

PRACTICAL COGNITIVISM¹

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Abstract:

This paper advances the main tenets of a new meta-ethical approach to moral problems. It holds that there is moral knowledge and that it is best understood in terms of knowing-how. Moreover, it presents an analysis of knowing-how and shows that it cannot be reduced to knowing-that. It distinguishes also moral knowing-how from the other kinds of knowing-how. Finally, it spells out the main advantages of such approach, mainly that that it avoids the dilemma of meta-ethics.

Keywords: meta-ethics, moral epistemology, knowing-how

Introduction

In this paper, I would like to advance the main tenets of a meta-ethical view, particularly an epistemological approach to ethical problems, which holds that moral knowledge is better understood in terms of knowing-how. Let me call this meta-ethical theory “practical cognitivism.” It holds that morality is above all a matter of knowing-how to behave, knowing-how to be a certain kind of person, knowing-how to follow a rule, knowing-how to react emotionally in a certain circumstance, knowing-how to have the appropriate moral feelings in such and such a situation etc. and not only a matter of having certain moral beliefs. Therefore, moral judgments express knowledge of some kind.

In order to better present the main features of this view, I will divide the paper into four parts. In the first section, I will engage in a provisional analysis of knowing-how and I will distinguish it from propositional knowledge or knowing-that. In the following section, I will establish a criterion for differentiating moral knowledge from the other kinds of knowing-how, namely technical, artistic, etc. In the third section, I will show that knowing-how cannot be *reduced* to knowing-that since it involves more elements than beliefs, true propositions and justifications. Thus, one may well speak of ethical sapience, which reflects the cognitive elements of a moral behavior. In the last section, I will argue that practical cognitivism avoids many meta-ethical difficulties that are troubling moral philosophers nowadays.

The distinction between knowing-that and knowing-how has so far remained restricted to discussions in epistemology, with few applications in philosophy of mind and philosophy of language.² No one has brought this debate into meta-ethics and the purpose of this work is to do just that. As far as I know, however, a few ethicists do consider moral knowledge in terms of knowing-how. Leaving gender issues aside here, many feminists and defenders of an ethics of care take moral knowledge to be a kind of knowing-how. In her book *Caring*, Nel Noddings wrote:

We may present a coherent and enlightening picture without *proving* anything and, indeed, without claiming to present or to seek moral *knowledge* or moral *truth*. The hand that steadied us as we learned to ride our first bicycle did not provide propositional knowledge, but it guided and supported us all the same, and we finished up “knowing how.” (1984: 3).

Thus, according to Noddings, caring, the fundamental moral relationship in her view, is a form of knowing-how and not of theoretical knowledge. The same may be true of other fundamental moral notions, for instance, respect: it may involve knowing-how, that is, an ability to re-*cognize* an individual as a person with dignity and to defer to her rights and ends.³

One of the main intentions of this paper is to criticize what I would like to call “the propositionalistic doctrine,” according to which *propositional* knowledge is the only knowledge proper. A good example of this view is represented by Ayer’s *Language, Truth and Logic*, where a sentence has meaning if and only if the *proposition* it contains can be verified. Since moral judgments are composed of pseudo concepts, they do not express knowledge at all. It is clear that when Ayer denies that moral judgments are propositions, he had in mind only “speculative knowledge”, either about facts or about values (1990: 104). As we will see in the fourth section, this is a common assumption in the debate between non-cognitivists and cognitivists, which obfuscates a clear understanding of moral phenomena. Let me, then, examine in which terms moral knowledge can be understood as a particular kind of knowledge-how.

1. A provisional analysis of knowing-how

It seems promising to start by analyzing what “knowledge” itself means. Consider, then, Wittgenstein’s remarks on this point in his *Philosophical Investigations*:

150: The grammar of the word “knows” is evidently closely related to that of “can”, “is able to”. But also closely related to that of “understand.” (‘Mastery’ of a technique,)

151: But there is also *this* use of the word “to know”: we say “Now I know!” – and similarly “Now I can do it!” and “Now I understand!”⁴

Note that Wittgenstein is making a remark about the grammar of the word “knows,” that is, he is clarifying the rules for the use of such a word. In ordinary language, we in fact use “knowing” as a synonymous word for “being capable of”. For example, in the sentence “I know how to ride a bicycle” the expression “I know how to” can be substituted by “I can,” *salva veritate*.

