What our Rylean Ancestors Knew: More on Knowing How and Knowing That

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In their recent article "Knowing How,"[1] Jason Stanley and Timothy Williamson deny that there is a fundamental distinction between knowing-how and knowing-that, claiming instead that knowledge-how is rather a form of knowledge-that. I contend that Stanley and Williamson are incorrect in rejecting the distinction between knowledge-how and knowledge-that. Our Rylean ancestors, and Ryle himself, had a genuine insight in recognizing knowing-how and knowing-that as distinct phenomena. This discussion will be divided into two sections. In section 1, I discuss some implications of what I take to be our naïve notion of knowing-that. In section 2, I turn to a defense of Ryle's argument in favor of the distinction between knowledge-how and knowledge-that against the criticisms leveled against it by Stanley and Williamson.

I

Consider the following three cases:

> (1) Steve, the ski-instructor, knows how some professional skier skis the course in record time, though Steve is unable to do so that fast himself.
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> (2) Pete, the paraplegic pianist, knows how to play the piano part in Beethoven's "'Triple Concerto' for Violin, Cello and Piano in C," Op. 56, although Pete is unfortunately no longer able to do so.
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> (3) Chip, the chicken-sexer, knows how to tell the sex of baby chicks, though he does not know how he knows.

All three of these cases demonstrate senses in which we say that one knows how to ϕ. All three are similar in at least the following senses. They all involve a reliable disposition (where this may be a disposition to believe) or ability of the agents in question. Furthermore, they all involve personal dispositions (where these may include dispositions to believe) or abilities of the knowers in question. Thus, none of the three support the extension of the notion of knowing-how to non-intentional actions or sub-personal dispositions, such as digesting food or breathing. That is, no human knows how to digest food or to breathe, precisely because such actions are non-intentional actions for humans.

Despite these similarities between the three cases, there are some striking differences between them. Crucial among these for our discussion here is a pair of ways in which (1) and (3) markedly differ from each other. Whereas (3) involves a reliable ability on the part of the knower-how to perform an action (in the particular case considered, to sort chicks), (1) involves no such ability. As the case was presented, it was explicitly stipulated that Steve the ski-instructor not be able to ski in the way he was nevertheless reliably able to recognize as being the way to ski the course in record time. Thus, (3) employs a sense of knowledge-how involving the possession of a reliable ability, whereas (1) does not. We will refer to this sense of knowing-how as the *performative* sense.

There is a further way in which (1) differs from (3), the second of the crucial ways alluded to above. As we noted, (1) involves a case in which Steve the ski-instructor has a reliable recognitional capacity: when presented with various ways of skiing the course, he is reliably able to say which will be the way to ski it in record time. Furthermore, it seems reasonable to suppose that part of this recognitional capacity rests in Steve's being able to recognize, when he himself is skiing, which ways of skiing are appropriate for which sorts of powder, etc. Call this sort of recognition, which would seem to rest in part on phenomena such as muscle-memory and other practical modes of presentation collectively known as the way a certain activity or performance "feels," *proprioceptive* acquaintance. Contrast the role that such acquaintance plays in (1) with the lack of such a phenomenon in (3). Although there might be some series of sub-personal mechanisms whose workings would characterize the way in which Chip the chicken-sexer sorts baby chicks, it would be a mistake to suppose that Chip's ability requires that he have any sort of awareness of the way in which he performs that action. Thus, this second distinction between (1) and (3) highlights the second sense of knowledge-how, that of acquaintance with a way of bringing about a state of affairs. Call this the *acquaintance sense*.

Note of course that, in asserting that some cases of knowledge-that do not fall under the acquaintance sense of knowledge how to ϕ, one need not claim that agents can know how to ϕ without being acquainted with *anything* – including, e.g., their external environment – rather, one need merely claim that one need not be aware of, or acquainted with, any particular way of ϕ'ing in order to possess knowledge how to ϕ. Indeed, it is imperative that one recognize the prevalence of cases of knowledge-that that do *not* comport with the acquaintance sense. Indeed, there are many sorts of abilities that one can acquire and exercise without having any particular sort of proprioceptive awareness or acquaintance. Indeed, a good deal of the skills honed by high performance athletes, surgeons, musicians, and others are ones the exercise of which is actually hampered by an attempt on the part of the agent to shape her performance on the basis of an explicit awareness of the way in which she performs. That is, acquaintance with a way of ϕ'ing is actually inimical to at least some forms of knowing-how to ϕ.

