

STUDIES IN THEORETICAL PHILOSOPHY

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Know-how as Competence

A Rylean Responsibilist Account





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for Leonhard

the one who made me sing

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Preface

This book was long in the making. I started to work on the problem of know-how in 2010, when I first read the seminal article “Knowing How” by Jason Stanley and Timothy Williamson (2001). Like many others, I found myself fascinated, outraged, and perplexed at the same time, and I maintained this wonderful combination of attitudes for some time because of the intriguing mixture of explanatory aims and methodological approaches in the ensuing literature. Eventually, I started to focus on the origins of this recent and current debate, the texts of Gilbert Ryle (1945a; 1949), where I finally found an approach to know-how, and the beginnings of an account of this notion, which pointed me to a firm and promising path into the thicket of the discussion. In any case, this is the path I chose to take.

The first version of this book was completed in 2014 and defended in the same year as my doctoral dissertation, which was supervised by Holm Tetens and Tobias Rosefeldt. Since then, I have continued to discuss this material in many ways and to work on the text off and on, eventually turning the thesis into this book. Time and distance have allowed me to improve the book significantly, whatever its remaining flaws may be. I fear that I was unable to give due credit to all of the fascinating work which has been published in the meantime. But then again, what is a book but a temporary snapshot of continuously developing thought.

In working on this project, I had intellectual homes with wonderful colleagues at Freie Universität Berlin and at Westfälische Wilhelms-Universität Münster, and I was able to discuss my ideas at several conferences and in a number of reading groups and departmental colloquia at Freie Universität Berlin, at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, at Technische Universität Berlin, at Ruhr-Universität Bochum, at the University of Cologne, at the University of Duisburg-Essen, at Technische Universität Dresden, at Georg-August-Universität Göttingen, in Kirchberg am Wechsel, at the University of Konstanz, at Universität Leipzig, at Université du Luxembourg, at West-

fälische Wilhelms-Universität Münster, at the University of Osnabrück, at the University of Riga, at the University of St Andrews, and at the University of Vienna.

At these occasions, and in uncounted further conversations, I was immeasurably fortunate to be able to discuss my work with more and with more wonderful friends and colleagues than I could ever have wished. For their criticism, care, and charity, I am deeply, deeply grateful. This book still has many shortcomings. Without this help and support, there would have been many, many more.

Some have accompanied my work on this book from beginning to end, some have touched on it only slightly, and some may even be ignorant of how much they helped me. While I am unable to give due credit to these contributions individually, the least I can do is try, and most certainly fail, to list the names of those who would have deserved this. These are Adam Westra, Alexander Dinges, Andrea Kern, Andreas Müller, Anna Wehofsits, Ansgar Seide, Barbara Vetter, Beate Sachsenweger, Bolesław Czarnecki, Christian Kietzmann, Christian Nimitz, Christian Quast, David Lauer, David Ludwig, Dirk Kindermann, Dirk Koppelberg, Ellen Fridland, Eliot Michaelson, Emanuel Viebahn, Erik Rietveld, Ernest Sosa, Eugen Pissarskoi, Eva-Maria Jung, Fabian Börchers, Greg Sax, Gregor Betz, Hans-Johann Glock, Hannes Worthmann, Helen Bohse, Henry Jackman, Holm Tetens, Jacob Langeloh, James Andow, Jan Constantin, Jan Janzen, Jan Slaby, Jason Stanley, Jason Streitfeld, Jessica Brown, Joshua Habgood-Coote, Julia Zakkou, Kilu von Prince, Lars Dänzer, Luz Christopher Seiberth, Martin Grajner, Martin Kusch, Martin Weicholt, Matthias Haase, Miguel Hoeltje, Nadja El Kassar, Patrick Shirreff, Pedro Schmechtig, Pirmin Stekeler-Weithofer, Raphael Van Riel, Robert Brandom, Romy Jaster, Sebastian Rödl, Stefan Tolksdorf, Thomas Jussuf Spiegel, Tim Kraft, and Tobias Rosefeldt.

I would like to express my gratitude to the editors and the editorial board of *Studies in Theoretical Philosophy* for including my book in this series, and to Anastasia Urban at Vittorio Klostermann Verlag for her guidance and support during the publication process. I also gratefully acknowledge that the publication of this printed book and e-book have been generously supported by the Verwertungsgesellschaft Wort and by the School of Humanities at Freie Universität Berlin.

Finally, my greatest debt and gratitude is to Kilu, for sharing this journey with me, and for so much more.

Introduction

The concept of know-how is at the core of our self-understanding as creatures both theoretical and practical, as beings who care about getting things right both in thinking and in doing. This book is an investigation of this central concept, an attempt to explain what it is to know how to do something.