Wittgenstein's notes on the grammar of 'know' are short and it is difficult to see for what they may stand. Hacker and Baker comment on the above passage in the following way: "knowing, understanding, and being able to do something are closely related, and categorically different from inner states (whether of mind or of brain, whether conscious or unconscious.)" (1992: 588) As it was pointed out above, the main applications of the distinction between knowing-that and knowing-how were made in the philosophy of mind (including, as we will see, Ryle's critique of the Cartesian conception of mind as a ghost in the machine, which commits a category-mistake) and in philosophy of language. That is why Hacker and Baker seem to take Wittgenstein's distinction as implying that an introspective psychological account of cognitive states would be partial, if not completely false. It does not follow, however, that a behaviorist would be in a better position. But the central point is that knowing-how requires the ability for *doing* something, which is not an internal, mental state. In the case of knowing-that, a belief may be seen in purely psychological or dispositional terms. This is not the case with knowing-how. Any epistemological account of knowledge that does not recognize this point would certainly be incomplete.

The most known advocate of the distinction between knowing-that and knowing-how is certainly Gilbert Ryle. In his book *The Concept of Mind*, he famously distinguished between knowing-how (e.g., when we speak of learning how to play an instrument) and knowing-that (when we speak of learning that something is the case). In his own terms:

When a person is described by one or another of the intelligence epithets, such as 'shrewd' or 'silly', 'prudent' or 'imprudent', the description imputes to him not the knowledge or ignorance of this or that truth, but the ability, or inability, to do certain sorts of things (1949: 27).

Thus, several human practices such as telling jokes, talking grammatically, playing chess, fishing, arguing, etc ... require the performance of operations which can be done correctly or not, successfully or not. Ryle goes on to point out that philosophers have normally focused on theoretical knowledge and have ignored the question of what it is for someone to know how to perform a task. Knowing-how is, according to Ryle, precisely the ability to perform efficiently those operations that are constitutive of such practices.

A major problem, however, in Ryle's account of knowing-how, as David Carr pointed out (1979: 394f.), is that it is made in terms of the intelligent performance of *abilities* only. It is clear, however, that physical ability may be a necessary condition for knowing-how, but it is not a sufficient one. Besides, it may be the case that a person knows how to do something, even if he lost the ability to perform it (for instance, a person knows how to play the piano even if he loses his two hands in a car accident). Moreover, Ryle explicitly associates to the intellectualist doctrine the idea that knowing-how can be re-assimilated to knowing-that by arguing that intelligent performance

involves the observance of rules (1949: 29). In my opinion, Ryle's problem is, in *The Concept of Mind*, to consider normative statements as propositions. Maxims, imperatives, regulations etc... cannot be true or false, hence they are not propositions *stricto sensu*. This point is made clear by Ryle himself in his 1946 paper "Knowing Now and Knowing That," reprinted in 1971.⁵ Now, any analysis of knowing-how must do justice to the place that such prescriptions play in the performance of activities. That is to say, knowing how to apply a rule cannot be reduced to propositional knowledge. Ryle overlooked the place of the rules in knowing-how and that is why Wittgenstein's remarks on rule following may help to understand better the concept of knowing-how (cf. PI § 184-243).

Many philosophers have, however, tried to develop Ryle's account. For instance, David Carr himself held that knowledge-how is a relation between agents and actions (A brings about p), rather than agents and propositions (A believes that p). He then presents an analysis of knowing-how in the following terms: A knows how to f only if: (i) A may entertain fing as a purpose; (2) A is acquainted with a set of practical procedures necessary for successful fing; (3) A exhibits recognizable success at fing (Carr 1981: 58). Despite the fact that I am sympathetic to Carr's methodological analogy between knowing-that (A knows that p iff: A believes that p; p is true and A has good reasons for believing that p,) and knowing-how, his approach seems faulty. His analysis does not do justice to all the elements of knowing-how, since he does not overcome the dispositional account (see also Ryle 1949: 43-4 for a similar problem). Thus, the second condition should state, if we want to maintain the parallel with an analysis of A knows that p, a more objective requirement (the independence of p's truth). This means that we need to use an analytic method, which keeps the philosophical legacy of overcoming both the immanent-idealist and the transcendent-realist metaphysics.⁶

But to be fair with Carr, he does give us a tip about how to analyze in a more objective way knowing-how. Carr does take the connotations of "knows how" in terms of a sophisticated mastery of complex *rule-governed* practical procedures (1981: 54). In his own terms:

... knowing how in the strong sense to play football is knowing *the rules* of the game, but a statement of the rules of the game is not a theoretical statement but a description of a set of rules of practice, and mastery of the rules bring with it an understanding of an activity rather than a theory. Statements of the rules of a game are essentially of relations between prescriptions rather than descriptions requiring a grasp of practical rather than theoretical discourse. (Carr 1981: 60-1; italics added)

Thus, what is needed is an analysis of knowing-how in terms of mastering the rules of a practice. It is worth also pointing out that Ryle's first paper explicitly says that "Knowing a rule is knowing how." ([1946]: 217).

