

KNOW HOW
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Table of Contents

- Chapter 1: Ryle on Knowing How
- Chapter 2: Knowledge-wh
- Chapter 3: PRO and the Representation of First-Person Thought
- Chapter 4: Ways of Thinking
- Chapter 5: Knowledge How
- Chapter 6: Ascribing Knowledge How
- Chapter 7: The Cognitive Science of Practical Knowledge
- Chapter 8: Knowledge Justified

Preface

A fact, as I shall use the term, is a *true proposition*. A proposition is the sort of thing that is capable of being believed or asserted. A proposition is also something that is characteristically the kind of thing that is true or false; that snow is white is a true proposition, that Barack Obama is President of the United States as I am writing these words is another. Facts in this sense are not only among the things we believe and assert; they are also the kinds of things we know.

The thesis of this book is that knowing how to do something is the same as knowing a fact. It follows that learning how to do something is learning a fact. For example, when you learned how to swim, what happened is that you learned some facts about swimming. Knowledge of these facts is what gave you knowledge of how to swim. Something similar occurred with every other activity that you now know how to do, such as riding a bicycle or cooking a meal. You know how to perform activities solely in virtue of your knowledge of facts about those activities.

This thesis may seem puzzling. Learning how to do something eventuates in a state that is intimately connected with action. In contrast, knowledge of a fact seems like the kind of thing that is characteristically acquired by reading a book. Learning facts seems to leave us with only with abstract or theoretical knowledge of the world. Learning how to do something, by contrast, seems to leave us with skills in engaging with it.

If it is surprising that knowledge of a fact can so immediately yield knowledge of how to swim, ride a bicycle, or play a piano, it is only so because of false assumptions about what it is to know a fact. These false assumptions lie behind the idea of knowledge of a fact as something that is by its nature inherently contemplative, rather than a state implicated directly in action. There are false assumptions about what it is to *act* on knowledge of facts, there are false assumptions about what it is to have *knowledge* of facts, and there are false assumptions about the *nature* of facts. In the course of establishing the thesis of this book, I will have to dispel all of these myths. To make it plausible that knowing how to do something is knowledge of facts, I must erect at least the skeleton of the correct view of factual knowledge.

Of course, when you learned how to swim, you didn't just learn any old fact about swimming. You learned a special *kind* of fact about swimming. The fact you learned is the proposition that answers a question – the question “How could you swim?” Knowing how to do something therefore amounts to *knowing the answer to a question*. To explain the kind of propositions that answer these kinds of questions, it will be necessary first to take a step back and investigate the genus of which knowing how to do something is a species. An account of what it is to know how to Φ must fit into a more general account of *knowing answers to questions*. For example, an account of knowing how to catch a fly ball must fit into a more general account of knowing *when* to catch a fly ball and knowing *where* to position one's glove in order to catch a fly ball. More generally, we need an account of what one might call *knowledge-wh*; knowledge where, knowledge when, knowledge how, knowledge why, etc. As we shall see, according to the best available theories, knowledge of facts is necessary and sufficient for knowledge-wh.

The outlines of an account of the special kind of facts that constitute knowledge how will emerge from this more general theory of what it is to know the answer to a question. But, as we shall see, the standard theories of knowledge-wh that we will

explore are conceptually impoverished. They are not even sufficient to explain the kinds of facts that one learns when one learns *who someone is*, much less the kinds of facts that one learns when one learns how to do something. I show that a more sophisticated notion of proposition (and hence a more sophisticated notion of fact) is required for a full account of knowledge-wh. This more sophisticated notion of proposition is one that exploits ways of thinking, or “modes of presentation”, of objects, as in the works of Gottlob Frege. It also explains why learning a fact is not always something one can do by reading a book. Some ways of thinking of objects cannot be acquired by mere description. I defend this conception of facts against well-known charges of obscurantism.

My aim is not just to sketch an account of factual knowledge and some of its sub-species. I also provide an account of the role such knowledge plays in guiding action. Skilled action is action that manifests an agent’s knowledge how. A surgeon wields her scalpel with skill only if it is an exercise of her knowledge of how to do the procedure. Acting with skill is action that manifests an agent’s knowledge of facts. A further goal of this book is to demonstrate that it is our capacity to learn and retain knowledge of facts that explains our capacity for skilled engagement with the world.

There is a wide-spread assumption that factual knowledge is by its nature solitary, purely reflective, and detached from decision and action. The result is the view, common throughout the human sciences, that factual knowledge is an idle wheel in explaining and evaluating behavior. This is the second book I have written in opposition to this assumption. The guiding idea of this work has been that the value of knowledge lies in its connection to action. Its aim is to exploit these connections to shed light on the nature of states of factual knowledge, while simultaneously revealing the explanatory richness behind the conception of rational animals as creatures who know.