The concept of know-how is intertwined with at least three other notions: knowledge, understanding, and ability. In the first step of this Introduction, I will present these interconnections and employ them in order to introduce the most prominent views about know-how currently under discussion. My second step will be a discussion of the methodology with which to approach the topic of know-how. I close with a note on the structure of this book and on the different paths one may wish to take in reading it.

The first conceptual connection leads from know-how to *propositional knowledge*, i.e. to knowing that something is the case, knowing a truth or a fact. Intuitively, knowing how to do something is related to the knowledge of facts about doing so or ways or methods to do so. Second, there is the concept of *understanding*. Again, there is an intuitive relation between knowing how to do something and having an understanding or, equivalently, a conception of how to do so or of certain ways or methods to do it. Third, there is the concept of *ability* or, equivalently, of capacity. Knowing how to do something is intuitively connected with having a capacity, with being able to do what one knows how to do.¹

Can these intuitions be maintained? And what do these relations amount to exactly? These questions are at the core of the problem of know-how.

The most prominent views in the debate about know-how² can be understood as attempts to identify *one* of these three conceptual relations as the *whole* of the explanation of the concept of know-how.

¹ I will continue to use ‘true propositions’ and ‘facts’ interchangeably, similarly for ‘an understanding of x’ and ‘a conception of x’, and for ‘ability’ and ‘capacity’.

² For an overview, see Fantl (2008; 2012), Bengson & Moffett (2011b), Jung (2012), Brown & Gerken (2012b), and Pavese (2016b).

The position which has come to be called *intellectualism* can be understood as the claim that know-how consists in a purely intellectual state largely independent from actual ability. The traditional version of this position, *propositionalist intellectualism*, holds that knowing how to do something is a species of knowing that something is the case, i.e. that know-how is just a special kind of propositional knowledge or propositional knowledge of a special kind of truth. By contrast, *objectualist intellectualism* is the view that knowing how to do something is a species of understanding something, i.e. that know-how is just a special kind of conception or a conception of a special kind of thing. The complementary view has come to be called *anti-intellectualism*. This is the claim that know-how consists in a state of actual ability largely independent from belief or understanding.

The central thesis I shall defend is that all of these positions identify a crucial necessary condition of know-how, but falsely claim that this condition is also sufficient for know-how. Knowing how to do something requires an understanding of how to do so, propositional knowledge about doing so, and the actual ability to do so, but none of these are individually sufficient for know-how. Instead, the concept of know-how requires all of these elements, and it requires them to interact with each other in the right way. Intellectualists and anti-intellectualists are both doubly mistaken – first, because they believe that a mere ingredient of know-how constitutes the whole of the phenomenon, and second, because they believe that their opponents’ accounts about know-how fail to even give necessary conditions. In other words, the central thesis of this book is that we can, and should, maintain all three of the intuitive conceptual connections with which I began.³

In order to make this case, I will discuss the most prominent accounts of know-how which are currently maintained – the propositionalist intellectualism defended by Jason Stanley and Timothy Williamson, the objectualist intellectualism defended by John Bengson and Mark Moffett and, albeit less prominently, the anti-intellectualism defended by Hubert Dreyfus.⁴

While these philosophers are paradigmatic proponents of these positions, the *terms* ‘intellectualism’ and ‘anti-intellectualism’ do not have a completely uniform use in the current debate about know-how.⁵

³ These conceptual connections are also expressed in a remark by Ludwig Wittgenstein which I quote as the motto of Part One of this book on page 11. This is inspired by Eva-Maria Jung who also quotes from this as the motto of her book *Gewusst wie?* (2012), even if she omits the last point about understanding and mastery of techniques.

⁴ I mainly rely on Stanley (2005a; 2011a; 2011b; 2011c) as well as Stanley & Williamson (2001; 2016) and Stanley & Krakauer (2013), on Bengson & Moffett (2007; 2011c), and on Dreyfus (2002; 2005; 2007; 2013) as well as Dreyfus & Dreyfus (1986).

⁵ Of course, these terms are also used elsewhere. But in this book, every use of ‘intellectualism’ refers to intellectualism about know-how and likewise for anti-intellectualism.

For example, intellectualism is often identified with propositionalist intellectualism (cf. e.g. Fantl 2008, 451), simply because objectualist intellectualism is comparatively young. Further, while I restrict the intellectualist position to the view that know-how is something exclusively intellectual, an influential article on the state of play of the debate defines intellectualism as the view that know-how “is or involves” some state of the intellect (cf. Bengson & Moffett 2011b, 7–9). On this definition, the account I will propose is an intellectualist account.

Conversely, while I restrict the anti-intellectualist position to the view that know-how is something exclusively practical, other conceptions of anti-intellectualism hold this position merely to assert the explanatory primacy of practical ability with respect to knowledge and understanding (cf. e.g. Fantl 2011, 128; Dickie 2012, 741). On this definition, the account I will propose is an anti-intellectualist account.