Let me, then, try to give a provisional analysis of knowing-how, using these suggestions

and assuming that moral behavior is rule-governed. In parallel to A knows that p, we may say that A knows how to fmg iff:

- (i) A was trained to fmg;
- (ii) fmg requires following the rule(s) x (and/or y, z ...);
- (iii) A is capable of following the rule(s) required for fmg.

This analytical model may be better understood if it is illustrated by an example. Consider under which necessary and sufficient conditions we may say that a person knows how, to take Noddings' example, to ride a bicycle. First of all, he must have been trained in some minimal sense, that is, even if it was at the very beginning by observing someone else and trying to mimic. It may be the case that he starts by being held until he could stand by himself and trying to perform the basic movements, etc. Some conditioning may well be necessary but, at some point, he needs to receive basic instructions of how to proceed.

Another necessary condition then is that he learns the required rules of that activity or practice. Rules may here be taken in a very broad sense: from any action-guiding instruction (even if not verbalized) to explicit normative prescriptions (rules and principles) about how to proceed. Thus, he must learn how to stand in equilibrium on the vehicle (x), how to pedal in a synchronized way (y), how to use the handlebars (z), etc... Mastering these rules is essential for knowing how to practice the activity of riding a bicycle. He may also at some point be able to re-invent that activity by reforming the rules. The same condition applies to practices such as playing chess and so on.

Eventually, he is capable of following and applying by himself the mentioned rule(s) and then performing the movements which constitute the very knowledge of how to ride a bicycle. Once he learns how to apply and to follow the required rules and engages in the activity, he may perform in a habitual way the operations that are constitutive of knowing how to ride a bicycle. Knowing-how becomes part of his "second nature," that is, through education this ability becomes part of his being. He builds habits by constant training, which are not only mechanical repetitions, but may involve (self) criticism and redoing. Again, this is true of practices.

The above analysis needs, however, to be complemented by a further distinction since, as it stands, knowing-how may well be applied to many kinds of knowledge, namely, technical, moral, artistic, and so on.⁷ In the next section, I will present a criterion to distinguish moral knowledge from other kinds of knowing-how.

2 . Moral knowledge as a kind of knowing-how

Let me start by pointing out that Aristotle already compared *skills*, which certainly

required knowing-how to produce something, with *virtues or excellences*, arguing that both require some sort of habituation, though he did not reduce one to the other. In Book VI, chapter 9, of his *Nicomachean Ethics*, he held that virtues are not just skills, since the latter involve no reasoning and are quick in their operation, while virtue requires choices and deliberations, which may take time before decision and execution of an action.⁸ Granted, virtues are not opinion or scientific knowledge, but the comparison between skills and virtues may just show that there is more than one kind of knowing-how. That is to say, art requires knowing-how to make things while a virtue such as prudence is knowing-how to secure the ends for one's life.

Now, in order to distinguish moral knowledge from the other kinds of knowing-how, one can stipulate that *moral* rules require an action to be done for its own sake, either because it is *prima facie* good or right in itself.⁹ We may consider here not just the Aristotelian tradition, according to which a good action is its own end, or the Kantian understanding of moral laws as categorical imperatives, commanding an action to be done for its own sake, but also Wittgenstein's criterion for a moral judgment. In his own words: There must be some sort of ethical reward and ethical punishment, but this must lie in the action itself. (*Tractatus*: 6.422) Thus, a moral rule commands an action to be done for its own sake and has a categorical form. If we observe ordinary moral rules such as "at least, do no harm," etc. we may recognize that this is indeed the case.

To say that knowing-how requires the mastering of rules and, in the moral case, the ability to understand and to apply a specific set of rules, does not imply that the moral life is composed only by rules. On the contrary, rules may be taken only as the *objective* core of moral life and the other ingredients can be understood in reference to them. For example, some norms are more general (principles) while others are more specific (rules) and then moral sentiments, such as shame and guilt, can be explained as a failure to live up to the standards required by moral rules. Virtues are principle-based qualities of character and so on.

Moral knowing-how, however, involves more than rules. Kant and Wittgenstein recognize that there may be rules which guide the application of other rules, but that cannot be the case *ad infinitum*. By making the distinction between understanding and judgment in the first *Critique* (A133; B172), Kant acknowledges the problem as to whether something does or does not fall under a rule, eventually, it could only be established by means of another rule. Kant's solution is to argue that judgment, as the faculty of subsuming under rules, is a peculiar talent, which can only be practiced, but cannot be taught. Consider what Kant wrote in the first *Critique* about *judgment*:

a peculiar talent which can be practiced only, and cannot be taught. It is the specific quality of so-called mother-wit; and its lack no school can make good. For although an abundance of rules borrowed from the insight of others may indeed be proffered to, and as it were grafted upon, a limited understanding, the power of rightly employing them must belong to the learner himself. (B171)

Thus, Kant recognized the need for a special talent to apply rules even in the theoretical domain that cannot be reduced to knowing-that.