The case exemplified by (2) is a particularly interesting one, as it poses a challenge to a naïve understanding of both the acquaintance and performative senses of knowledge-how. The difficulty posed by (2) for the performative notion of knowledge-how is easier to recognize. Pete is no longer able to perform the piano part of Beethoven's "Triple Concerto;" nevertheless, we still feel comfortable attributing knowledge how to Pete. Nor, however, can we explain this fact straightforwardly in terms of the acquaintance sense of knowing-how. Certainly, there are certain proprioceptive sensations – those involving balance or the performance of certain specific muscle-tasks – that are no longer available to one who has lost the use of some or all of his limbs. Let us stipulate that Pete, due to his injury, is in such a situation. That is, were Pete to have the use of his limbs, he would be able reliably

[1] Jason Stanley and Timothy Williamson, "Knowing How," *The Journal of Philosophy* (2001): 411-44.

to pick out, through proprioceptive acquaintance, the way to play the piano part of Beethoven's "Triple Concerto." However, since he does not, Pete is no longer even dispositionally acquainted with the way to play the piano part of Beethoven's "Triple Concerto." That is, the acquaintance sense seems to be in the same situation with respect to cases like (2) as the performative sense: it seems on the face of it that we attribute knowledge how to Pete due to the fact that, if he had the use of his limbs, he would be acquainted with the way of performing the piano part of Beethoven's "Triple Concerto." This, however, is true of Pete's ability as well: were he to have the use of his limbs, he would be able to perform the piano part.

Let us recap. So far we have attempted to sketch an intuitive motivation for the idea that there are two independent senses associated with knowledge how, an acquaintance sense and a performative sense, and provided examples of cases of knowledge how in which one or the other sense would not apply. It is interesting to note that the two senses of knowledge how do have striking parallels to distinct aspects of knowledge that: the performative sense of knowledge how mirrors the significance of reliability for knowledge that, whereas the acquaintance sense of knowledge how mirrors the fact that knowledge that is a representational state of subjects. Thus, although we will be arguing that knowledge how is not a form of knowledge that, it would be futile to ignore the significant parallels between the two phenomena.

II

In the last section we amassed an amount of independent evidence in favor of the idea that at least one sense of knowledge how, the performative sense, is not a form of knowledge that. There is still the matter, however, of Stanley's and Williamson's critique of Ryle.

Stanley and Williamson[2] suggest that Ryle argues as follows. He assumes (in order to employ a *reductio ad absurdum*) that [I] all knowledge how to ϕ is knowledge that ___ ϕ. He then argues that (a) when one intentionally ϕ's, one employs knowledge how to ϕ, and (b) if one employs knowledge that *p*, one must contemplate the proposition that *p*. This means that, for any S, if S ϕ's, then – according to (a) – S employs knowledge how to ϕ. By [I], if S employs knowledge how to ϕ, then S employs knowledge that ___ ϕ. According to (b), however, if S employs knowledge that ___ ϕ, then S must contemplate the proposition that ___ ϕ. But contemplating the proposition that ___ ϕ is itself an action. Thus begins the regress.

In objecting to Ryle's argument, Stanley and Williamson build on a reply to Ryle given by Ginet in his *Knowledge, Perception, and Memory*.[3] There, Ginet argues that Ryle is mistaken, in the application of (b) to S's employment of knowledge that ___ ϕ, to suggest that, when one employs one's knowledge that *p* one performs the distinct action of contemplating the proposition that *p*. Thus, I employ my knowledge that opening a door is the best way to leave a room, and that turning a doorknob is the best way to open a door, by turning the knob and opening the door – and without contemplating the propositions in question. The only way that Ryle can dispute Ginet's argument, Stanley and Williamson suggest, is by interpreting the contemplation of propositions as a non-intentional – or otherwise deflated sense – of action. However, as they rightly suggest, their reformulation of premise (a) of Ryle's argument requires that the action in question be an intentional action. Thus, they argue, Ryle's argument relies on an equivocation for its force; it is, in fact, unsound.