Of course, what counts in the end is not the use of labels but the content of positions. Still, the way I conceive of the position defended here, it is neither intellectualist nor anti-intellectualist, but precisely in the middle ground between these views. In other words, I propose a rapprochement between intellectualism and anti-intellectualism, and I hope to show that both views stand to gain from this.

There are many different methodological strands in the debate about know-how. How can this concept be expressed in ordinary language? Which cases exemplify know-how intuitively? What is the relationship between this concept and terms like ‘practical knowledge’ or ‘procedural knowledge’? And what, precisely, are the *phenomena* which we want to capture with a conception of know-how? What is it we aim to explain? Let me develop the approach pursued in this book by briefly walking through these interconnected questions.

The contrast between know-how and propositional knowledge is often understood in terms of the contrast between what we express as ‘knowing that’ and as ‘knowing how’ in English. But this can be misleading. Know-how is knowledge *how to do* something, i.e. a state expressed paradigmatically with the verb ‘to know’, followed by ‘how’ and infinitive. A sentence like ‘I know how tall Leonhard is’ does not involve the concept of know-how so understood because it involves a finite verb phrase. Instead, it seems to express propositional knowledge. Likewise, propositional knowledge is knowledge *that something is the case*, i.e. a state paradigmatically expressed in English with the verb ‘to know’, followed by the complementizer ‘that’ and an embedded proposition. A sentence like ‘I know that smell’ does

not involve the concept of propositional knowledge so understood because it uses the demonstrative article ‘that’ rather than the homophone complementizer and introduces a noun phrase rather than a proposition. Instead, it seems to express knowledge in the sense of objectual acquaintance.⁶

Given these difficulties, it is sometimes suggested that the contrast between know-how and propositional knowledge can be expressed more clearly as the contrast between ‘theoretical’ and ‘practical’ knowledge.⁷ But what one may know how to do also includes intuitively ‘theoretical’ things like solving mathematical problems, and what one may know to be true also includes intuitively ‘practical’ propositions, i.e. that I am currently running or that it is good for me to take a run regularly. Further, the term ‘practical knowledge’ has come to be used in a number of different senses only one of which is equivalent to know-how. Further concepts discussed under this heading include the ‘practical’ knowledge of what I am currently doing, a special kind of non-observational knowledge of action (cf. Anscombe 1957). The contrast between ‘theoretical’ and ‘practical’ knowledge is therefore less helpful than the contrast between know-how and propositional knowledge.

A further methodological commitment is that a philosophical account of the concept of know-how must be answerable to ordinary intuitions as to when it is appropriate to apply the phrase ‘knows how to’. But it would be a mistake to assume that all of these intuitions will necessarily have to be preserved, let alone shown to be accurate. To take an analogy with propositional knowledge, it is perfectly acceptable to say, of a candidate in a quiz show, that she ‘knew’ the correct answer, even if her true belief was everything but sufficiently justified and therefore does not amount to a case of full-blown propositional knowledge in the sense discussed by many epistemologists.⁸ The same should also be allowed in cases of ‘knows how to’. Loose talk is perfectly fine. It is perfectly acceptable to speak of machines, robots and of all kinds of simple-minded animals as ‘knowing how to’ and ‘knowing that’ such and such. Still, it remains an open question whether they possess genuine know-how or genuine propositional knowledge.

At this point, one may turn to cognitive science where a cognate distinction between ‘declarative’ and ‘procedural’ knowledge plays an important role. It is a natural, and plausible, thought to seek clarity on the philosophical problem of know-how in terms of these scientific concepts. However, this

⁶ These distinctions are discussed in detail in chapter 7.

⁷ This strategy is considered e.g. by Glick (2011), Fantl (2012) and Stanley (2012c).

⁸ Of course, some epistemologists hold that such attributions are actually true and not just loose talk. But these complications can be left open here. We can accept how people use the verb ‘to know’ without *settling* these philosophical questions.

is not the approach I will pursue in this book. The concept of know-how is entangled with scientific discourse, and an account of this notion is answerable to these interconnections. But as philosophers, we should seek the most important criteria for assessing an account of our core concepts in the explanatory roles which they play in the whole of our self-understanding. To employ a famous distinction by Wilfrid Sellars, the manifest image of ourselves and our position in the world is essentially interrelated with the scientific image of ourselves and our position in the world (cf. Sellars 1962). But a philosophical attempt to account for a core concept of the manifest image must stay true to the role of this notion within this framework.

The methodology to be pursued in this book begins with the manifest image. For it is here that we encounter the crucial phenomenon for which the concept of know-how is supposed to provide an account – ‘intelligence’ or ‘intelligent practice’. This name for the explanandum of know-how stems, of course, from Gilbert Ryle, the modern classic of the debate about know-how. And despite many changes and further methodological considerations, the aim to explain what Ryle calls ‘intelligence’ continues to be a core commitment throughout the debate.