In his paper “Kant’s Concept of Practical Reason,” however, Walsh argues that, because Kant’s philosophy is committed to a dualistic metaphysics, he “had no clear knowledge of the distinction between ‘knowing how’ and ‘knowing that’” (1974: 194).¹⁰ In his comment on Walsh’s paper, Scott-Taggart argues that Kant was not unaware of the concept of knowing-how, quoting a passage where Kant says that doctors and lawyers who have performed well during their schooling, but who, when they have to give advice, do not know how to set about it (1974: 255). Furthermore, Scott-Taggart argues that the concept of knowing-how has great philosophical importance, but it is irrelevant to the concept of rational action. He recognizes that there may well be persons versed in moral theory who are absolutely lost when it comes to moral practice because they lack the perceptiveness to recognize in practice what they well know, or would know, to be morally relevant in theory: such men lack what Kant calls the rare talent of *judicium discretivum*.¹¹ Scott-Taggart’s explanation for Kant’s neglect of the concept of knowing-how is “because he was above all interested in developing a theory of reason that was *normative* for such practice.” (1974: 255). But this is not a good defense of Kant’s presumed fault since one may well construct a theory of moral knowing-how without explicit normative intentions. At least, one may give a purely meta-ethical account of knowing-how independently of assuming a specific normative approach, either deontological, consequentialist or virtue-based. This is a presupposition of the present paper, anyway.

Facing a similar problem, Wittgenstein, in his *Philosophical Investigations* (§ 84), asks whether we can imagine a rule determining the application of another rule. Both Kant and Wittgenstein may be dealing with a specific skeptical problem, which makes it impossible to apply rules. Wittgenstein argues in a Kantian way when he emphasizes that to obey a rule, to give an order, etc. are customs and that to teach someone how to apply a rule can be done only by means of examples and by practice. Thus, to stop a regress *ad infinitum* in the application of rules, we need to acknowledge that some training, some sort of practical talent is in possession of the agent for knowing-how to apply rules. The ability to know how to apply rules is learned, practiced, etc. One of the merits of the analytical model presented in the first section is to make this point clearer. It shows also the cognitive elements of knowing-how that cannot be reduced to knowing-that, for example, abilities and rules.

3. Can moral knowing-how be reduced to knowing-that?

One could, however, argue that knowing-how has no distinctive nature by itself and may even be reductively analyzed in terms of knowing-that. In fact, Stanley and Williamson, in

their much commented paper “Knowing How,” argued recently that knowing-how is a *species* of knowing-that (2001: 410). According to them, sentences such as “Hannah knows how to ride a bicycle” contain a proposition that is ascribed to Hannah and it is true in

... a context *c* if and only if there is some contextually relevant way *w* such that Hannah stands in the knowledge-that relation to the Russellian proposition that *w* is a way for Hannah to ride a bicycle, and Hannah entertains this proposition under a practical mode of presentation. (Stanley & Williamson 2001: 430)

Thus, the statements that the subject of ascriptions of knowing-how are said to involve ways of engaging in actions, but still are, according to them, *propositions*.

Despite the fact that Stanley & Williamson do not clearly want to present a *reductive* analysis of knowing-how, they missed the point of the distinction between knowing-how and knowing-that, since it is not just a linguistic one, but it may well be coined to show that there is not only *propositional* knowledge.¹² Thus, it may well be the case that *some* kinds of knowing-how involve propositions, but others may not. I will return to this point soon. Moreover, Stanley & Williamson’s strategy seems to work because they refuse the idea that there is something distinctive about knowing-how, but they introduce a *practical* mode of presentation, which is propositional, though in a “different guise.” This is very obscure and makes their argument that knowing-how is just a *species* of knowing-that flawed. The opposite thesis may well be true: any proposition may depend upon an agent knowing-how to relate a function to an argument or a predicate (a quality, an attribute, a relation) to a subject.

One may also object that we ascribe knowing-how to babies and even to animals and they seem to lack the ability to apply rules since my analysis assumes that knowing-how is related to practices which are rule-governed. For instance, a baby knows how to suck milk from her mother’s breast and elephants know how to cross a river. The question then is this: does this characterize knowledge in a strong sense? If we define knowing-how, using our provisional analysis presented above as “the ability to apply rules acquired by training,” then clearly the answer is “No”. But one may provide a distinct analysis and then *use* a different definition of “knowing how”. Thus, if one wants to use knowing-how for babies and elephants, I would have no strong objection, since the words have the meaning we want to give to them, but then I would make a further distinction between specific, rule-governed (and intentional) knowing-how, and perhaps general, natural (non-intentional) knowing-how, which may include the performance of instinctive behaviors. This distinction makes room for the following case: many persons know how, for instance, to separate good and bad horses without being able to present the criterion. Thus, knowing-how may be just implicit. In the case of moral knowledge, it seems clear that it may be the truth that we have both

species of knowing-how (for instance, feeling natural compassion and following the rule “keep your promises”), but only the rule-governed behavior is capable of being justified in an objective and universal way. That is to say, a rule sets a standard of behavior and it is objective in the sense that it guides the action of all agents.

