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Chess and Regress: A Defense of Intellectualism

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ABSTRACT

The relationship between knowing how and knowing that is a contentious one. Intellectualists say that knowing how to do a thing is either a case of knowing that certain things are the case, or at minimum, knowing how requires some prior amount of knowing that. Anti-intellectualists generally deny that there is any such relationship, and most insist that there is simply no link between knowing how and knowing that. This paper discusses two of leading anti-intellectualist Gilbert Ryle's strongest arguments against intellectualism: the regress argument and the chess argument. I attempt to show that Ryle's case against intellectualism ultimately fails in the face of ordinary ways we think about our knowledge.

KEYWORDS

Epistemology, Know-how, Structure of knowledge, Gilbert Ryle, Regress, Propositional Knowledge, Intellectualism, Anti-Intellectualism

1. ARGUING THAT

Epistemology traditionally distinguishes between three types of knowledge: propositional knowledge, acquaintance knowledge, and practical knowledge. Propositional knowledge is knowing *that*; you know *that* Barack Obama is the President of the United States in 2013, or *that* water boils at 100°C. Acquaintance is expressed as a sense of being familiar with a thing, like in the case of “Eric knows Rhonda.” Practical knowledge, sometimes called *know-how*, is what is expressed when we say that “Herschel *knows* how to ride a bike.”

Here, we are only concerned with propositional knowledge and practical knowledge, or as they will be referred to, knowing-that and knowing-how. Historically, there has been a lot of argument over the nature of the relationship between these two types of knowledge. Some philosophers (see for instance Stanley and Williamson 2001 and Bengtson and Moffat 2009) have thought that knowing-how is ultimately reducible to knowing-that, which is to say that you need to grasp a certain proposition before you know how to do something. This view is called Intellectualism, in reference to the supposed mentalistic quality of grasping such propositions. Others (for example, Lewis 1990, Nemirow 1990) have thought just the opposite: that in order to know that a thing is the case, you must possess some sort of ability prior to that. This view is called Strong Anti-Intellectualism. Still others think that there is simply no relationship between knowing how and knowing that. This view is accordingly termed Weak Anti-Intellectualism. In this paper, we will consider these first and second views, but not the third, as it is rarely defended in modern literature.

The philosopher Gilbert Ryle is the best-known Strong Anti-Intellectualist, having over the years offered many criticisms of intellectualism. The foremost of these is considered to be his regress argument, which is thought to pose significant difficulty for intellectualists. In this paper, I will examine this regress, lay bare its assumptions, and show where the argument goes wrong. I will then examine Ryle’s second line of defense, the chess player argument, and show why I find it inconceivable. If I should successfully defeat these two arguments, then Ryle’s attack on Intellectualism will have failed.

2. THE REGRESS

...I rely largely on variations of one argument. I argue that the prevailing doctrine leads to vicious regresses, and these in two directions. (1) If the intelligence exhibited in any act, practical or theoretical, is to be credited to the occurrence of some ulterior act of intelligently considering regulative propositions, no intelligent act, practical or otherwise, could ever begin... (2) If a deed, to be intelligent, has to be guided by the consideration of a regulative proposition, the gap between that consideration and the practical application of the regulation has to be bridged by some go-between process which cannot, by definition, be the resultant deed. —Gilbert Ryle ([1971, 213] as found in Stanley and Williamson 2001, 2)

Ryle's central argument against Intellectualism is that there is a vicious regress involved in its basic workings. Ryle believes that if knowledge-how were a subspecies of knowledge-that, then to exercise know-how and perform any action at all, one would need to grasp a certain proposition. However, that grasping of a proposition would then be an action also, for which we would also require the grasp of a proposition (which is also an action in need of a proposition), and so on. Actions would always need to be accompanied by propositions, and those propositions would always need to be accompanied by more actions, resulting in a permanent recursion. Ryle argues that if Intellectualism were true, we would be constantly and permanently grasping propositions about how to grasp propositions. Intuitively, it seems that that this is not true; sometimes we relax on a summer day seemingly without a care in our minds. We do not think we have significant brain activity in these serene moments, and diagnostic data on brain function does not seem to reveal the sort of ever-increasing mental activity such an account would necessitate. Therefore, as Ryle means to show, such an idea is absurd.