In this book, the phenomenon of intelligent practice takes center stage. The core criterion for assessing an account of know-how is its role in explaining what Ryle called ‘intelligence’. All the other questions touched upon in this Introduction are also important, but they are secondary to this central theoretical aim. This methodology will show a clear path through the complex thicket of methodologies and topics in the debate about know-how.

This book is not only Rylean in its methodology, but also in the account of know-how it defends. In his Presidential Address to the Aristotelian Society, entitled “Knowing How and Knowing That” (1945a), and in a chapter with the same title in his celebrated book *The Concept of Mind* (1949), Ryle has made a strong case for the relevance of know-how:

Philosophers have not done justice to the distinction which is quite familiar to all of us between knowing that something is the case and knowing how to do things. In their theories of knowledge they concentrate on the discovery of truths or facts, and they either ignore the discovery of ways and methods of doing things or else they try to reduce it to the discovery of facts. (Ryle 1945a, 5)⁹

The advance of knowledge does not consist only in the accumulation of discovered truths, but also and chiefly in the cumulative mastery of methods. (Ryle 1945a, 15)

⁹ I would like to use the first quotation in this book to make the general typographical remark that all emphases in quoted passages are taken over from the original texts.

Ryle's position has received both support and criticism, and the interpretation of his texts has remained one of the central themes in the debate about know-how. Part of my project in this book consists in a favorable reassessment of Ryle's legacy. Maybe Ryle never intended to give a comprehensive account of the concept of know-how (cf. Hornsby 2011, 81), and maybe this topic even turned into a mere stepping stone of the larger project in *The Concept of Mind*. Still, Ryle's texts already contain at least the firm foundation of a very attractive conception of know-how.¹⁰ To see this, it will prove important to broaden the textual scope of Ryle's works beyond the widely and often exclusively read chapter II of *The Concept of Mind*, particularly to also include chapter V on dispositions and chapter IX on the intellect, as well as Ryle's Presidential Address, where he is occupied more exclusively with know-how.

I will propose an interpretation of these texts intended to deepen some of Ryle's insights and to correct some of his errors, and I will defend such a Rylean account of the concept of know-how against the main contenders in the current debate. Among other things, this will consist in an argument against the widespread view that Ryle is an anti-intellectualist in the sense just distinguished.¹¹ Though a dedicated critic of intellectualism, Ryle does not believe that know-how is *merely* an ability, as the anti-intellectualist position states. Instead, he argues that know-how is a special *kind* of ability – a skill or, equivalently, a competence. However, the explanation of this concept also requires appeal to intellectual states such as understanding and propositional knowledge in order to explain intelligent practice through responsible control of one's acts. At the very least, this is the most faithful and most plausible Rylean position which will emerge from my interpretation – a Rylean responsibilism.

This book is organized in two Parts, but it can be read in many different ways. Part One develops and defends my Rylean responsibilist proposal out of an engagement with Ryle's own texts and a number of independent considerations. This also includes a discussion of anti-intellectualism and its shortcomings. Part Two considers the range of candidate cases and examples of know-how, the linguistic expressions of know-how, and it engages in detail with intellectualist views.

Since every chapter begins with an overview and since dependencies between the material in the individual chapters and sections are mentioned and cross-referenced, readers familiar with the debate about know-how will

¹⁰ This has recently been noted by Kremer (2016) and Elzinga (2016).

¹¹ To name just two examples among many, this view is explicitly held by Stanley & Williamson (2001, 416) and Bengson & Moffett (2007, 45 fn. 25).

hopefully be able to read this book in any way and in any part. However, there is one terminological, or conceptual, thing to bear in mind. In this book, I follow Ryle in speaking of know-how *as* competence. That is, I use ‘know-how’, ‘competence’, and ‘skill’ largely interchangeably. This is highlighted and justified in § 1.1. Readers who are unhappy with this may immediately jump to chapter 7, which deals with the linguistics of ‘knows how to’, or to chapter 5, which discusses alleged counterexamples.

Before presenting a short overview of all chapters, let me also mention that this book does not only end with an index of subjects on page 325, but also with two other indices. Readers who are interested in my take on a specific author or on a particular puzzle case may consult the index of persons on page 319 or the index of cases on page 317.

Part One consists of four chapters. The first pair of these offers the groundwork of a Rylean account of know-how while the second pair adds further independent considerations with which this project can be continued in order to reach the explanatory aim of accounting for intelligent practice.

Chapter 1 introduces the concepts of know-how and of ability and gives an account of the phenomenon of intelligent practice as essentially normative. Further, it provides a sketch of what an explanation of this phenomenon must achieve, namely by understanding know-how, skill, or competence, as an *intelligent* ability rather than a *mere* ability. Chapter 2 goes on to discuss Ryle’s remarks on the intellectual part of an intelligent ability, the role of understanding and propositional knowledge. At times, following Ryle’s declared arguments will require correcting inconsistencies, and I will conclude this chapter by assessing where the Rylean view I propose departs from Ryle’s texts, and where it stands with respect to other important themes in their reception, such as the question of behaviorism.