Let me now explore in a more detailed way how close to “real morality” is this analysis of moral knowledge in terms of knowing-how. It is possible to give several examples and perhaps the clearest one is acting virtuously. As Ryle points out,

When a person knows how to do things of a certain sort, we call him ‘acute’, ‘shrewd’, ‘scrupulous’, ‘ingenious’, ‘discerning’, ‘inventive’, ‘an expert cook’, ‘a good general’, or ‘a good examiner’, etc. In doing so we are describing a part of his character, or crediting him with a certain dispositional excellence. ([1946]: 223)

As I said above, Aristotle compared virtuous activity with skills, but he also distinguishes moral virtues (e.g., justice) and intellectual excellences (e.g., practical wisdom). It is clear that to know how to behave in a prudent way in such and such circumstances is a good example and strong evidence for the kind of moral epistemology we are trying to develop. Obviously, virtuous activity is taken here as principle governed (either by *mesotes* (right-mean) or by the Categorical Imperative or the Principle of Utility or any other meta-norm), but I cannot develop this point further. Moreover, one may realize that, even if we do not have a legal conception of morality, it is clear that it is possible to say that I know how to follow such and such rule. One may or not know how to feel sympathetic concern for those in need; one may or not know how to respect a person; etc. Therefore, moral knowledge as conceived in any normative ethical theory is better understood as a kind of knowing-how.

It is important to point out that my analysis of knowing-how does not commit itself with the idea that morality or any other human practice is completely belief-free or absolutely nonpropositional. As Ryle himself points out, there are parallelisms and divergences between knowing-how and knowing-that (1949: 28; 59).¹³ For instance, we never speak of a person as having partial knowledge of a fact, but we may say of a person that he has a capacity in a limited degree (e.g., an ordinary chess player knows the game well, but Kasparov knows it better).

In fact, it may be the case that there is an *internal link* between knowing-how and knowing-that. For instance, when we learn how to ride a bicycle, the process involves the acquisition of many beliefs which complement the successful performance of it. Thus, apart from being guided by the hand of an instructor, we need to believe that we can do it, that the bicycle is not falling, that it is going to work and so on. It is worth quoting here at some length Mackie’s remarks on Hintikka’s paper “Practical vs. Theoretical Reason –An Ambiguous Legacy”, where the latter discusses the

'maker's knowledge' and argues for the inseparability of theoretical and practical reason:

Practical knowledge in another sense is knowing how to do or how to make something. This may involve no theoretical knowledge, in which case knowing how consists simply of being able to do or to make whatever it may be; or it may involve theoretical knowledge of the kinds used in the intelligent making ... In either case, if one both intends to make an X and knows how to make an X, then given favorable circumstances (materials, instruments, and effort) one will make an X. But this conjunction of intending and knowing how will not give the maker any specific, direct knowledge of the product of his intentions. If his knowing how is of the non-theoretical variety, this conjunction will ensure at most that he makes an X, not even that he knows at all that he is making one or has made one. If his knowing how includes a theoretical element, then indeed he will know that the processes he is performing are appropriate to produce an X, but his consequential knowledge that he is producing an X rests partly on empirical and observational premises, and can be no more direct or authoritative than his knowledge of these. (1974: 104-5).

Thus, we may have both cases: (i) a "pure" knowing-how and (ii) knowing-how "mixed" with knowing-that. To be more precise about the possibility of knowing-how: practical knowledge is not exhausted by knowledge of, say, causal connections. It may, however, involve such knowledge as an element.

What about moral knowledge: is it a pure form of knowing-how? On this point, Walsh wrote: "The morally wise man is not necessarily the man with the strongest will or the widest knowledge of truths; he needs both, but he needs knowledge of another kind as well." (1974: 212) Moreover, it is necessary to point out that in moral education we learn by example, which may be a pure form of knowing-how. But, we need not be committed to this thesis that moral knowledge is just a matter of knowing-how, without any beliefs. It is perfectly possible to say "I know that I have to be prudent." In order to learn how to be prudent, we may look at what a prudent person does and try to imitate him, but we need also to believe that we are capable of deliberating, of perceiving the appropriate singularities of an action and knowing-how to choose the best means to our ends. Thus, it may be the case that beliefs-formation and abilities to follow rules complement each other. Intelligence informs actions; actions inform intelligence. The mistake to be avoided here is to refuse the idea that knowing-how is not a form of knowledge, as Ayer and many others thought, or that it can be reduced to knowing-that, that is, to propositional or demonstrative knowledge. The point is that it is not enough to know-that such and such obligation is my duty, but it is also necessary to know-how to act in order to fulfill it. *Acrasia* may be explained in terms of the lack of knowing-how: the moral person has more than just moral beliefs, since he knows-how to behave.