To borrow from Stanley and Williamson (2001)'s analysis, Ryle's *reductio* has two premises:

Premise 1: If one performs an action F, then one employs know-how of F.

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Premise 2: If one has propositional knowledge that P, one cognitively grasps that P.

As with any other argument, undercutting the premises will render the argument unsound.

2.1. How to Perform a Somersault

Let us examine the first premise. If someone performs an action, is it really true that they *know* how to perform that action? I think not. David Carr points out the falsity of this in his famous trampoline example:

A novice trampolinist, for example, might at his first attempt succeed in performing a difficult somersault, which although for an expert would be an exercise of knowing how, is in his case, merely the result of luck or chance. Since the novice actually performed the feat one can hardly deny that he was able to do it (in the sense of possessing the physical power) but one should, I think, deny that he knew how to perform it. (1991, pg. 53)

It would seem that the trampolinist did not *know how* to do the aerial trick, but still managed to perform it. That is, we have to separate the raw ability to do something from possessing knowledge how to do it, because various forces can compel our bodies to do any number of things that are normally beyond our knowledge. We can bring this up in more ordinary cases, such as Stanley and Williamson (2001)'s example of digestion; Ryle would have to say something like "If Hannah digests food, then she knows how to digest food." But of course nobody *knows* how to digest food; it is simply an operation that the body performs. So we can say that there are certain actions that we perform without knowledge. Of course, we might still think Ryle's premise applies in a subset cases. If Eric does ride a bike, then Eric probably knows how to ride a bike—at least if he can do it consistently. It seems like there is some set of actions for which the premise applies. We can say that this premise simply does not apply in some cases, but does apply in others. As such, Ryle must amend the premise to be more restricted in its scope for it to be true. However, we will postpone the matter of the amendment of the first premise, as there are more pressing matters to attend to with regard to the second premise.

2.2. of Dogs and Doorknobs

The second premise states that if a person has propositional knowledge *that p*, then that person cognitively grasps *that p* (and, again, grasping is an action). This means that if I know that Ubby is a dog, then I have some conscious cognitive relationship with the idea that Ubby is a dog. This is because the mental content of *that p* is nothing more than *that p*; the content of "Ubby is a dog" is the identification of Ubby as a dog, where a dog is a member of the species *canis lupus familiaris*.

The philosopher Carl Ginet provides good reason to doubt that we a conscious relationship with all of our knowledge (1975, pg. 6-9). In his view, if one uses a doorknob to open a door, one exercises the knowledge *that* one can open the door by turning the knob. But that does not mean that a person formulates the corresponding proposition in their mind every time they open a door. Likewise, when we walk, we utilize various propositions: that we must balance such-and-such a way to stay upright, or that distributing our weight too far to the left or right could cause us to fall. But we do not conjure those up every time we walk. Ryle means to show that know-how constructed of know-that could not possibly function because the constitutive know-that would require conscious grasping of the attendant propositions, and the grasping is an action, which starts the regress. But as Ginet shows, we do not seem to consciously grasp knowledge in that way. It would seem that this premise is false.

Between these criticisms of Ryle's premises, it seems that the regress argument fails on grounds of unsoundness. It is true that the first premise is true in some restricted number of cases, but the second seems to be false in all of them. If the second premise is false, the regress is inoperable; the thinker in question would not perform the action of grasping, which means that it would require no accompanying proposition (as all know-how is constituted of know-that). There would be no regress. For instance, if I know how to ride a bike, I know all the propositions that compose knowing how to ride a bike, but I no longer have to grasp them in such a conscious way; instead, I took in that information the second I knew all of the associated propositions.