Chapter 3 discusses the question what it is to exercise know-how, and comments on the interrelations between practice, intentionality, and automaticity. Along the way, I will also discuss and reject some considerations in favor of anti-intellectualism. While these topics are largely independent from more specifically Rylean positions, chapter 4 builds on these results in order to complete the line of thought laid out earlier. Ryle himself failed to provide the crucial final element in the explanation of intelligent practice. But I will offer an account which is congenial to Ryle’s position, a Rylean responsibilist account of normative guidance as responsible control.

Part Two consists of five chapters. The first pair of these discusses the range of examples and puzzle cases which have been proposed as candidate examples of know-how and shows how Rylean responsibilism can account for them. The three final chapters are concerned with the linguistics of ‘knows

how to' and related expressions, with the way in which intellectualists have used linguistic considerations in support of their positions, and with these positions themselves.

Chapter 5 reconsiders and defends the Rylean conception of the relationship between know-how and ability and offers explanations of the relevant counterexamples and puzzle cases. This also includes an analogy with structurally identical cases from the independent debate about dispositions, and a discussion of the question if competences or abilities are themselves dispositions. These considerations are complemented by chapter 6 which addresses the puzzle cases which pertain to the *cognitive* rather than the *practical* nature of know-how. This includes crucial semantic and epistemic properties of know-how, as well as certain themes from cognitive science, including the notion of 'procedural knowledge' and some clinical cases which have been discussed with respect to know-how.

Chapter 7 considers the question how the concept of know-how is expressed in ordinary language, and it defends my Rylean use of the expression 'knows how to' as expressing competence against a number of objections. After both pragmatic and semantic considerations, I will eventually suggest that 'knows how to' is polysemous. Such linguistic considerations are continued in chapter 8, but brought to bear on the position of intellectualism which has prominently been supported with linguistic theory. I discuss and eventually reject this line of thought, but I also present an argument for the claim that there is substantial common ground between intellectualism and Rylean responsibilism, including the question of compatibility with the linguistic data. The final chapter 9 addresses the question if intellectualism can succeed at the explanatory task of accounting for intelligent practice. I argue that the positive intellectualist proposals fail at this task, and I defend Ryle's famous regress objection as an argument which establishes a principal problem for such attempts. In the end, however, I suggest that the way in which intellectualists have reacted to this argument speaks in favor of the rapprochement advertized in this book.

Part One
Rylean Responsibilism

Die Grammatik des Wortes „wissen“ ist offenbar eng verwandt mit der Grammatik des Wortes „können“, „imstande sein“. Aber auch eng verwandt mit der des Wortes „verstehen“. (Eine Technik ‚beherrschen‘.)

The grammar of the word “know” is evidently closely related to the grammar of the words “can”, “is able to”. But also closely related to that of the word “understand”. (To have ‘mastered’ a technique.)

(Wittgenstein 1953, § 150)

Chapter 1

Ryle on Know-how and Intelligence

This chapter provides the groundwork of Rylean responsibilism in the form of a normativist account of Ryle's notion of intelligence and of his characterization of know-how as an intelligent ability.

In § 1.1, I introduce the concept of know-how in terms of the phenomenon it is supposed to explain. I argue that that this phenomenon, what Ryle calls "intelligent practice", can be understood as *normative* practice. This notion of normative practice is then further developed and clarified in § 1.2.

§ 1.3 is devoted to the idea that the concept of know-how is a concept of achieving success in activities, or of meeting the normative demands of those activities. This, in turn, requires the concept of an ability and in particular of a reliable ability within a certain range of normal situations. § 1.4 will clarify these issues.

In § 1.5, I present a sketch of the full conception of know-how as a capacity to achieve success in virtue of an understanding of an activity's normative requirements. As I will show in § 1.6, the crucial distinctions and explanatory demands involved here are entirely parallel to those in the debate about rule-following. Finally, § 1.7 discusses the loose boundaries of the concept of know-how – its vagueness and its context-dependence.