The last point I would like to discuss in this section is whether a moral epistemology based on knowing-how needs to commit itself to a foundationalist outlook. As the case of knowing-

how to ride a bicycle makes clear, there is always room for improving, perfecting our abilities, as well as for moral knowledge. Improving an ability requires continuous learning, even retraining. As Ryle points out, 'part-trained' is a significant phrase, 'part-informed' is not (1949: 59). Practice makes perfect: if it is possible to speak, as we saw above, of knowing-how to play chess with a limited degree of ability, even Kasparov may have much to learn (especially, when he needs to beat computers playing chess). In the case of knowing-how, we may learn to improve by correcting our mistakes. Thus, we may say that knowing-how can also be seen in a fallibilist vein: there is no need to advocate "infallibility" in knowing-how to act morally. There is more merit in improving than in stopping at a presumption of moral certainty. This means that one is not just trained to follow a rule, but may be re-educated or perfect himself by practicing and following it in a more appropriate way. Or, as may even be the case, the rules themselves need to be re-written, perfected, improved, eliminating cases not foreseen, overcoming internal contradictions and so on. In this case, the rules would require a constant and continuous process of improving knowing-how to apply them.

The conclusion of this section is that moral knowledge cannot be reduced to knowing-that. In Ryle's terms, "we cannot call an imperative a truth or falsehood. The Moral Law refuses to behave like a fact." ([1946]: 22).

4. Avoiding the dilemma of meta-ethics

A major contemporary ethical problem can be put in the following terms:

Either there are real ethical properties and facts or there are not. If there are, the problem is to say what these properties and facts might be like, how there could be such properties and facts. But if there are no such properties and facts, the problem is to explain why we think, talk, and feel as though there must be and to explain, moreover, how ethical thought is not undermined by the lack of such properties. (Darwall 1998: 26)

Much of the Twentieth-Century meta-ethical debate can be reconstructed by locating philosophers and intellectual movements on one horn of this dilemma. For example, starting with Moore's *PE*, "good" was believed to refer to a simple, non-natural and non-metaphysical property, namely goodness. Nonetheless, it could be supervenient upon natural states of affairs, such as people having pleasant states of mind contemplating works of art. Thus, there were intrinsically good states of affairs and it was possible to hold that the judgments that express them were true (synthetic *a priori* true). Supposedly, there were also moral facts. Ross, disaffected by Moore's insistence that only goodness was a moral property, held that rightness was also a simple and indefinable

property making moral statements true, such as the ones asserting *prima facie* duties (e.g. keeping promises) directly apprehensible by intuition. On the other hand, Wittgenstein, in the *Tractatus*, starting from a very narrow conception of *proposition* as a model (*bild*) of a state of affairs, held that moral judgments have no sense, that is, they cannot be true or false despite the fact that they be communicated in some way. Consequently, there were no values in the world. Many other non-cognitivists, such as the logical-positivist A. Ayer, the emotivist C. Stevenson and the prescriptivist R. Hare, also denied that moral properties and facts are part of, to use Mackie's expression "the fabric of the world." We do not need to multiply examples.

The fundamental dilemma of meta-ethics may, however, have no direct solution. Instead, it may have a *dissolution*, but I will not argue this point here. Instead, I will maintain that there is a way of guaranteeing moral knowledge without falling into the trap of the dilemma. First, note that the dilemma is formulated in *ontological* terms in order to guarantee objectivity (or to deny it). Thus, one way of avoiding the dilemma of meta-ethics is to hold that there are different *kinds* of knowledge and that moral knowledge is a form of knowing-how, without falling into these ontological difficulties. Thus, practical cognitivism is not committed to any need for an ontological anchorage of moral judgments on mysterious "moral facts."

It seems clear, furthermore, that one problematic assumption of the debate between many versions of cognitivism and non-cognitivism is a very narrow conception of knowledge itself: normally it is defined as justified true belief, which presupposes the propositional form only. This is the "propositionalistic doctrine" to which Ayer is clearly committed. Then, cognitivists such as intuitionists have difficulties in showing how moral judgments fulfill these requirements and need to postulate a special faculty and sometimes even queer entities such as mysterious non-natural properties. Non-cognitivists rightly denied both postulations, but then turn to the opposite side: moral judgments are just *expressions* of feelings, emotions etc. In a more radical version, they deny that such judgments have meaning, since they are not propositions in the strict sense. However, the dilemma does not appear if we have a different understanding of knowledge in a nonpropositional or nonrepresentational philosophical account. That is why we need to consider moral knowledge in terms of knowing-how.

