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PRACTICAL UNDERSTANDING

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**Introduction**

It is a characteristic of well-functioning agents that they have an excellent epistemic relationship to their intentional actions. In the literature on practical knowledge, as this phenomenon is called, it is customary to ask how it is that agents *know what they are doing*. This common way of characterizing the agent’s epistemic relationship to her action, together with its name, “practical knowledge”, suggest that our philosophical theory of this phenomenon should focus on an agent’s *knowledge* of what she is doing. But I will argue that when we examine the epistemic profile of this phenomenon carefully, we should think of well-functioning agents as having a particular kind of understanding of their action.[[1]](#endnote-1) The main claim that I argue for is as follows:

**The Necessity of Understanding** **thesis:**

If an agent, S, has the excellent epistemic relationship to her own intentional action, A, that is characteristic of well-functioning intentional agency, then S understands A.

The argument for this relies on three interlocking lines of thought. The first exploits the normative structure of intentional actions, the second appeals to the intimate connection between so-called practical knowledge and the social practice of reasons explanation of action, and the last relies on a practical amnesia case – a case where the agent forgets what her overall plan in action is as she is acting. All of these lines of argument converge on the same idea: the normative complexity of an intentional action, even a simple one, imposes a constraint on what kind of epistemic state(s) an excellent epistemic relationship to it involves. Understanding fits this constraint.

I will proceed as follows. First (§1), I introduce central features of practical knowledge. Relying on literature in epistemology, I then (§2) briefly present some ideas about the differences between knowledge and understanding. I go on (§§ 3, 4, 5) to present the three interlocking lines of argument for the Necessity of Understanding thesis. I then (§6) turn to the implication of this claim for the debate about the non-observational view of practical knowledge, a view that many philosophers adopt.[[2]](#endnote-2) I suggest that if the Necessity of Understanding thesis is true, then some apparently strong reasons to adopt the non-observational view are weaker than has been appreciated. Finally (§7), I consider an objection.

I will refer to the phenomenon that is usually referred to as practical knowledge using a neutral expression, Special Epistemic Relationship, SER. This sounds less paradoxical for the purpose of defending my main thesis than the expression “practical knowledge”.

**1. The Special Epistemic Relationship between an Agent and her Action**

My main aim in this paper is to defend the Necessity of Understanding thesis. In arguing for this, I wish to remain uncommitted on key controversies about SER, such as about what its relationship is to the agent’s practical thinking and in what sense SER is practical. To avoid begging the question against existing views of SER, but to clarify what phenomenon is under discussion, I will briefly characterize SER in as neutral terms as possible.

First, it is distinguished by its object: intentional acting. Suppose that S is intentionally going to work. She unlocks her bicycle, cycles along the street, opens the door of the building where her office is. She doesn’t intentionally cycle over a red leaf, cause the pedals to creak, or startle a magpie. But she does these things too. She may even know that she does them on the basis of observing them happen. Nevertheless, she doesn’t have SER to this second list of things, but only to the first list of things. In addition, because SER is an epistemic accompaniment to an intentional action, and as executive thinking – that subspecies of practical thinking that guides action – is constitutive of intentional action, SER is intimately related in some way to the agent’s executive thought.

Second, SER is had only by the agent[[3]](#endnote-3) of the intentional acting that is SER’s object. It is had by the agent just in virtue of their being the agentand it becomes available at the onset of acting. (O’Brien, 2007, 157) Some philosophers think that SER – understood as knowledge of what one is doing – is necessary for intentional action. But this is disputed and I do not take a stand on this here (e.g. Piñeros-Glasscock, 2020; Shepherd and Carter, 2023; Vekony, Mele, and Rose, 2021).

Third, SER is distinguished by being of superior epistemic quality. When the agent is well functioning and conditions are normal, it grounds the agent’s authority about what she is doing and why she is acting as she is. This is not an authority that others have.

Fourth, SER is distinctively practical. This is a difficult characteristic to get to the bottom of, particularly while remaining neutral. It has been claimed that practical knowledge is the cause of what it represents, and when it does not reflect reality, that the error is not in the practical knowledge, but in the agent’s performance. (Anscombe, 2000) These characterizations aim to capture SER’s practical nature, but one may worry that they make obscure how SER could be an epistemic phenomenon. I will not discuss this here, but retain the widely held view that SER is an epistemic phenomenon while being in some sense practical. A different view of SER’s practical nature is that it plays a role in the agent’s ongoing control of their intentional action. (e.g. Schwenkler, 2012) SER may also contribute to ongoing practical thought, facilitating the co-ordination of a planning agent’s current action with her other plans: in having a secure epistemic grip on what I am doing now, I can plan more effectively for what I will do next. Another idea is that there is a specific kind of interplay between SER and the agent’s executive thinking – the subspecies of practical thinking that guides action. Note that a well-functioning agent accepts the authoritativeness of the practical standards that she holds herself to in her executive thinking – practical standards are standards of action that are given by the reasons, rules, practical roles, or act-types that the agent is trying to act in accordance with. (O’Brien, 2021) For a rationally integrated agent, the epistemic states of SER will ordinarily cohere with the view that the practical standards that the agent is abiding by in action are authoritative for her. SER is rationally constrained by the agent’s executive thinking.

