

Two Types of Knowledge?

In ordinary language, we use the word “know” in at least two different kinds of ways:

Consider:

“Joe knows *that* the capital of California is Sacramento.”

“Sara knows *how* to do the electric slide.”

English philosopher Gilbert Ryle 1900-1976 claimed that this different way of speaking corresponds to *two different kinds of knowledge*.

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Let's call the first kind of knowledge (“knowledge *that*”) *propositional* knowledge. It's also been called *factual* knowledge.

We'll call the other kind (“know-how”) *practical* knowledge.

It might seem easy enough to maintain that there's a legitimate distinction between these two types of knowledge—but it's harder to *explain* the distinction.

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Let's look at the game of poker for supposed examples of the two types of knowledge.

“Knowledge that”:

“[A]ny poker player must understand the fundamental concepts that constitute the game...

...correctly understanding the vocabulary of poker...

...knowing the various hand rankings...

...*knowing the best possible hand* given the flop, the turn, or the river” (Lucey 118)

“Knowledge how”:

“Knowing how to bet (as well as how to check and how to fold) in the appropriate circumstances...” (Lucey, 120)

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So “know-how” seems to amount to something like this:

(1) Knowing how does *not* consist in knowing that some proposition is true or that some fact obtains; knowing how cannot be reduced to or equated with (any form of) knowledge that.

(2) Knowing how to G does in fact consist in being able to G, in having the capacity to G. Knowing how ascriptions ascribe abilities or capacities to do the mentioned action.

P. Snowdon (2003)

Does this view hold up? Are we drawing a legitimate distinction here?

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Let's consider two kinds of problems for (2)

First, here are some cases that purport to show (2) is not *necessary* for know-how

- (a) I know how to make Christmas pudding, and have done so frequently. Alas, a terrible explosion obliterates the world's supply of sugar, so that no one is able to make it. I still know how to but, like everyone else, cannot.
- (b) Raymond Blanc, the world's greatest chef, knows how to make an excellent omelette. He loses his arms in a car accident, and is no longer able to make omelettes. However, he retains his knowledge how to make omelettes, and if you wish to learn how to make an omelette you should consult Blanc. He has, that is, not lost his knowledge, merely his capacity.
- (c) Ann is in a room at the top of a burning building. There is no escape through the door since the corridor is ablaze. The only way to escape is to climb out of the window and crawl along a narrow ledge on one side of which is a sheer drop. Ann realises that that is the only way to escape. Unfortunately, the sight of the drop has the effect of making it true that she simply cannot get onto the ledge. She is, as we say, paralysed by fear. It seems plausible to me to say in this case that Ann actually *knows* how to escape, since she certainly realises that the one and only way to escape is to crawl along the ledge, but she is unable to do that, and hence unable to escape. (P. Snowdon 2003)

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Next, let's consider cases that purport to show that (2) is not *sufficient* to constitute know-how:

(1) A man is in a room, which, because he has not explored it in the least, he does, as yet, not know how to get out of. In fact there is an obvious exit which he can easily open. He is perfectly able to get out, he can get out, but does not know how to (as yet).

(3) Martin is someone who can do fifty consecutive pressups. Let us suppose that none of us here can do that. It would be, I suggest, quite counterintuitive to say that Martin knows how to do something we do not know how to do. Rather, he is, simply, stronger than we are. He is stronger, but not more knowledgeable.

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So (2) seems suspicious at best as a necessary or sufficient condition for know-how. If we're going to maintain (1), then it looks like we'll need a better account of how the distinction is supposed to work.

Here's a possibility:

“[K]nowledge how (in poker) consists in part an ongoing disposition to discard [bad] cards and not pay to see the flop with them.” Lucey, 120

What's this business about dispositions???

“Certain states of mind, Ryle argued, can best be understood dispositionally. For example, the mental state of believing is not best understood as a conscious entertaining of specific thoughts or propositions. It is better understood as being *disposed* to say or do various things.” (Lucey, 121)

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But a “dispositional” version of the distinction runs into problems:

“As with dispositional accounts generally, it is difficult, even impossible to specify non-trivial conditions under which one manifests one's dispositions. If one analyzes knowing how to play chess in terms of dispositions to move chess pieces, one must specify the conditions under which a player manifests those dispositions. Such specifications are difficult since a person's reaction to a chess board and an invitation to play is subject to all manner of physical and psychological preconditions. If the person has been injected with curare, they will likely not react. If they believe themselves to be overmatched, they may demur.”

Charles Wallis, <http://philosophy.uwaterloo.ca/MindDict/knowhow.html>

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It's beginning to look difficult to explain exactly how “knowing how” differs from “knowing that”.

So let's consider another possibility: Maybe “knowing how” is just a *kind* of “knowing that”?

Is there anything really distinctive about “know-how”?

In judging that someone's performance is or is not intelligent, we have,...in a certain manner to look beyond the performance itself. For there is no particular overt or inner performance which could not have been accidentally or 'mechanically' executed by an idiot, a sleepwalker, a man in a panic, absence of mind or delirium or even, sometimes, by a parrot. ...in looking beyond the performance itself,... We are considering his abilities and propensities of which his performance was an actualization. Our inquiry is not into causes (and a fortiori not into occult causes), but into capacities,... (Ryle 1949, p.45)