In taking Ryle's argument to deal simply with intentional actions, however, Stanley and Williamson have done him a disservice. In fact, Ryle considers not intentional actions, simpliciter, but those that we would characterize as "intelligent." In the context of discussion, "intelligent" actions, for Ryle, are those actions that display knowledge how. In *The Concept of Mind*, for example, Ryle summarizes his argument against the idea that all knowledge how is a species of knowledge that as follows:

> To put it quite generally, the absurd assumption made by the intellectualist legend [i.e., the idea that all knowledge how is a form of knowledge that] is this, that a performance of any sort inherits all its title to intelligence from some anterior internal operation of planning what we do. … By the original argument, therefore, our intellectual planning process must inherit its title to shrewdness from yet another interior process of planning to plan, and this process could in turn be [analyzed with respect to its shrewdness]. The regress is infinite.[4]

Thus, Stanley and Williamson are correct insofar as they see Ryle's argument as a species of infinite regress argument, but incorrect in seeing the argument simply as referring to all intentional actions. How, exactly, are we to understand it?

The argument rests on the following considerations. Ryle seems to characterize the "intellectualist legend," the idea that knowledge how is a species of knowledge that, as comprised by the following thesis:

> [INTELLECTUALISM] ϕ'ing on the basis of one's knowledge how to ϕ requires that one guide one's actions on the basis of one's knowledge of the proposition that ___ ϕ.

The argument then seems to run as follows:

> (1) If one's action is a knowledgeable performance of ϕ, then one ϕ's on the basis of one's knowledge how to ϕ.
>
> (2) [INTELLECTUALISM]
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> (3) If one's guidance of one's actions on the basis of one's knowledge of the proposition that ___ ϕ is itself to be knowledgeable, then one guides one's actions on the basis of one's knowledge of the proposition that ___ ϕ on the basis of one's knowledge how to guide one's actions on the basis of one's knowledge of the proposition that ___ ϕ.
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> (4) [INTELLECTUALISM]
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Thus, according to this analysis, Ryle's argument does not rest on any independently implausible theses concerning what is involved in employing knowledge that *p*, but rather employs simply those theses that the intellectualist himself must accept. Is this in fact the case?

[2] Cf. pp. 413-4.

[3] Carl Ginet, *Knowledge, Perception, and Memory* (Boston: Reidel, 1975), p. 7.

[4] Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 1949), p. 31.

It does not seem that the intellectualist will want to object to premise 1, as this premise simply captures the difference between action on the basis of knowledge how – i.e., knowledgeable action – and action that accidentally achieves the desired result. Thus, we wouldn't call the clumsy person's accidentally flawless performance of a flamenco a knowledgeable performance, precisely because that performance was not executed on the basis of a knowledge how to dance the flamenco.

Nor does it seem that the intellectualist can deny [INTELLECTUALISM]. For precisely such a thesis will be needed if the intellectualist is to rule out the sorts of cases, like Chip the chicken-sexer, which motivated the performative sense of knowledge how in sections 1 and 2. That is, in order to be able to restrict the range of cases of knowledge how to the acquaintance sense, one would have to argue that it is a necessary condition of S's acting on the basis of knowledge how that S guide her actions on the basis of knowledge that ___ ϕ – specifically, in the case of Stanley and Williamson, on the basis of knowledge that *w* is a way of reliably performing ϕ. Indeed, this is what it means to say that knowledge how is a species of knowledge that.

Furthermore, it does not seem that the intellectualist will be able to stop the move to step 3 of the argument by denying that one's guidance of one's actions on the basis of one's knowledge that need be knowledgeable. Recall that "knowledgeable action," in the sense used in the above argument, is simply that action that is based upon the ability of an agent reliably to perform the given action – as opposed to that of an agent who, by sheer luck, manages to perform the same action. If the intellectualist were to stop the argument here, then it seems that he would be forced to relinquish the idea that an agent's guidance of her own actions – in those cases in which the agent exercises her knowledge how – is itself no different than that of an agent who guides her actions through sheer luck.