Here is the general characterization of SER that I rely on:

**SER:** SER is an exclusive, secure, and distinctively practical epistemic relationship that concerns an intentional action, A, that a well-functioning rational practical agent ordinarily has just in virtue of being the agent of A.

It should be noted that characterizations of SER in terms of *knowing what one is doing* are very prominent in the literature. In a paper offering an overview of the ”problem of practical knowledge” John Schwenkler (2012) says:

“There seems to be something special about the *knowledge of what one is intentionally doing*. First, I have a knowledge of my intentional actions that I seem not to be able to have of anyone else’s: if I want to *know what you are doing*, I have to “look and see” …… Second, I appear to have a kind *of knowledge of what I am doing intentionally* that I seem not to have of my unintentional behaviors …” 731 (emphasis added)

In an influential paper, Sarah Paul characterizes her main concern as “… Anscombe’s “Non-Observational Knowledge Thesis”: that if an agent is acting intentionally, he will *know* without observation *what he is doing* ...” (Paul, 2009, 2) (emphasis added). Kieran Setiya characterizes this special epistemic access as follows: “The idea of practical knowledge – *knowledge of what one is doing or what one is going to do* that does not rest on sufficient prior evidence – is central to understanding of intentional action.” (Setiya, 2017, 2) (emphasis added) Campbell (2017) distinguishes knowledge of what one is doing from knowledge of why one is doing it and goes on to treat the first as the problem of practical knowledge.[[4]](#endnote-4) A recent debate about whether or not agents must have practical knowledge if they are to perform an intentional action is couched in terms of whether or not there is a “knowledge condition” on intentional action, and on the assumption that knowledge entails safety, whether the safety condition can always be satisfied. This debate focuses on an agent’s knowing what she is doing. (e.g. Piñeros Glasscock, 2020; Beddor and Pavese, 2022; Shepherd and Carter, 2023). Clearly, there is a lot of prominent literature that takes *knowledge of what one is doing* as at least necessary for SER.

It is not usually asked whether knowledge is also sufficient for SER. I do not think that such a view could be right. Understanding of a particular sort that is different from knowledge of what one is doing is at least necessary for SER, or so I will argue.

**2: Knowledge and Understanding**

It is widely accepted that S’s *understanding* some subject matter is different from S’s knowing some proposition.[[5]](#endnote-5)  First, knowing-that requires an epistemic relationship between an agent and a proposition, but paradigmatic cases of understanding involve an epistemic relationship between an agent and something of complexity, such as a set of coherent propositions, as in a scientific theory, or a physical object with complex functional or normative structure, such as a machine, a biological system, a game, or a religious ritual. (e.g. Grimm, 2011)

Second, knowledge-that can ordinarily be acquired all at once from the operation of such cognitive faculties as perception or memory. By contrast, understanding ordinarily results from the agent’s bringing what might otherwise be her isolated beliefs about the thing understood into relations with one another. In doing so, she grasps conceptual and logical relations among the contents of her beliefs, and she may ultimately grasp relations among things in the world. By this intellectual process, she gains stable rational capacities, such as capacities for reliably and correctly discriminating between different features of the thing understood, capacities for further correct reasoning, and for making reliably correct judgments about what is understood.

Finally, understanding concerns things of complexity that hang together in non-accidental, systematic ways. Such complex things can be grasped to a greater or lesser extent, and so, understanding comes in degrees. But this does not seem to be true of propositional knowledge.

An example may help to illustrate this brief sketch. Suppose that a child comes to knowthe answer to the question, Why did the house catch fire?: Because of faulty wiring. But suppose that his knowledge is based only on a parent’s testimony and the child doesn’t know anything else about how the fire was caused. (Pritchard, 2010, 81-83) He does not know whether the colour of the faulty wires or the fact that the house was located on a street with two “A”s in its name was causally relevant to the fire’s occurrence. With just an isolated true belief to work with, he is unable to discriminate between what is integral to the causal pathway and what is extraneous to it, to make accurate judgments about what depends on what in the pathway, and he is unable to make non-lucky correct judgments about what would have happened had things been otherwise. Even if the child *knows what* caused the fire, and even if in knowing the true answer to the why question he *knows why* the fire occurred, he does not seem to *understand* the causal pathway to the fire.