§ 1.1 Intelligence and Normative Practice

Any philosophical inquiry into the nature of a concept must start with an intuitive characterization of the explanandum. Otherwise, it is difficult to express the very question to be addressed. I shall therefore start with what I take to be a pre-theoretic and uncontroversial survey of the intuitive homeland of the concept of know-how. In fact, Gilbert Ryle has already provided such a survey. He offered a rich range of examples of know-how:

*Ryle's Range of Cases*¹

playing chess	(Ryle 1945a, 5–6, 14; Ryle 1949, 29–30, 40–41)
arguing, reasoning, inferring	(Ryle 1945a, 6–7, 12–13; Ryle 1949, 29, 46)
speaking a language	(Ryle 1945a, 14; Ryle 1949, 29, 41, 50, 297)
behaving ethically	(Ryle 1945a, 12–13; Ryle 1949, 297)
practicing philosophy or science	(Ryle 1945a, 15)
writing with literary style	(Ryle 1945a, 14–15)
making jokes	(Ryle 1945a, 8, 10; Ryle 1949, 29–30)
playing cards	(Ryle 1949, 29)
writing poetry, composing limericks	(Ryle 1949, 48, 49)
feinting to do something	(Ryle 1949, 50)
calculating, practicing mathematics	(Ryle 1945a, 15; Ryle 1949, 34–35, 125)
solving anagrams	(Ryle 1949, 49, 125)
spelling a word	(Ryle 1949, 125)
mountaineering	(Ryle 1949, 42)
cooking	(Ryle 1945a, 8, 12–14)
playing cricket	(Ryle 1949, 125)
reading a map	(Ryle 1945a, 15)
driving a car	(Ryle 1945a, 10)
designing dresses	(Ryle 1945a, 8)
fishing	(Ryle 1945a, 12; Ryle 1949, 29)
practicing as a medical doctor, performing surgery	(Ryle 1949, 48, 125)
swimming	(Ryle 1949, 48, 293–294)
conducting battles, working as a general	(Ryle 1945a, 8, 14–15)
acting as a clown	(Ryle 1949, 33)
examining something	(Ryle 1945a, 15)
‘seeing’ or appreciating jokes	(Ryle 1945a, 10; Ryle 1949, 29)
playing golf	(Ryle 1949, 78)
behaving appropriately at a funeral	(Ryle 1945a, 8)
sculpting	(Ryle 1949, 50)
persuading a jury	(Ryle 1945a, 8)
shooting, hitting the bull’s eye	(Ryle 1945a, 15; Ryle 1949, 45)
pruning trees	(Ryle 1949, 29)
boxing	(Ryle 1949, 48)
tying knots	(Ryle 1949, 50, 54–55, 125)
trading professionally	(Ryle 1949, 48)

I take it that this list of activities may serve as a criterion of adequacy for any philosophical explication of the concept of know-how. Whatever know-how may be, it must be possible to understand that these activities are typical examples for things one may know how to do.

¹ I have done my best to be able to claim that this list is, to my knowledge, complete – if not in the references, then at least in the examples listed.

For the sake of convenience, I will sometimes use the simple abbreviation “S knows how to A”, where “S” stands for a subject and “A” for an activity.

However, one may wonder why I have chosen to speak of ‘activities’ rather than, say, of ‘actions’. And with good reason. It is an obvious fact that all or nearly all of the examples can and typically are exercised as intentional actions – and as I shall discuss in chapter 3, this is not an accident. The reason for my choice of words is, however, rather simple. Activities, as I shall use this notion, include intentional actions, but also further elements. For example, some stretches of behavior, particularly very long processes, are not always naturally described in terms of individual actions, whereas the notion of an activity seems more natural.² Most importantly however, one sometimes exercises one’s know-how not as an intentional action, but entirely automatically. Still, such performances are nevertheless genuine exercises of the know-how in question. At this point, I cannot do more than bluntly state this claim, but I will elaborate, discuss and defend this in chapter 3. Until then, however, nothing I say depends on this point. Thus, in the earlier parts of this book, when I say that an ‘act’ or ‘performance’ is an exercise of know-how, this can simply be read as a notational variant of ‘action’. From chapter 3 onwards, however, it will become crucial to have the broader notion of acts, performances and activities.

One may also worry that the notion of an activity is unclear – either because it is not clear how we should understand it in general or because it is not clear where we should locate the boundary between variants of one activity and distinct activities. For now, I will assume that the concept of an activity is sufficiently clear in order to be put to work in my proposal. I shall come back to these questions later in this section and in § 1.7.

Thus, the concept of know-how is at home in explaining and understanding the performances of certain activities. Ryle calls this “intelligent practice” (1949, 27). He points out that people’s performances can exhibit a variety of “qualities of mind” (1949, 26), some of which in turn are picked out by what he calls “intelligence-concepts” (1945a, 3). These concepts form a proper subset of the “mental-conduct epithets” or “mental-conduct concepts” (1949, 9, 26) with which the whole of *The Concept of Mind* is concerned (cf. 1949, 9–11). For example, one may do something wisely, thoughtfully, correctly, successfully, as well as inefficiently, stupidly, and so forth. According to Ryle, these concepts “belong to the family of concepts ordinarily surnamed ‘intelligence’.” (1949, 26)

² One may couch this point in terms of the general ontological view that actions are a subclass of *events*, whereas activities are a subclass of *processes*. For an illuminating discussion of these issues, see Hornsby (2012). But I shall leave this open.

