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Gilbert Ryle and the Ethical Impetus for Know-How

Matt Dougherty

This paper aims to shed light on an underexplored aspect of Gilbert Ryle's interest in the notion of "knowing-how". It is argued that in addition to his motive of discounting a certain theory of mind, his interest in the notion also stemmed (and perhaps stemmed more deeply) from two ethical interests: one concerning his own life as a philosopher and whether the philosopher has any meaningful task, and one concerning the ancient issue of whether virtue is a kind of knowledge. It is argued that Ryle saw know-how as crucial in both respects and, also, that he continued to be interested in these ethical issues throughout his career.

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To elucidate the thoughts of a philosopher we need to find the answer not only to the question “What were his intellectual worries?” but, before that question and after that question, the answer to the question “What was his overriding Worry?” Gilbert Ryle (1971a, ix)

1. Introduction

The paper “Knowing How and Knowing That”, Gilbert Ryle’s presidential address to the Aristotelian Society in 1945, marked the start of an ongoing discussion in philosophy on the nature of knowing how to do things and its relation to knowing truths and facts. If Ryle was right, his distinction was one which is “quite familiar to all of us” (Ryle 1945a, 4). But there is little doubt that he himself was largely responsible for bringing it to philosophical consciousness.

His primary aim in doing so is commonly understood to have been anti-Cartesian. In the presidential address, he describes himself as clarifying the nature of intelligence—or, in his more linguistic terms, as clarifying “the logical behaviour of the several concepts of intelligence” (*ibid.*, 1). He lists various such concepts, but his concept of choice is *knowing how*.¹ He believes that once

¹Other such concepts that he mentions are *shrewdly*, *wittily*, *methodically*, and *scrupulously*. Presumably, he believed that to do a thing in any of these ways is to do it knowingly and that the basic way in which to do a thing knowingly is to exercise knowledge how to do it.

we are clear about what knowing how to do things consists in—for instance, what knowing how to ride a bicycle or knowing how to care for a garden consists in—we will see that a person’s intelligence is “as directly exhibited in some of his doings as it is in some of his thinking” (*ibid.*, 5). Ryle’s most explicit aim, then, is to erase the temptation to think that intelligence is or amounts to *thinking*—the view he calls “Intellectualism”. And though Descartes is not mentioned here, the proposed view is plausibly anti-Cartesian. For erasing the temptation to believe that human *intelligence* essentially amounts to thinking also plausibly erases the Cartesian temptation to believe that human *being* essentially amounts to thinking.

That we now tend to think of Ryle’s aim in his presidential address as specifically anti-Cartesian, however, may result from the fact that *The Concept of Mind* (his most famous work, published four years later) is *explicitly* anti-Cartesian, and knowledge-how again takes centre stage there. In the introduction to the book, Ryle states his purpose as “exploding” “the Cartesian myth” of “the ghost in the machine”—a view which, he says, understands human mind and agency as “para-mechanical” (that is, as one part paranormal and one part mechanical) (Ryle 1949, 7ff). Add to this that the chapter entitled “Knowing How and Knowing That” is the first substantive chapter of the book (following the chapter entitled “Descartes’ Myth”, and repeating much of the material of his presidential address), and it becomes quite reasonable to assume not only that the notion of know-how is foundational for Ryle’s critique in *The Concept of Mind* but also that the impetus for discussing the notion was anti-Cartesian all along.

Such assumptions are certainly plausible and, to an extent, correct. Alone, however, they leave us with an impoverished picture of the genesis (and continuation) of Ryle’s interest in know-how. The notion clearly does form part of the foundation of his anti-Cartesian critique in *The Concept of Mind*, and the initial motivation for discussing it may, at least in part, have

been anti-Cartesian. But we have good reason to believe that much more motivates his concern with it, even regarding *The Concept of Mind*.

In “Ryle’s ‘Intellectualist Legend’ in Historical Context” (2017), Michael Kremer has provided us with an additional aspect of this picture. He has shown that in taking Intellectualism as his enemy, Ryle plausibly saw himself as contributing to a decades-long debate about the nature of human mind and agency, “spanning not only philosophy, but also psychology, economics, political science, and sociology”.² Put in the most general terms, this debate pitted Reason against Instinct, with individuals who took Reason’s side being labelled “intellectualists”, and those who took Instinct’s side being labelled “anti-intellectualists”. While intellectualists understood human beings as basically rational and as at their best when acting with deliberation and thought, the latter understood humans, much like non-human animals, as basically instinctual and as at their best when acting instinctually.