**3. First Argument: the Normative Structure of Actions Requires Understanding**

Consider the avid fan of basketball who watches a player take a free throw. This fan reliably and correctly judges that the free throw is being taken because of an earlier foul and that in carefully choosing her location and stance the player is maximizing her chances of getting the ball into the hoop. The fan can correctly infer that the ball’s bouncing on the rim was not intended by the player and that this has certain implications for the likelihood of the team’s winning the game. She can explain to others why the player does what she does, and why she does things as she does them, thereby drawing on her significant capacities for grasping how things hang together in the game.

Now consider the spectator who has never before encountered basketball, and for whom ball games are quite a mystery. Let’s suppose that he knows on the basis of testimony that the player is “taking a free throw” and that this will hopefully help her team to win the game. But the naïve spectator isn’t sure whether the player’s carefully positioning herself and kissing a small crucifix are manifestations of nervousness, or some required element in free-throw-taking. He is unsure about whether the bounce of the ball on the rim threatens the player’s aims, because he doesn’t know what the aim is: perhaps it is to bounce the ball as high as possible off the rim. He is unable to reliably discriminate between what is integral and extraneous to the game. His judgments, unlike the fan’s, are not just often incorrect, they are not made with speed and ease, and if he is ever correct, he is lucky. As stipulated, the naïve spectator *knows what* the agent is doing, he *knows why* she is taking a free throw, he *knows how* the player is helping her team, but in spite of this, it seems reasonable to say that he doesn’t understand much about what the player is intentionally doing. He doesn’t, after all, appreciate facts such as that the player is trying to get the ball into the hoop and that kissing a crucifix is not part of taking a free throw. His knowing-what, -why, and -how, even though coherent, touch only a small part of the complex system in which the basketball player operates, and given this, it is not sufficient for understanding the player’s action.

The fan’s understanding of what is unfolding stems from the fact that she understands the rules of the game, and because she understands the rules, she easily grasps the rule-based relationships among events (why the free throw followed a foul), she reliably discriminates between what is and what is not integral to the game (why kissing the crucifix is not a part of the game), and she correctly explains why the player proceeds as she does (with such attention to positioning herself), and so on.

The basketball game is normatively constituted – it has a normative structure. Its structure is given by the rules of the game, such that events and things that are within the game can be understood in terms of their rule-based roles. This normative structure is what is understood by the fan and what the naïve spectator does not have access to.

An intentional action is also normatively constituted – it has a normative structure of a sort. Although intentional actions are not necessarily structured in accordance with *rules* (although they can be), they are by necessity structured to accord with the agent’s plan in action. This may be a very simple plan to do just one thing. But even in such simple cases the agent is subject to practical standards – the standards of correct action – that are given by the act-type(s) that she is trying to token, and which are represented in her executive thought. It is by reference to these standards that movements can be assessed by the agent and others as successes or failures. As the act-types specify what the agent *must do* *if she is to succeed in fulfilling her plan*, we have reason to think of intentional actions as having a normative, albeit a weakly normative, structure.

An agent’s plan in action may have complexity that goes beyond specifying that some act-type is to be tokened. It may concern tokening act-types as means to an end or tokening the act-types in an ordered series of actions that are related by “augmentation” or “conventional” relations, such as when one waves one’s hand, and given the conventions in place, one thereby signals a turn. (Goldman, 1970) And it may be part of the plan to perform the action at a particular time or place or in a particular manner – flamboyantly, stealthily – or to comply with a social rule or a policy of her own. Such elements in a plan also give structure to the action by providing standards by reference to which it can fail or succeed. If the agent plans to signal stealthily to an accomplice, her highly visible waving that draws lots of attention will be a failure to meet a standard of action she is trying to abide by.

The SER of the well-functioning agent and the fan’s understanding of the basketball game are analogous in this important respect: the epistemic relation in both cases is between an epistemic agent and a thing with normative structure. In basketball games and in intentional actions some things are integral and some extraneous, there are non-random relationships among their parts, and there are explanations for certain features that they have, such as the manner or place or time of occurrence. The fan is analogous to a well-functioning agent in this further respect: the fan (because of their intense commitment to the game) and a well-functioning agent (because of their rational nature) ordinarily have excellent epistemic relationships to the game and their intentional action respectively. What would it take to have an excellent epistemic relationship to such things? It is plausible to suppose that it is to have a good epistemic grip on what is integral or extraneous to these things, to grasp the internal relationships of dependency within those things, and to have a good grip on what explains other features these things may have. If such epistemic excellence is sufficient for understanding, having an excellent epistemic relationship to an intentional action, or for that matter, to anything with normative structure, requires understanding. The argument is as follows:

