

Dissertation Summary: “How Know-How Explains Skill”

Dylan Bianchi

Human intelligence has multifarious expressions. Some are paradigmatically *intellectual*: we reason our way to new conclusions, deliberate about our actions, and construct scientific theories. But other expressions of intelligence do not seem similarly intellectual. These include *skillful performances* such as riding a bicycle, performing a sonata, or painting a portrait. In virtue of what do such performances express intelligence? A natural answer appeals to the subject’s *knowledge-how*, an underlying cognitive state that guides a subject in executing her skill.

What sort of cognitive state might know-how be? According to Jason Stanley and Timothy Williamson’s influential doctrine of *intellectualism*, to know how to ϕ is know that one could ϕ in way w . Now intellectualists acknowledge that simply knowing the right piece of information doesn’t suffice for knowing how: fill a person’s head with detailed information about the mechanics of bicycle riding; still, that person may not be in a cognitive position to skillfully ride a bike. Intellectualists attempt to solve the problem by requiring that the information be grasped under a *practical mode of presentation*. But many theorists have found practical modes of presentation to be ad hoc and mysterious.

In “Know-How and Information Access” I argue that an important part of the work practical modes of presentation are introduced to do can be accomplished by a condition on the *purposes for which a piece of information can be easily accessed*. Purpose-relative information access properties are not only independently motivated; they include high-level functional features of human cognitive systems which make the difference between know-how and its absence. Moreover, viewing know-how as involving a kind of purpose-specific access to information casts light on three of the state’s distinctive features: gradability, failure to be transmitted by testimony, and immunity from certain kinds of epistemic defeat.

I mentioned that intellectualists identify knowledge how to ϕ with knowledge of a proposition concerning a way of ϕ ing. But what exactly is a way of ϕ ing, and how does grasp of one enable the guidance of skillful action? A natural proposal identifies a way of ϕ ing with a set of general-purpose *rules* or *instructions* for ϕ ing. Indeed it is hard to imagine what *else* a way of ϕ ing could be such that grasp of it could possibly account for the flexible ability to ϕ characteristic of know-how. In “How Know-How Guides Skill”, I propose a different model for how know-how guides skillful activity. Instead of internalized rules, I identify know-how with perceptually based grasp of the *constitutive standards* for performances of the action ϕ —viz. the standards that determine what makes a performance of ϕ good *qua* performance of ϕ . The resulting account provides insight into several phenomena connected with know-how and skilled action: practical modes of presentation, the fine-grained control exhibited by skillful performance, and the phenomenology of unreflective skill.

In “Agency in Skill”, I shift focus from the question of intelligence to the closely related question of *agency*. What makes the highly precise but spontaneous and often inarticulate modulations to an activity during skillful performance attributable to the subject *qua* agent? Attempting to rationalize these modulations by viewing them as the upshot of a deliberative process over-intellectualizes skillful action. Rationalizing them by identifying them as parts of a larger action (following a suggestion by Michael Thompson) misses a more informative psychological level of rationalization that appeals to the subject’s knowledge-how. Invoking the idea from my second chapter that knowing how involves grasping the constitutive standards of an action-kind, I show how the minute modulations and adjustments characteristic of controlled performance can be viewed as a response to normative demands arising from the nature of the activity itself. I suggest that this way of ‘rationalizing’ skillful control harmonizes with a general conception of agency as action performed ‘under the guise of the good.’