556-558). Thanks to an anonymous referee for this journal for pressing me to clarify this issue.

special first-personal way of thinking of oneself, or practical mode of presentation, such that this knowledge cannot be transferred via testimony.⁸

Indeed, I think it is plausible that Bill could transfer the knowledge attributed to him by (1f) to Hannah via his testimony. Similarly, if Hannah could ride a bike in her normal physical circumstances then, in principle, Bill could know that and thereby possess the knowledge attributed to Hannah by (3f). But Hannah cannot do that. And the knowledge attributed to Bill by (1f) is not the knowledge Hannah needs to possess in order for (3f) to be true. The problem with **Bad** is not that Bill possesses the practical knowledge that Hannah seeks but is unable to transfer that knowledge to her because his knowledge involves some special mode of presentation. The problem is that Bill simply fails to possess this knowledge altogether.

3. Other Applications

There are cases where it seems that practical knowledge transmits easily. Consider the following inference:

(4) Bill knows how to open the door.

(5) Bill tells Hannah how to open the door.

So, (6) Hannah knows how to open the door.

This inference, in contrast to **Bad**, looks fine. A nice feature of the intellectualist response I have offered to cases like **Bad** is that it can also explain this difference. Suppose the way to open the door is to enter the code 4359 and pull the handle up. If Hannah has normal cognitive and physical capacities, and relevant past experiences (e.g. of opening other similar

⁸ It may turn out that, for other reasons, the best version of intellectualism is one that appeals to special modes of presentation. What matters here is that such an appeal is not needed to reply to these testimony objections. Similar issues arise in relation to insufficiency objections to intellectualism; see Stanley (2011b: 126-127) and Glick (2013: 556-558) for related discussion.

doors), then it will already be true that she can open the door in that way in her normal physical state. Unlike the action of riding a bike, Hannah does not need to develop any new dispositions or skills in order for it to be true that she could open a door in that way in her normal physical state. And Bill could easily know this truth about Hannah and share this knowledge with her via his testimony.⁹

4. Conclusions

I submit that testimony poses no special problems for intellectualism. For the intellectualist can maintain that the cases where it appears that practical knowledge cannot be transmitted have been misinterpreted. In such examples the speaker does know how to ϕ in virtue of knowing the right proposition about what they can do in normal circumstances. But the speaker does not know the corresponding proposition about what the *hearer* can do in normal circumstances that the hearer would have to know in order to know how to ϕ . It is this fact that explains the failure of the hearer to gain practical knowledge from the speaker, not any failure of the speaker to transmit their knowledge.¹⁰

⁹ Poston (2015: 6) acknowledges that there are cases where it seems that practical knowledge is easily transmitted and he gives an example involving testimony about how to tie a Bimini Twist (a type of knot). Poston tries to defuse the challenge that this case poses to his views by suggesting that actually *only* deontic knowledge about how one *ought* to tie a Bimini is transmitted from speaker to hearer in his case. However, even if Poston's assessment of his case is correct the parallel assessment of the door case looks implausible, for the reasons just given.

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