1. If some epistemic agent, S, has an excellent epistemic relationship to a thing with normative structure, T, then S has an excellent epistemic relationship to the facts that (i) some things are integral to T and some are extraneous, (ii) there are certain non-random relationships obtaining among T’s parts, and (iii) some of T’s other characteristics obtain because of the rules or standards in accordance with which T is structured.
2. If S has an excellent epistemic relationship to facts concerning (i), (ii), (iii), then S has stable rational capacities (RCs) to reliably discriminate between what is (i) integral and extraneous to T (RC1), to reliably make correct judgments about (ii) non-random relationships obtaining among T’s parts (RC2), to reliably and correctly judge (iii) which other characteristics of T obtain in virtue of T’s normative structure (RC3).
3. If S has stable rational capacities RC1 – RC3 with respect to T, S has a high degree of understanding of T.
4. So, if some epistemic agent, S, has an excellent epistemic relationship to T, S has a high degree of understanding of T.
5. Intentional actions are things with normative structure.
6. If T is S’s own intentional action, A, and S is well-functioning, then S ordinarily has an excellent epistemic relationship to A.
7. So, if T is S’s own intentional action, A, and S is well-functioning, then S ordinarily has a high degree of understanding of A.

The support for premise 1 comes from reflection on things like the basketball game and intentional actions. It seems clear that such things have a normative structure, which makes it the case that some things are integral to them, some extraneous, there are internal relationships among their parts that are normatively required, and some of their other characteristics may also be normatively required. It also comes from reflection on the differences between the fan and the naïve spectator. Premise 2 is an attempt to articulate, again by reflection on such cases, what kinds of rational capacity an epistemic agent would have if they had an excellent epistemic relationship to the kinds of fact cited in premise 1. The ones listed come to mind easily and seem uncontroversial. Premise 3 draws on the literature in the epistemology of understanding. Such capacities are those that come up in discussions of understanding and seem appropriately associated with having this particular kind of epistemic excellence. Intermediate conclusion 4 follows from premises 1 – 3. I argued above that intentional action is something with normative structure – this is the support for premise 5. If this is correct, then it could be a case of T. And if we accept that S is a well-functioning agent, who has, as is ordinarily the case, an excellent relationship to her action, then we should accept premise 6. The final conclusion (7) follows from 5, 6 and the interim conclusion 4.

Unlike the fan, the agent’s epistemic states are intertwined with her practical thought, such as the executive thought that is constitutive of her intentional acting. For an agent who is performing the intentional action of taking a free throw in a basketball game, for example, her understanding of her own movements is not just based on her understanding of the rules of basketball, as the fan’s is, it is based on her own executive thought in which she holds herself to these rules, seeks to act in accordance with them. In addition, her understanding of her movements is bound up with her rational planning concerning what to do if she fails. But the fan’s understanding is not knitted into their ongoing practical thought like this. Despite these differences, the comparison between them serves to illustrate that both are training their epistemic capacities on something with normative structure. And insofar as they both exhibit epistemic excellence, it is of the same basic kind: understanding.

**4: Second Argument: Our Action Explanation Practice Requires Understanding**

One of Anscombe’s most widely accepted claims is that intentional action is distinguished by the twin facts that it is action to which a distinctive kind of “why” question “is given application” (Anscombe, 2000, 9; Hieronymi 2009) and it is something about which the agent has distinctive epistemic states, “practical knowledge”. Anscombe and others accept that the first exploits the second: these “why” questions elicit answers from the agent that express SER.

The social practice of addressing “why” questions to the agent about her action, her offering explanatory answers, and the enquiring agent’s growth in understanding on the basis of such answers is often referred to as “rationalizing action explanation” or “reasons explanation”. For simplicity I will call this social practice the “Action Explanation practice” or AE-practice.

Not only do AE-questions mine SER, given that we are largely reasonable and sensitive to our subject matter when posing AE-questions, it is reasonable to suppose that the questions are *shaped* *in order to exploit* SER. If this is correct, we can examine typical AE-questions and AE-answers to try to discern whether the questions require the agent to have knowledge of what she is doing or whether they require understanding of her action. I will argue that we have good reason to think that AE-questions presuppose that agents understand their action in terms of its normative structure and that in ordinary cases these questions elicit such understanding. This gives us a further reason to think that SER requires understanding.

Consider this simple case:

**Car Keys**

A is picking up her car keys from a table and is asked by someone, Q, “Why are you getting your car keys?”. A answers truthfully “I am going to drive to the store”.

