

KNOW-HOW, ABILITY AND ACTION

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ABSTRACT

In contemporary epistemology the intellectualists have conceptualized the notion of knowing-how to Φ as a species of knowing-that Φ which is a propositional attitude. In this article I shall dwell into the continuum between the conceptualization of knowledge as a performance which leads us to the question; is knowing how to Φ a necessary condition for the agent to perform Φ ? What does doing Φ preclude on the agent's part? Does knowing how to Φ precede the ability Φ or is the converse true?

Keywords: Knowledge-How, Action, Aristotle, Ability, Aptness.

BACKGROUND

As propounded by Stanley¹, Knowing-How is a species of knowing-that, in the sense that when an agent knows how to Φ , the agent also has propositional knowledge of the kind where the subject knows w such that w is a way to do Φ and is complimented with a practical mode of presentation². In simple terms, when one knows how to ride a bicycle it is different from knowing that this is a bicycle, but it is not absolutely different since for the intellectualists knowing how to Φ is supervened by some sort of propositional knowledge on part of the subject³.

My intention is to invoke Sosa's theory of knowledge as action in the contemporary debate of the intellectualists like Williamson and Stanley and anti-intellectualists like Alva Noe and Katherine Hawley.

The rules that govern a set also govern the members of the set [Assumption]

All knowledge how is a species of knowledge that [The intellectualist stance]

Knowledge that is propositional in nature

Sosa's aptness condition is applicable to propositional knowledge⁴

Therefore, Sosa's aptness condition is applicable to knowledge that [Modus Ponens 2,4]

All that is applicable to knowledge that is also applicable to knowledge how

Therefore, Sosa's aptness condition is applicable to knowledge how. [MP 5,6]

Since Knowledge-How is considered to be a species of Knowledge-That and Sosa's Theory of Aptness is applicable to Knowledge-That, Sosa's Theory of Aptness must be applicable to Knowledge-How.

Knowledge as an ability would involve considering Sosa's concept of knowledge as an ability where he defines knowledge with his criteria of Aptness. An act is considered knowledge when an act is performed by an agent, with accuracy and involves the agent's adroitness⁵. The criteria is as follows:

Is the act performed involve the skill of the agent?

YES/NO

Is the act performed with accuracy?

YES/NO

Is the accuracy attained because of adroitness?

YES/NO

If and only if all the answers to the above criteria are “YES” will the action be categorized as apt knowledge on part of the agent.

For example, if an archer aims at the bulls eye and shoots the arrow exactly where she wanted it to land, the act is considered as apt knowledge. This is because the archer has employed her adroitness and has attained accuracy by shooting the arrow where she desired. Therefore according to Sosa the formulation of apt knowledge where B stands for ability and D for adroitness and A for aptness, will be as follows-

$$A(x) ((B(y) \wedge D(y)) \rightarrow x=y)$$

There are several difficulties which arise when considering this definition of Sosa's knowledge as an act, which include Gettierized cases, unsafe arguments and un-sensitive arguments which have been dealt with in detail by Pritchard (2005)⁶ and shall not be a part of discussion here.

To the common sensical eye it seems logical that in order for S to do Φ , S ought to have knowledge-how Φ . For example let's consider two propositions:

1. If one were to play the piano then one ought to know how to play the piano.
2. If one knows how to play the piano one ought to play the piano.

In the case (2), one may know how to play the piano but may choose not to play the piano, therefore knowing how Φ is not a necessary condition to do Φ . Hence we can logically conclude from the above argumentation that Knowing how to Φ should in common sense be an antecedent to the action by S of doing Φ .

However logical this may seem we shall introspect the crevasses in this logical philosophical mountain in the next section.

EXPLORING THE NECESSARY CONDITION

When a Pianist plays the piano, it is assumed on part of the audience that the pianist knows how to play the piano. This assumption can easily be broken by the following hypothesis

1. The Piano being played is actually a dummy piano and the music is actually being played on hidden speakers in the auditorium that give the illusion that the pianist is playing the piano.
2. The Piano is a specially designed electrical piano where one may feed what one wants to play and it gets played without the pianist making an effort on it. The pianist may press whatever keys he wishes to but the output is prerecorded in the piano.