Thus, the touchstone for a philosophical explication of know-how is its role in explaining and understanding ‘intelligent practice’ – and this, Ryle proposes, through the examination of the family of ‘intelligence concepts’. But how are we to understand this family of concepts? Paul Snowdon, a dedicated critic of Ryle’s view, has complained:

Ryle does not say or give any hint as to the boundaries of this range of concepts. [...] The scope of intellectualism is, then, more or less impossible to determine. (Snowdon 2011, 62)

But this criticism does not go far enough. Ryle employs the family of intelligence concept in order to demarcate the explanandum for which the concept of know-how is then introduced as the explanans. Thus, not only do *intellectualist* accounts of know-how depend on a precise understanding of intelligence concepts, *every* account of know-how does.

As a first step in order to answer to the question what Ryle’s “intelligence concepts” have in common, it is important to note that he does not only include concepts which refer to what one would ordinarily conceive of as the *presence* of intelligence under the term “intelligence concept”. Cases of *lack or deficiency* in intelligence – such as stupidity – are also included. Ryle makes this perfectly clear in both of his central texts on know-how:

Consider, first, our use of the various intelligence-predicates, namely, “wise,” “logical,” “sensible,” “prudent,” “cunning,” “skilful,” “scrupulous,” “tasteful,” “witty,” etc., with their converses “unwise,” “illogical,” “silly,” “stupid,” “dull,” “unscrupulous,” “without taste,” “humourless,” etc. (Ryle 1945a, 5)

The mental-conduct concepts that I choose to examine first belong to the family of concepts ordinarily surnamed ‘intelligence’. Here are a few more determinative adjectives of this family: ‘clever’, ‘sensible’, ‘careful’, ‘methodical’, ‘inventive’, ‘prudent’, ‘acute’, ‘logical’, ‘witty’, ‘observant’, ‘critical’, ‘experimental’, ‘quick-witted’, ‘cunning’, ‘wise’, ‘judicious’, and ‘scrupulous’. When a person is deficient in intelligence he is described as ‘stupid’ or else by more determinate epithets such as ‘dull’, ‘silly’, ‘careless’, ‘unmethodical’, ‘uninventive’, ‘rash’, ‘dense’, ‘illogical’, ‘humourless’, ‘unobservant’, ‘uncritical’, ‘unexperimental’, ‘slow’, ‘simple’, ‘unwise’, and ‘injudicious’. (Ryle 1949, 26)

In a survey of the debate on know-how, John Bengson and Marc Moffet (2011b) have thus been inspired to an interesting orthographical strategy:

Hereafter, we reserve ‘intelligence’ (lowercase ‘i’) for intelligence in the narrow sense, namely, that which is intelligent but *not* stupid, idiotic, and so forth; we will use ‘Intelligence’ (capital ‘I’) as an umbrella term covering all states of intellect and character, including intelligence (in the narrow sense), stupidity, and idiocy. (Bengson & Moffet 2011b, 5–6)

It is certainly true that a clarification of Ryle's terminology is important. It seems to me, however, that simply distinguishing "Intelligence" from "intelligence" does not do much to clarify any of these terms and that it misses an important opportunity: There already *is* an umbrella term other than capital-'I'-Intelligence which is well-established and which helps to bring out the *point* of the various concepts subsumed under the label of capital-'I'-Intelligence. What I have in mind is the concept of *normativity*. However, it will take some time to spell out how this can be made to work.

To begin with, I take it to be obvious that all the terms cited by Ryle contain *evaluations*.³ These concepts do not describe performances in a detached or uninvolved manner but contain judgments of these performances as to whether or not – and to what extent – they live up to certain standards. In particular, they assess the quality of these performances against the background of the normative requirements of the activity in question.⁴

The norms or standards which govern our activities are manifold, of course. Efficiency, success, and originality are paradigmatic examples of the norms Ryle subsumes under the label "intelligence". Many of them are highly general and their application differs a lot from case to case. One may also conceive of these norms differently and deny that, say, efficiency in playing chess has much to do with efficiency in catching fish. According to such a view, there would be no such thing as *the* norm of efficiency, but rather several norms for the efficient practice of a certain activity (or family of activities). But for now, these differences do not make a difference. However many standards are in play at a certain point, and however narrowly or broadly they are to be conceived, it remains true that all of them are recognizably norms or standards against the background of which an activity is evaluated.