A’s direct (i.e. non-corrective) answer seems to exhibit *knowledge of what* she is doing. Should we conclude that AE-questions seek only knowledge of what one is doing? I think that the aim of AE-questions are not so easily isolated. Davidson maintains that true, direct, and informative answers lead the competent enquirer “… to see something the agent saw, or thought he saw, in his action – some feature, consequence, or aspect of the action the agent wanted, desired, prized, held dear, thought dutiful, beneficial, obligatory, or agreeable” (1963, 685). The constitutive aim of AE-questions, as Davidson characterizes it, is to understand the *appropriateness* – the obligatoriness, agreeableness – of the intentional action. And one arrives at a satisfactory conclusion of an AE-enquiry when one comes to see the action as appropriate, at least relative to the agent’s (perhaps mistaken) beliefs. This is a widely-accepted view both of the aim of AE-enquiry and what it takes to gain understanding from such an enquiry (e.g. Mele, 2013, 163-4; Setiya, 2007, 62-67).

Consideration of cases in which the enquirer and the agent do not see eye to eye on matters of what it is appropriate to do support Davidson’s view of the aim of AE-enquiry. In Car Keys, suppose that Q thinks that A should walk to the store rather than take the car, because of the amount of traffic at this time of day. Q may say “But why would you take the car – the traffic is crazy at this time of day?”. It looks like Q hasn’t gotten a satisfactory answer to her original enquiry. But note that Q has come to learn *what A is doing* in getting her car keys. If her enquiry remains unsatisfied, Q’s question does not seem to seek (only) knowledge of what A is doing. Davidson’s view offers a plausible explanation of why Q’s enquiry remains unsatisfied: Q doesn’t yet see why taking the car is an *appropriate* practical response to A's situation.

This is also supported by considering how the conversation between Q and A might continue. Suppose that A elaborates “I injured my foot yesterday, it’s too painful to walk to the shop. But I do need to get milk”. A tries to show that her means is, after all, appropriate. Given the constraint that she is acting under, driving is a necessary means. But then Q might say “Couldn’t you do without milk?”. She again seems to seek out the appropriateness of A’s action. A: “Well, I need it for breakfast in the morning”. A again tries to show that her action is appropriate. This might prompt comprehension or a new round of questions and answers. And these questions and answers would again focus on why the course of action is appropriate – beneficial, obligatory, etc.

Note that in exercising her capacity to explain her acting in terms of its appropriateness, the agent does not just need *knowledge of what* she is doing, but an *understanding* of her action in terms of its overall normative structure. The driving is understood by her as appropriate in light of her overall goal. And when this is challenged, A reveals that she understands driving as appropriate in light of the fact that she is unable to take an alternative means (walking). Were Q to ask her why she is going at this time of the day, she might say “Well I have to go now as the store shuts soon”. And were Q to ask her why she is rushing, she might explain this in terms of the need to get this done quickly, and so on. Q expects answers and a well-functioning agent like A ordinarily has many such answers available. Such back and forth is not uncommon in AE-contexts. And it reveals something about the AE-practice: its questions presuppose that well-functioning planning agents have a comprehensive understanding of the normative structure of their intentional actions and competent AE-answers convey such understanding. If we think that the nature of SER is reflected in the contours of the AE-practice, then we have strong reason to think that SER requires such understanding.

It might be objected that I am basing an implausibly intellectual view of both intentional action and of the AE-practice on just one kind of case. Intentional actions can be very simple and the AE-practice can have a corresponding simplicity that precludes the presupposition that the agent understands her action in terms of its overall normative structure. Consider this case:

**No Reason**

S is only raising her arm - she is doing it for no reason and she has no further aim in doing this.

Suppose that we ask S why she is raising her arm. If she is a well-functioning agent, she should be able to answer “I am not doing it for any reason”. Our question may have presupposed that the action is favoured by reasons or has some end, but she denies this. In denying this, she doesn’t simply express her knowledge of what she is doing. She correctly discriminates between what is integral and extraneous to the action: the action bears no relationships to ends, rules, her values, her policies or reasons. Similarly, were we to ask the agent why she is raising her hand in a particular way (e.g. quickly), she could answer “I didn’t realize I was doing it like that.” She again evinces a grasp of her action’s overall normative structure: its manner is not intentional, explicable in terms of some end or policy. If S is a well-functioning agent she should be able to authoritatively answer these questions. An agent needs a good epistemic grip on the overall normative structure of her action if she is to retain control of it.

It seems that even these AE-questions presuppose that the agent has understanding of the overall normative structure of her intentional action. And it also seems that the well-functioning agent will have understanding of her intentional action even in cases where the normative structure of the action is meagre. We have good reason to think that the objection fails.

One may think it more plausible to deny that SER and our AE-practice are as intimately intertwined as my arguments suppose. But this would involve rejecting the intimate connections among the trinity of (1) intentional action (with its practical thought), (2) SER, and (3) our AE-practice that Anscombe (1957/2000) insightfully highlights and that many philosophers accept. Such an approach would be unappealing in a variety of ways and I will not consider it here.