Let me, now, make a distinction between a narrow and a broad sense of 'cognitivism.' In the narrow sense, cognitivism is the meta-ethical view which holds that moral judgments are capable of truth and falsehood. In a broader sense, ethical cognitivism holds that moral judgments are capable of figuring in a system of logical and evidential relationships. It seems that few ethicists would be non-cognitivists in the latter sense nowadays. For instance, sophisticated forms of expressivism or quasi-realism are certainly cognitivist in this sense, if not in the former. To deny these weak tenets of moral epistemology means to be committed to the idea that morality is non-rational. Now, the question is: how can we build a reasonable account of moral knowledge to best fit the requirements of the broad sense of cognitivism? Certainly, practical cognitivism, based on knowing-how, is the

best answer to this question.

It is time then to spell out some of the main advantages of considering moral knowledge as a kind of knowing-how. The main positive outcome is that it avoids many metaphysical problems, which are currently troubling meta-ethics, for example, the main metaphysical assumptions used by realists, anti-realists, quasi-realists, etc. in their quarrellings, which lead to the dilemma of meta-ethics. First, it is not committed to the inadequate debate of whether or not moral judgments are true or false and, consequently, with the search for the appropriate theory of truth in ethics. As Carr points out, “since that which an agent knows how to do is not a proposition but an action, it can be neither true nor false, although a truth value may be assigned to a report of his knowing how to do something.” (1981: 59) Moreover, it does not need to postulate queer kinds of entities, such as mysterious properties or moral facts. That is to say, this way of understanding moral knowledge is, so to speak, metaphysically-free. As Ryles points out, moral philosophers will stop asking illegitimate questions once they realize that knowing-how to behave is not a sort of knowing-that: “Other bogus ethico-epistemological questions also vanish, like the question of whether imperatives or ought-statements are synthetic or analytic, *a priori* or *a posteriori*.” ([1946]: 221). These are some of the advantages of practical cognitivism.

I am not trying, however, to provide here a full account of the tenets of practical cognitivism which are involved in the distinction between moral knowing-how and non-moral knowing-how. For instance, it is another important meta-ethical issue to discuss whether morality understood as a kind of knowing-how is intrinsically motivating or not. That is to say, the issue of internalism in moral psychology may receive a different light from practical cognitivism, even if it does not solve the dilemma of meta-ethics. Much work needs, however, to be done in this regard and this is a topic for another paper.

Final remarks

This work has tried to show that propositional knowledge is not the only kind of knowledge that there is and that some kinds of knowing-how cannot be analyzed in terms of representational knowledge only, since it is related to practical rather than theoretical rationality. That is to say, knowing-how involves reasoning about what to do and not only descriptions of what things stand for in the world. Moreover, the paper presented a way of making the distinction between moral knowing-how and other kinds. Now, despite the fact that knowing-how and knowing-that are distinct, they complement each other. The philosophical mistake to be avoided here is to hold that only knowing-that is knowledge proper or that there is no place for cognitivism in ethics if we don't postulate moral facts or the possibility that moral judgments may be true or false. In fact, I advanced a particular meta-ethical view called “practical cognitivism,” which holds that moral

knowledge is better understood as a specific kind of knowing-how. Therefore, the present analysis of knowing-how provides a way of envisaging objectivity and knowledge in morality, avoiding the difficulties of the fundamental dilemma of meta-ethics.

Notes

¹ This work is part of the results of a research carried out at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor during my postdoctorate in philosophy (2007). I would like to thank Steven Darwall and Peter Railton for their comments on a previous version of this paper. Thanks also to André Klaudat, Hugh Lacey, Marco Azevedo, Maria Cecilia Carvalho and Wilson Mendonça for our discussions during an oral presentation of this paper at the *Principia* Symposium. I would also like to thank CAPES for financial support.

² For instance, Devitt held that semantic competence is “an ability or a skill: a piece of knowledge-how not knowledge-that” (1996: 52).

³ It is also worth pointing out that bioethics, in its original Potterian project, was meant to be “a new wisdom,” that is, “the knowledge of how to use knowledge’ for man’s survival and for improvement in the quality of life.” (Potter 1971: 1). It seems clear that *wisdom* requires more than knowing-that, that is, to have information about how the world is since it involves a way of being, of acting and living well.