3. Here the Pianist suddenly lost a significant chunk of his memory in an accident in the green room minutes before the performance and nobody knows about it, not even the pianist, for he is unaware of the accident himself. He plays a bunch of keys and they by sheer luck get translated into a melody.⁷

In all the above mentioned scenarios the pianist is able to deliver a successful performance without employing the knowledge of how to perform. However, by Sosa's criteria of an Apt performance all three would fail to be categorized as knowledge because none involved the application of knowledge-how to Φ , which would roughly translate as adroitness in Sosa's enterprise. Therefore it would be safe to state that "A successful performance alone is not necessary for an action Φ to employ knowledge-how Φ ."

With regard to the accuracy of the agent, the agent can possess the know-how Φ , but may fail to perform the action Φ . For example:

1. A pianist has been practicing for his show in Madison square for the past 3 years and has been doing it successfully on a daily basis on every day for the 3 years prior to the show. However on the day of the show, the anxiety of the humungous crowd affects his performance and leads him into not performing the piece as aimed thus making his performance unsuccessful, even though he had the knowledge how to perform successfully and had demonstrated the ability at previous occasions.
2. A real life example of Michael Phelps losing to a debutant Olympic swimmer, Joseph Schooling in the Breast stroke event of the 2016 Olympics.

In the above mentioned two scenarios the agents have the knowledge how to perform their task but fail to deliver or perform the task when required of them. This aligns with the hypothesis of Krasia as used by Stanley⁸ to advance his intellectualism discourse in his brilliant book Know-How (2011). Additionally, this act would fail to fulfill Sosa's Criteria of Apt action for the act is not accurate. Therefore it would be safe to state that even if an agent has know how Φ , it does not necessitate in accuracy of doing Φ . Solely possessing the knowledge how Φ , does not necessarily lead to the action Φ .

From the above mentioned scenarios we can draw the following argument with regard to the necessary condition for an act Φ to entail knowledge-how to Φ .

1. If S performs Φ , without knowing how to Φ , the act would not be termed as an apt act.
2. If S knows-how Φ , then S need not necessarily perform Φ
3. If S performs Φ , then S ought to know-how Φ
4. Therefore, It is necessary for S to know how to Φ , in order to do Φ .

It is therefore clear from the above mentioned argument that there is a continuum in the agent first knowing how to Φ , and then doing Φ . For if the agent performs Φ , without knowing how to Φ it would fail the Aptness criteria of Sosa.⁹

A NEGATIVE CASE FOR THE NECESSARY ARGUMENT

For every case, there is an exception that may lead the carefully constructed philosophical card tower to collapse. I present herewith such a case:

Duncan, who is a novice rower, is canoeing in the white waters of a river known for its intense rapids for the first time and he gets caught up in the rapids. He stumbles and gets his way out of the rapids by rowing the oar in a manner which allowed him to...

In this example Duncan did not possess the know-how of escaping the rapid yet he does by employing the ability that he learned while tackling the rapid in that very moment. Therefore, the act has both the adroitness (for Duncan knew how to use the canoe) and accuracy (for Duncan successfully escaped the rapid), that is required for an action to be apt, thus fulfilling Sosa's Aptness criteria. Duncan still does not know how he came out of the rapid, nor does he know how to tackle the situation if he were to be put in it again. Thus it can be concluded that

For S to do Φ , it is not necessary for S to know-how to Φ

With this argument, I would further my case by stating a scenario which manifests the inconsistency of know-how Φ and ability to do Φ as not being invariably concomitant.

A painter who has lost the sense of colour after an accident views the world in absolute grey scale. He then begins painting in shades of grey. When he paints a sunrise he is capable of portraying the aura of the Sun in shades of grey which he did not know-how he was doing it. He also lacked the ability to do so in normal circumstances (were he to have a normal sense of colors). Even though the absence of know-how Φ and the new found ability to Φ (which was earlier unavailable to the subject), the subject is painting Φ without knowing how Φ or the ability Φ in normal circumstances.¹⁰

In the example, we see that the agent can perform the act Φ without the function of know-how Φ which implies that know-how Φ is not a necessary condition while in order to perform Φ one necessarily ought to have the ability to Φ , implying that ability is a necessary condition but not sufficient.

A Reversed Continuum

Since we have observed certain anomalies when we take the common sense stance of knowing how to Φ to be prior to the ability of Φ . Lets consider the reversed chronology of events where the agent must first possess the ability to Φ and only then the know-how to Φ . For this I shall conceptualize the notion of ability as a potentiality as recorded by Aristotle in his work Theta¹¹.