**5: Third Argument: Practical Amnesia**

Consider this case of ‘practical amnesia’ (modified from Kim, 1998; see also Velleman, 2007, 15):

**Fridge**

Anna walks across the kitchen to the fridge, reaches for the handle of the fridge door, and begins to pull it open. She realizes that she can’t remember what she wants. Was it milk for coffee, ingredients for dinner, or something else?

On a special agential basis Anna has a true belief that, or knows that, she is going to the fridge in order to open the door. Were someone to ask her “What are you doing?”, she could answer truly and authoritatively “I am opening the fridge door”.

Nevertheless, Anna doesn’t know what the further purpose of the action is. Her knowledge of what she is doing does not equip her to answer other AE-questions. And it leaves her feeling pretty helpless: suppose that the fridge seal has been giving trouble and that Anna has been meaning to fix this. She may ask herself whether her overall plan is to check the seal on the fridge, and she may then reasonably wonder whether she should be pulling slowly on the fridge door handle while paying careful attention to the resistance that the seal offers. Or is she just getting milk? Her knowledge of what she is doing does not help her in ongoing practical thought and intentional control.

Even if Anna’s knowledge of what she is doing intentionally satisfies certain conditions on SER, such as having an exclusive agential basis, it seems too slight, too unilluminating, and too troubling to Anna herself to qualify as SER. Either Anna doesn’t have SER at all, or her knowledge is, at best, a borderline case of same. But if this is correct, we have good reason to think that *knowledge of what one is doing* is insufficient for paradigm SER.

It may be objected that because Anna has forgotten her overall plan, she is no longer intentionally getting a beer, say. As SER concerns only what is being done intentionally, Anna does not lack SER. But this response is problematic. It concedes that an agent can suffer a significant agency-undermining epistemic failure, but still have SER. It also forecloses on the possibility that there is a diagnosis of what is wrong with Anna that will be provided by a theory of SER. In granting that SER does not have to be embedded in relationships to ongoing practical thought and control, or in a relationship to the capacity of the agent to engage in our AE-practice, or to an agent’s felt authority over her action, it makes obscure how SER is practical or rationally integrated into the agent’s practical thought. It forecloses on the possibility of a functional profile for SER in which it plays key roles in well-functioning practical agency. I think that if SER is a *practical* kind of epistemic excellence, it is preferable to say that Anna’s epistemic states are at best a borderline case of SER and to seek an alternative characterization of SER that gives us insight into what is wrong in Fridge.

There is such a characterization available. What Anna is missing in Fridge is an epistemic grip on the overall normative structure of her current action of opening the fridge: how this action relates to the other things that she originally planned to do (e.g. get a beer, give it to her guest, etc.). She does not *understand* her own current action as a means related to this end, or how it relates to reasons, her policies or values, her practical roles, such as the role of host, or social rules that she acts in accordance with, and so on. If we accept that SER requires understanding, we have a neat diagnosis of what is wrong with Anna: she does not understand her action in terms of an overall normative structure of which it is a part. We also have a good reason to think that the Necessity of Understanding thesis is true.

**6: Implications for a Debate about SER**

Many philosophers have argued that SER is non-observational.[[6]](#endnote-6) One reason to think that this is correct is that if you came to know what you are doing intentionally by observing yourself doing this, you would lag behind where you should be epistemically if you are the agent of the action. (O’Brien, 2007, 157-8) The well-functioning agent with SER should not be in the position of one who thinks: “Let me see, what is this body bringing about? Ah yes, the opening of the window!” (Anscombe, 2000, 50) We might think of this as the Epistemic Lag worry about the compatibility of SER and knowledge of one’s action on the basis of observation.

Furthermore, observation is a relatively fragile source of knowledge, and to incorporate it into SER would threaten the seeming exceptional security of SER, which grounds, in turn, a well-functioning agent’s near unassailable authority concerning her intentional action. Let’s call this the Authority worry about observation. And if other agents have observational access to an agent’s action, then SER’s being exclusive to the agent may also be threatened. Let’s call this the Exclusivity worry about the compatibility of SER and observation.

When we put the Epistemic Lag, Authority, and Exclusivity worries together, it may seem that SER must be non-observational.[[7]](#endnote-7) Kieran Setiya argues that this is less troubling than it may first appear, because what is important for SER is that the agent ordinarily has secure and exclusive epistemic states concerning *something* that she doesintentionally. Although an agent must rely on observation of his movement and its effects to come to know that in pressing down hard on a top sheet of paper he is making 10 carbon copies (Davidson, 1980), he can still have SER with respect to, say, his pressing down:

Although the carbon-copier does not believe that he is making ten copies, he is doing so by performing other intentional actions of which he is aware. For instance, he believes that he is pressing on the paper as hard as he can ... (Setiya, 2008, 390)