2.3 Ryle's Response

In order to contest this argument, Ryle would have to reject one (or both) of the criticisms of his premises (he could perhaps also reject the framing of them

in this way, although it is hard to see how else to construe his regress). Since the criticism of the first premise is lighter and not altogether fatal to his argument, I propose that Ryle would be willing to grant it. This means that Ryle would have to address his second premise.

In order for the regress argument to 'take', Ryle needs the act of considering a proposition to be an action (that action must be preceded by a proposition, and the regress begins). We have been taking "grasping a proposition" to mean actively, conscious, cognitively considering that a proposition is the case. In a more practical way, this makes sense: the *reductio* has its roots in the absurdity of thinking about thinking, in series, forever. Nonetheless, Ryle could argue that the action involved is anything but conscious and cognitive. This removes the nasty counterexamples: you unconsciously grasp what to do with a doorknob, and one's clarity of mind when walking becomes unremarkable. We think recursively, in series, but in the backs of our minds. In essence, our brains would be permanently ruminating in the background about previous actions and thoughts.

However, this would render the regress a bit too weak. The regress, again, is so particularly absurd because our brains simply could not *handle* conscious recursion. The consciousness of the regress situation is what gives the absurdity argument such *bite*. Some of us cannot walk and chew gum at the same time; how on Earth could we recursively consider thousands of propositions? If we are talking about something more muted and sedate, it seems downright possible that we could handle it. We could even say that mental fatigue is the product of weathering the regress for too long! Perhaps sleeping 'resets' one's personal loop, and we are tired in the morning because we manage sometimes to consider propositions while we sleep; maybe we do not properly reset, some nights.

With this move, Ryle comes far too close to giving the intellectualist something she can work with. After all, the point of all of this was to show how silly and untenable an idea having all know-how be composed of know-that really is, and, indirectly, to show the explanatory superiority of Weak Anti-Intellectualism. So if my proposed outcome was a defeat for Ryle, this is only a softer defeat. If Ryle (or others) wants to truly rebut the intellectualist here, he must provide a new turn to the regress argument and show that there is a reasonable way to arrange his premises that resists criticism. So we turn to the Regress argument's richer cousin, the Chess Player argument.

3. THE RIGHT MOVES

Ryle's Chess Player argument is a close cousin of the regress argument. In it, Ryle gives us the case of a certain chess player. Imagine a loquacious and learned chess player who shares with her opponent all sorts of rules, tips, and stratagems, such that she could not think of anything further to impart. Despite the incredibly high level of detail that our chess player can go into when talking about the game, she is, alas, a terrible chess player. Thus it is supposed to be that although our chess player possesses all sorts of propositional knowledge about the game of chess, she cannot translate it into chess know-how. Therefore, the argument goes, knowing-how is not reducible to knowing-that because you can have the former without the latter. (As discussed in Fantl 2008, from Ryle 1946.)

Let us observe first that this is a conceivability argument. Ryle seems to be suggesting that if this sort of state of affairs is conceivable, it says something about the nature of our world such that knowledge-how and knowledge-that are shown to be logically separate. On the other hand, we can deny the argument by finding grounds on which to deny that we can conceive of such a chess player. I intend to do just that.

The idea is intuitive enough: there must be persons whose know-that is such that it ought to mean success, but in practical cases means failure. We often see this concept employed in ethics: the case of the moral idiot, who knows all of the moral rules but cannot bring herself to act morally. In this case, we have to ask ourselves what sort of knowledge ought to be sufficient for success. In the event that the person does not possess the proper know-that to guarantee success under normal circumstances, it seems that the argument does not go through; it could simply be that the person didn't know enough of the relevant propositions to perform well.