⁴ By introducing the distinction between knowing-that and knowing-how using Wittgenstein’s project of a philosophical grammar, I want to avoid the difficulties associated with Ryle’s obscure reasons for criticizing the so-called “intellectualist doctrine,” which “tries to define intelligence in terms of the apprehension of truths, instead of the apprehension of truths in terms of intelligence.” According to Ryle, it involves a regress *ad infinitum*: “The crucial objection to the intellectualist legend is this. The consideration of propositions is itself an operation the execution of which can be more or less intelligent, less or more stupid. But if, for any operation to be intelligently executed, a prior theoretical operation had first to be performed and performed intelligently, it would be a logical impossibility for anyone ever to break into the circle.” (1949: 30; see also Ryle [1946]: 213) It is not clear, however, as Stanley and Williamson correctly pointed out (2001: 412-417), what the real problem is (See also Snowdon (2003: 19) for a similar critique).

⁵ There are interesting differences between Ryle’s 1946 version of the paper “Knowing How and Knowing That” and the Chapter II of *The concept of mind*. For instance, the former contains more illustrations from moral philosophy. It explicitly mentions ‘practical reason,’ virtuous persons, etc. as requiring knowing how. More importantly, in 1949, Ryle associated a rule-governed activity with the intellectualist doctrine and that is not the case in his 1946’s version of the distinction between knowing-how and knowing-that.

⁶ By this I mean only that an analysis may contain psychological or other subject-related elements, but also need to be composed of subject-independent ingredients (e.g., p is T). This is the lesson given by Kant and Wittgenstein that we should never forget.

⁷ If Russell is right, there are also different kinds of knowing-that, namely knowledge by acquaintance (of objects, truths) and by description (of “the so-and-so”). (See Chapter 5 of his *Problems of Philosophy* for more details.) But one may here mention also intuitive knowledge, perceptual knowledge, etc. as kinds of non-propositional knowledge. I shall however focus on moral knowledge only.

⁸ It is worth reminding here Aristotle’s definition of prudence: a man of practical wisdom is said ... “to be able to deliberate well about what is good and expedient for himself, not in some particular respect, e.g. about what sorts of thing conduce to health or to strength, but about what sorts of thing conduce to the good life in general.” Book VI, 5 of *NE*. To act prudently or wisely and many other qualities of character, as Ryle himself points out (1949: 43; 50), requires knowing-how to deliberate.

⁹ This stipulation does not rule out any normative ethical theory. Practical cognitivism is normatively neutral. This is true even of sophisticated forms consequentialism, since the value of an action may be considered together with the intrinsic value of its effects.

¹⁰ In a more detailed way, his criticism is this: “The other respect in which Kant’s account of moral thinking needs supplementation is by the development of a theory of moral know-how. It seems to me plain that being virtuous involves skill as well as will; the virtuous man needs to know what to do in particular situations, as well as to have the resolution and determination to do it. Kant has plenty to say about the element of will which is necessary to virtue, but is silent on the element of skill, perhaps because he wanted to make out that morality was wholly in men’s power. He is of course right in arguing that being moral is not a mere accomplishment, like being able to play the piano well, but something that requires character. But that fact could be recognized without leaving skill out of the story altogether. If it has no place in the moral life, what is meant by describing one person as more morally sensitive than another, or by saying that one can make moral decisions with intelligence or the lack of it? How can one hope to improve on one’s past moral performance, on this account of the matter?” (Walsh 1974: 211-2). However, as I pointed out above, since Aristotle we know that virtuous activity is, in some respects, similar to skillful action, but in others, very different.

¹¹ Scott-Taggart wonders whether Kant failed perhaps to appreciate that practice precedes theory: that knowing how to speak a language, for example, precedes the development of linguistic theory, or that knowing how to reason properly precedes the development of logical theory (1974: 255). But here the right answer to Walsh, who held that Kant has

nothing interesting to say about practical reason (reason concerned with action), is to argue that Kant explicitly held the priority of the practical over the theoretical use of pure reason in the second *Critique*. On Kant's meta-ethical commitments, see Rauscher (2002).

¹² Rumfitt has rightly criticized Stanley & Williamson's approach arguing that they rely upon the particularities of the English language and that the problems involving embedded questions (how, where, whom, which and why) and untensed clauses may vary among natural languages such as French, Russian, etc. (2003: 162). Thus, the linguistic evidence bearing on Stanley and Williamson's thesis is equivocal. In fact, many languages do distinguish knowing-how (kennen, savoir, saber) from knowing that (wissen, connaître, conhecer). Thus, in Portuguese one may say "Sei como andar nesta bicicleta" but not "Conheço como andar nesta bicicleta." Similarly, one may say "Posso andar nesta bicicleta." Thus, can implies know-how. For other and similar criticisms to Stanley & Williamson see: Schiffer: 2001 and Koethe 2002.

¹³ It is worth noting that in the case of knowing-how we may also have a problem similar to Moore's paradox: If I say "I know how to ride a bicycle, but I cannot do it," I may utter an absurd statement. On Moore's Paradox see: Baldwin (1990, 2006) and Green & Williams (2006).

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