But views that restrict the scope of SER like this have costs. First, they disconnect SER-epistemic-states and the epistemic states that are involved in ongoing practical control. Observational beliefs are often needed for the control of world-involving actions, but according to such “special domain” views, as John Schwenkler calls them, these epistemic states are not involved in SER. (Schwenkler, 2012) Second, suppose that we ask the agent making carbon copies: “What are you doing?”. If he is co-operative, he would not say “I am pressing down hard”, thereby drawing on his SER (as the special domain view conceives of it), but “I am making handouts”. Such an answer is co-operative in an AE-context because it gives the interlocutor the opportunity to understand the action as appropriate in light of an end. But on the special domain understanding of SER this answer does not draw on SER. Special domain views would also seem, then, to sever the connection between SER and our AE-practice. Furthermore, the carbon copier reveals a kind of epistemic excellence in fielding such AE-questions – he seems to understand his actions in terms of their place in a larger normative structure. This is a striking kind of epistemic excellence characteristically found in well-functioning agency. But special domain views will offer no account of this excellence, nor do they explore continuities between this excellence and that which is involved in the secure grip that one has on one’s basic actions.

If the Necessity of Understanding thesis is true, it is not clear that the Epistemic Lag, Authority, and Exclusivity worries should push us towards a special domain view. If SER requires understanding, the well-functioning agent’s observation of her movements is accompanied by distinctive epistemic capacities. When the carbon copier peeks to see if he has made 10 copies, his observation is accompanied by the capacity to reliably and correctly judge that this is the successful execution of his plan to make handouts. Furthermore, he *looks to see whether* he is successfully doing what he has set out to do. His prior understanding rationally prompts and guides a highly specific enquiry. It is not clear that such an agent lags behind, epistemically speaking, where he should be if he is the agent of the action. He is, in fact, quite different from the naïve observer, who lags behind in the comical and decisively non-practical way that Anscombe describes.[[8]](#endnote-8) Although the Epistemic Lag worry seems potent when observation is unconditioned by understanding, it seems less worrying when observation supplements, and is guided by, understanding.

The appeal to understanding also promises to blunt the Authority and Exclusivity worries: even if an agent and an onlooker both come to know what the agent is doing intentionally by observing her movements, only the well-functioning agent has by nature the capacity to grasp the role of her current action in an overall normative structure. Second, the agent who understands this structure would ordinarily have warrant for her observational beliefs about what she is currently doing intentionally that the mere observer lacks. Suppose that the agent forms the observational belief “I am A-ing”. Because she also understands her A-ing as her bringing about B, and because she knows that she is currently engaged in bringing about B, she has an additional non-observational source of justification for her belief that she is A-ing.

There is much more to be said here. My limited aim has been to indicate how key objections to the possibility of incorporating observation into SER might be addressed if understanding is given a central place in a theory of SER. I tentatively suggest that an understanding view of SER is promising if we wish to accommodate observation within SER and avoid the downsides of a special domain view.

**6. An objection**

Some discussions of SER, such as recent interpretations of Anscombe’s *Intention* (e.g. Frey, 2019; Schwenkler, 2020; Small, 2012) do not foreground knowledge-of-what-one-is-doing. Do these existing views already accommodate what I have argued for even if they don’t use the language of understanding? I will confine myself to a brief discussion of one such view where SER is thought of as follows:

The mode of practical knowledge is the means-end order of practical reasoning. It is not an abstract knowledge only of what is happening or getting done, but of how and why these things are taking place. (Schwenkler, 2020, 179)

In having SER I know that I am A-ing, that I am A-ing in order to B, and that I am B-ing in order to C, which is my end. I *know how* I am bringing about C: by A-ing and B-ing. And I know for each of A and B, *why* I am doing them: they are means to C. If knowledge of how and why is more comprehensive than knowing what one is doing, does this view preempt the Necessity of Understanding thesis?

First, I do not think that the structure of intentional action can be understood exclusively in means-end terms.[[9]](#endnote-9) Personal policies, moral or social rules, plans, and act-types all feature prominently in executive thinking and the structure that they give to actions is not always means-end in nature. I may recycle just because it is the right thing to do, and in such a case my acting seems to be structured by a moral rule rather than by some further end that I have. If I step to the right in the execution of a particular dance step, my action is structured by the practical standards given by the act-type rather than because it is a means to some end. And I may not explain my stepping in that way in means-end terms in AE-contexts, but in terms of what one has to do if one is to perform that dance step. (O’Brien 2021) However elastic the means-end construct may be, it is problematic to claim that all intentional actions, of which we may have SER, conform to this mould. If an agent’s excellent epistemic relationship is to something with normative structure that goes beyond means-end structure, the competing approach that threatens the significance of the Necessity of Understanding thesis, offers, in fact, a clearly different and problematic view of the epistemic relationship between an agent and her action.