On this basis, I therefore propose to understand Ryle's notion of "intelligent practice" (1949, 27) – in the wider, capital-'I'-sense pointed out by Bengson & Moffett (2011b) – as *normative practice*. What we are interested

³ Next to the passages quoted above, Ryle mentions further examples in four other passages, and all of these examples clearly contain evaluations. He says that "we characterise either practical or theoretical activities as clever, wise, prudent, skilful, etc." (1945a, 1) and that "thinking and doing do share lots of predicates, such as 'clever,' 'stupid,' 'careful,' 'strenuous,' 'attentive,' etc." (1945a, 2) Ryle examines "[a]dverbs expressing intelligence-concepts (such as 'shrewdly,' 'wittily,' 'methodically,' 'scrupulously,' etc.)." (1945a, 3) And he writes: "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." (1945a, 14)

⁴ The example "strenuous" (Ryle 1945a, 2) comes closest to a counterexample to this view. But the contrast between acting strenuously and acting with ease can be understood as the contrast between failing and succeeding at meeting the norm of efficiency.

in when we use the concept of know-how is behavior engaging in activities which in turn are governed by norms. In fact, these norms are also able to explain the otherwise puzzling co-existence of positive and negative ‘intelligence-predicates’ in Bengson & Moffett’s general category. The hallmark of the positive evaluations which refer to the phenomenon of genuine intelligence is that the norms of the activity in question are in fact met. In contrast, negative evaluations refer to the fact that the performances under discussion fail to meet these norms.

I take it that this proposal is something Ryle should have applauded because he makes very clear how important the normative dimension of know-how is, even if he does not use this term himself. He writes:

When a person knows how to do things of a certain sort (e.g., cook omelettes, design dresses or persuade juries), his performance is in some way governed by principles, rules, canons, standards or criteria. (For most purposes it does not matter which we say.) (Ryle 1945a, 8)

What is involved in our descriptions of people as knowing how to make and appreciate jokes, to talk grammatically, to play chess, to fish, or to argue? Part of what is meant is that, when they perform these operations, they tend to perform them well, i.e. correctly or efficiently or successfully. Their performances come up to certain standards, or satisfy criteria. (Ryle 1949, 29)

Ryle is certainly correct in assuming that terminological differences between ‘standards’, ‘criteria’, and related terms do not make a difference for the present questions. However, all of these expressions clearly refer to normative concepts. Thus, it should be obvious that Ryle explicitly endorses the idea that know-how is closely connected to the normativity of activities.

§ 1.2 Clarifying the Normativity of Activities

I have argued that the normativity of practice is at the heart of the concept of know-how since it is at the heart of the specific phenomenon for which this concept is supposed to account – what Ryle called ‘intelligence’. However, Ryle does not pick up these phenomena systematically. He does not explicate in which sense activities are governed by norms and in which sense one ought to conform to these norms. Therefore, at least some amount of clarification is in order.

In this section, I offer three such clarifications. First, I argue that the normativity of practice suggests a way to individuate activities. Second, I discuss the bindingness of the norms of an activity. And third, I comment on the question of their nature and their ontological status.

As for the first point, I hold that we can individuate each activity uniquely by giving the unique set of norms which governs it as well as the way these norms are weighed with respect to each other. Certainly, the individual norms which are members of this set can be of different importance for the activity in question. Some norms may form the core of the set, while others are merely at the periphery, and there may even be several gravitational centres more or less balancing one another.

Consider a swimmer. What is the activity she is engaged in? At a first level of description, we may say that she is swimming, period. At a second level of description, she is swimming the breast stroke. The norms and standards in play are clearly different in these different perspectives. One may be swimming very well, but not thereby swimming the breast stroke at all. The converse, however, does not hold. Swimming the breast stroke well is one of several ways of swimming well. A third level of description would be one where we describe her as swimming a race. Again, the norms and standards in play change. One may be swimming very well, but not thereby doing well at swimming a race. Again, the converse is false since everybody who does well at swimming a race also does well at swimming. Further, some performances will count both as swimming the breast stroke and as swimming a race, others will count as only one of them and some will count as neither while still being exercises of swimming.

These phenomena can be accounted for in terms of the hypothesis that activities are to be individuated in terms of weighed sets of norms – those which govern the activity. The set of norms which identifies the activity of swimming is a proper subset of the set of norms which constitutes the activity of swimming the breast stroke and again a proper subset of the set of norms which constitutes the activity of swimming a race. And these latter two sets intersect, but do not coincide.

On these grounds, I shall go on to employ the view that activities are identified by the weighed sets of norms which govern them – particularly in § 2.2 and § 4.5. Thus, part of the full justification for this claim will hopefully stem from the way in which it proves useful at these later stages.⁵

This brings me to my second point, the question how binding the norms of a certain activity are. Crucially, to say that the activities one may know how to engage in are governed by norms is not to say that one ought to engage in these activities in a moral or an otherwise non-instrumental sense

⁵ One may object that the identity criteria of the individual norms are unclear and that therefore the identity criteria of an activity in terms of a set of such norms are equally unclear. This, however, is not an argument against my view but something I entirely endorse. As I shall argue in § 1.7, know-how is a vague concept anyway.