For one thing, I think there's something to be said for the idea that Ryle's chess player doesn't have every proposition sufficient for winning chess games. To repeat a sports cliché, it is often said that certain players 'know how to win,' which is held apart from other skills. A player might have every tool in the proverbial box, but lack this crucial factor. I advance the idea that Ryle's chess player is just like this. She has every bit of propositional knowledge about how to play chess, but does not possess the propositional knowledge for *winning* chess. This can be interpreted as a set of propositions such as move X will win the game in situation S_1 , or that move Y will lose the game in situation S_2 .

I suspect that Ryle would object to this on the grounds that the knowledge of how to win at chess is a subset of the broader set of 'how to play chess.' But in an obvious way, it seems to me that the chess player cannot understand winning chess in a crude way: because she does not win, not even a minority of the time. She only loses. It would seem that she possesses only a certain basic group of chess propositions: that such-and-such is a legal move, and that this or that strategy once gave Kasparov a big victory, and so on. I think there is reasonably something that the chess grandmaster possesses that our chess player does not: the propositional knowledge that a particular move will lose the game for her. If our chess player possessed that, she would lose far less often. This is, of course, barring some other sort of intervening psychological circumstance like her *wanting* to lose or her being insane.

This should make us start to question Ryle's example. Contrary to Ryle's claim, the chess player does not seem to possess all of the requisite knowledge to play winning chess. If we incorporate the knowledge of how to play winning chess into the chess player's 'knowledge base,' then it seems that she should win instead of lose (provided she's a rational, well-adjusted individual). That is, if the chess player has all of the propositional knowledge about Chess (including my addition), then she ought to win.

This paints Ryle into a corner. He can admit that the chess player does not have all of the propositional knowledge about chess, which means that his argument does not go through, since he means to show that full propositional knowledge cannot be translated into know-how, and yet the propositional knowledge at hand is hardly full. Otherwise, Ryle can deny it. He must deny that such knowledge exists at all in order for his argument to make sense. However, I think that I have provided a persuasive case as to why such additional knowledge *does* exist. If this knowledge does exist, then it seems that Ryle's chess player is inconceivable as construed: it does not make sense to have someone with perfect knowledge still lose on grounds of knowledge.

Of course, we might say that although the letter of Ryle's argument fails, the spirit is more successful. Could there be a person who possesses all of the requisite propositional knowledge for success, yet still manages to fail on grounds of know-how? Perhaps I could read all about snowboarding, but when the time comes, I simply do not possess the coordination to be a successful snowboarder. Maybe there are certain propositions that are difficult to articulate: that in order

to stay upright while snowboarding, you need to use the muscles on your back leg in a certain way. So, in that way, perhaps I could say that truly knowing how to snowboard is to know those physically-oriented propositions. If that is true, then the result would be the same as in the chess player case. However, I think the belief that these sort of physically-motivated propositions are a different species than more mentalistic propositions is a well-motivated one.

Also, there seems to be something special about what these physically-motivated propositions capture. "A roux is made by combining butter and flour," is something that is easily entertained mentally, but "in order to hit a home run you move arms hands like this," is different. By "this" we refer to something non-linguistic; we refer to a state of affairs in the world that is better seen than read. If I see a chef make a roux in person, it does not reveal much more about the proposition than what I already knew. But there is a certain indexical element of physicality that the home run proposition represents that is not done justice by language, and *prima facie* could not be realized in the same way (i.e. converted into know-how and performed).

Doubts about indexical propositions notwithstanding, the argument stands for now. It is enough to say that it seems likely that knowing how to snowboard is also to know how to use one's body parts to successfully perform the task.

CONCLUSION

As I have shown, Ryle's arguments against intellectualism fail. The regress is not nearly as regressive as once believed, and it does not seem as though comprehensive knowledge can conceivably lead one to repeated failure. As these were by far the strongest arguments marshalled by anti-intellectuals, I feel that their case is substantially weakened. Perhaps future positive inquiry can provide new and better arguments with regard to the true relationship of knowing-how and knowing-that.

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