Second, the relationship between knowledge-why, -how, and -what, on one hand, and the understanding that I have focused on here, on the other, is not as straightforward as it would need to be for the Necessity of Understanding thesis to be preempted, rendered uninteresting. In cases such as the child who knows why the house burned down (§2), or the naïve spectator of the basketball game (§3), it seems to be possible to have coherent knowledge-why, -how, and -what of some matter, but fail to have understanding. And as discussed in Fridge (§5) Anna has means-end knowledge (I am crossing the kitchen in order to get to the fridge, I am reaching for the handle in order to open the fridge door) that might be understood as “a mode of practical reasoning”, but it seems to be insufficient, not just for understanding, but for SER. The competing view is, then, not clearly adequate as an account of SER, and it does not clearly preempt or surpass the Necessity of Understanding thesis. Finally, it should be noted that if the discussion of the No Reason case (§5) is a guide, we can have epistemic states that are redolent of SER, but which are not easily understood as a “mode of practical reasoning.”

There is much more to be said about the nature of practical thinking in action, its relationship to SER, and the nature of intentional action, and so, my brief discussion is unlikely to satisfy objectors. But it is premature, I think, to conclude that the Necessity of Understanding thesis offers, at best, a gloss on pre-existing views, or to assume that those views face no challenges from the cases considered here. It should be noted that the Necessity of Understanding thesis is uncommitted on many key issues, and so, potentially compatible with a number of different approaches to SER and intentional action.

**Concluding remarks**

To develop a theory of the special epistemic relationship between an agent and her intentional action with understanding as a central component, we need a more detailed characterization of what kind of understanding is involved. And we need to specify what this understanding’s relationships are to the agent’s executive and deliberative thought, and to her knowledge of what she is doing if that is a necessary component of the special epistemic relationship. We need accounts of this understanding’s practical nature and its relationship to observation. The limited aim of this discussion has been to challenge the view that the excellent epistemic relationship between an agent and her intentional action can be given an adequate general characterization in terms of *knowledge of what one is doing*. Even if philosophers use “knowledge” as a placeholder only to signal some kind of epistemic excellence, we can go further. Understanding of normative structure is necessary for SER.

A theory of SER that incorporates understanding promises to explain how our AE-enquiries and SER fit together. If knowing what one is doing were necessary and sufficient for SER we would be at risk of misunderstanding the agent’s poor epistemic performance in Fridge. And we would risk underselling the epistemic excellence of a carbon copier who has a secure epistemic grip on the normative structure of their world-involving actions. It is preferable, I think, to adopt the view that understanding is necessary for SER.

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1. As will be discussed at length, this is understanding of an action in terms of its “normative structure”. This may take the form of understanding one’s intentional movements as being the tokening of some act-type, or understanding one’s action as a means to a further end, or in light of reasons that favour it, or in terms of social rules, policies, or practical roles that one thereby acts in accordance with. For brevity, I do not include this detail in the Necessity of Understanding thesis. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Schwenkler (2011, 2012) and Grünbaum (2013) argue against the non-observational view. O’Brien (2007), Paul (2009), Setiya (2008, 2017), Velleman (2007), among others, accept versions of it. Anscombe (2000) is widely interpreted as defending a non-observational view. For an alternative reading of Anscombe see Schwenkler (2020). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Unless specified I will be concerned with well-functioning rational agents, such as adult human “planning agents” (Bratman 1999). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Frost (2019), who departs from the knowledge paradigm, characterizing it instead as a capacity, says: “Of all the contemporary authors I know who write directly about Anscombe’s views about practical knowledge, only McDowell 2013 is noticeably wary of speaking of practical knowledge as a special kind of ‘knowledge-that’.” [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. It has been argued that understanding is transparent while knowledge is not (e.g. Zagzebski, 2001), understanding is compatible with epistemic luck while knowledge is not (Kvanvig, 2003), understanding is not factive (Elgin, 2007), understanding is a cognitive achievement while knowledge is not necessarily so (Pritchard, 2010), understanding involves cognitive abilities not required for knowledge (Hills, 2015). Philosophers who accept the reducibility of understanding to knowledge may still regard understanding as a sub-species of knowledge that deserves separate treatment because of its special characteristics. (e.g. Grimm, 2006; Sliwa, 2015) [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. For dissent see Schwenkler (2011, pp. 146-147 and 2012, pp. 25-29). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. This does not cover all of the arguments for the non-observational view e.g. O’Brien (2007, chapter 9). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. There are points of contact here with other views, such as Moran (2004), but I do not rely on claims about how intensional thought affects perception. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. A striking challenge to means-end structure is found in Hursthouse 1991. Anscombe also had misgivings about her exclusive focus on the means-end “calculative” order (Anscombe, 1981, viii). [↑](#endnote-ref-9)