Lets take a car for instance, we know that a dolphin does not possess the ability to drive a car. A dolphin lacks the potentiality to even perform the act of driving a car. Therefore, a dolphin is incapable of knowing-how to drive a car.

The question is whether the dolphin does not possess the ability to drive a car because it lacks the knowhow of driving a car, or does the dolphin not possess the knowhow of driving the car because the dolphin lacks the ability to drive a car. To put it in propositional terms

1. Does S lack the know-how to Φ , because S lacks the ability to Φ , or
2. Does S lack the ability to Φ , because S lacks the know-how to Φ .

Before we proceed any further the definitions of the discussed terms should be recollected.

Knowledge-How: is a species of propositional knowledge that an agent refers to intentionally or unintentionally prior to acting. For S to do Φ , S intentionally or unintentionally considers the propositional attitude of know-how Φ ¹².

Ability: The agent has the potential to exercise the ability Φ in order to perform action Φ . The ability must be cognitively, biologically and willingly coordinated. Ability is a sort of potentiality in the Aristotelian sense which may require appropriate know-how in order to be actualized into an action.

Action: It is the function of know-how and ability which when harmonized in a way aligns with the intention of the agent. The action is the actualized form of the integration of know-how and ability. S performs action Φ , when S has ability to Φ and know-how to Φ .

$$f(x) = (\forall(y) (A(y) \rightarrow (K(y) \wedge B(y)))) \rightarrow x=y$$

For example, if Nadal performs the action of a backhand, Nadal is cognitively, biologically and willingly able to perform the backhand. Nadal first has the ability to perform the backhand and then he has the know-how of performing a backhand.

It may be argued that a bat uses sound waves to gauge its environment, we as humans do not possess this ability but we know how to use sound waves to gauge the environment. Thus, the know-how Φ does not arise from the ability Φ . However, I would like to oppose such a counter argument for we as humans do not know how to use sound waves to gauge the environment in the same way as bats do, we may use biomimicry or an extended cognitive apparatus like a SONAR machine to replicate the ability of a bat, but the action Φ , does not belong to the agent which in this case would be us. This argument is also complimented by Nagel's "What it is Like to Be a Bat?"¹³. Not only is the bat's mind inaccessible, the potential set of know how is derived from the potential set of abilities.

Therefore, an action is the actualization of the underlying potential ability of the agent accompanied with relevant know-how of the action to be performed.

In short, know how to Φ implies ability to Φ .

ACTION AND WILL

A person may possess the relevant know-how of Φ and the ability to perform Φ and the will to perform action Φ yet may fail to perform Φ in suitable circumstances for the following reason-

1. The agent may just not be able to act even under suitable circumstances even though he employs his will, knowhow and ability concerning Φ .
2. The agent may employ his will to not perform even though he has the know-how and ability to perform Φ .

The first scenario is a mysterious one which deserves an analysis in a separate paper but the second scenario tells us that the agent beyond his know how and ability for Φ , has to employ his will in order to act. Even after he has garnered the will to act, he may fail to perform the act, due to some other reason.

For example, Micheal Phelps knows how to swim freestyle, he also has the ability to swim freestyle but he may choose not to swim freestyle on the day of his Olympic event. He will only act in accordance to his will. The will may overlap with the ethical foundations of every person individually, but to have a determined and immovable will would be considered a virtue according to Aristotle.¹⁴

Therefore the function of Action is further renewed to

$$f(x) = (\forall(y) (A(y) \rightarrow (K(y) \wedge B(y) \wedge W(y)))) \rightarrow x=y$$

Where an agent must possess the know-how, ability and will in order to act.

CONCLUSION

Following from the previously presented arguments and analysis, I have arrived at the three constituents of action which are required when an agent performs action Φ . These are namely know how Φ , ability to do Φ and the will to perform Φ . The chronology of progress is that an agent must first possess the ability to perform to Φ , only then can the agent know how to Φ . The will to perform Φ is the final step preceding the agent actually doing Φ . Ability to perform Φ precedes knowing how to Φ because as explained in section A Reversed Continuum, an agent ought to possess the ability to Φ in order to know how to Φ . A person must have the ability to walk in order to know how to walk. A person must have the ability to live in order to know how to live, since if a person lacks the ability to live (i.e. the person is yet to be born) then a person cannot know how to live.

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