As Kremer tells the story, the so-called “revolt against reason” in philosophy was led by the French intuitionist Henri Bergson.³ In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Bergson had become a public intellectual and cult figure and, in 1928, even received a Nobel Prize in literature.⁴ But this was no doubt a controversial choice. In 1915, the sociologist L. T. Hobhouse had said of Bergson’s philosophy that it was fitting for “a generation which was rushing headlong on disaster”, since it degraded reason and placed instinct “upon the throne” (Hobhouse 1915, 51; Kremer 2017, 24). In 1918, the American philosopher Ralph Barton

²Kremer (2017, 17-18); I rely on Kremer for the historical content of this and the following paragraph.

³With some help from the American pragmatist William James. See, e.g., *A Pluralistic Universe* (1909).

⁴Technically, Bergson won the 1927 Nobel Prize for literature, but he was not awarded it until 1928. In 1927, the committee had decided that there were no suitable candidates. They thus saved the award until the following year and awarded it then, along with the 1928 prize, which was won by the Norwegian novelist Sigrid Undset. (Bergson, however, had been nominated numerous times prior.)

Perry seconded Hobhouse, calling Bergson’s philosophy a form of “irrationalism”, supported by “the motivation of lawlessness” (Perry 1918, 296; Kremer 2017, 24). And even into the Second World War, the assault on Bergson and anti-intellectualism continued, with then-political scientist Max Lerner going as far as to say that Bergson and other anti-intellectualists had prepared the ground for Hitler, albeit unconsciously (Lerner 1943, Kremer 2017, 21). Bergson was thus seen as the arch anti-intellectualist.

Today, the term “anti-intellectualism” is commonly used to describe Ryle’s position as well, but as Kremer argues, Ryle’s aim in opposing the Intellectualist legend is not to defend anti-intellectualism as just described but, rather, to mark a path *between* intellectualism and anti-intellectualism.⁵ In both the presidential address and *The Concept of Mind*, Ryle argues that human action can be rational without involving reasoning—being, in a sense, both rational and instinctual. In particular, Ryle aims to mark a path between Reason and Instinct by arguing that exercises of knowledge-how involve both. Kremer’s history of the Intellectualism debate brings this more firmly to light and thus adds some historical richness to the story of Ryle’s interest in know-how.

I believe, however, that neither the anti-Cartesian story nor Kremer’s history of the Intellectualism debate, even together, gives us a suitably complete story. Indeed, I think that the most basic impetus for Ryle’s interest in know-how lay elsewhere. I will be arguing that his most basic interest in know-how was (broadly speaking) an *ethical* one, with both a theoretical and a practical dimension. In the epigraph to this paper, we see Ryle state that to understand a philosopher, we need to know not only their “intellectual worries”—their theoretical aims and interests—but also their “overriding Worry”—their more basic, perhaps existential motivations.⁶ In arguing that Ryle’s interest

⁵Indeed, one could argue that this was Bergson’s aim as well.

⁶Iris Murdoch (1970, 72) similarly notes that “[i]t is always a significant question to ask about any philosopher: what is he afraid of?”

in know-how was an *ethical* one, I will be arguing that his own worries consisted in part of an ethical intellectual worry and in part of an ethical Worry.

First, Ryle was intellectually worried by a question commonly discussed by the ancient Greeks. He was concerned with the question of what ethical virtue (that feature which the Greeks took to constitute or else to be necessary for living a good and meaningful life) *is*. Specifically, he was concerned with whether ethical virtue is a kind of *knowledge*. We see him interacting with this question in the presidential address itself, but also in a related discussion occurring five years prior—“Conscience and Moral Convictions” (1940). In this earlier paper, he is concerned to argue that *genuine* moral knowledge (which he also construes as virtue) is *knowledge-how*, or skill.⁷ We then see the same view expressed again, albeit in passing, in the presidential address. As a precursor to his use of the notion of know-how in arguing against Cartesianism and Intellectualism, this first ethical interest is an important one. As we will see, it is an interest which he continues to engage with in various forms to the end of his career.⁸

Second, Ryle regularly entertained a Worry about the status of philosophy itself. Having begun his philosophical career just after the fall of “psychologism” and at the start of “analytic” philosophy, he was worried that the discipline had no real job to do, that there was no properly philosophical knowledge, and, hence, that life as a philosopher—a life that he was living—was a senseless one. As with his intellectual worry, this worry has to

⁷Ryle uses the terms “ethical” and “moral” interchangeably, such that talking of “ethical virtue” (if ethical virtue is a kind of knowledge) and talking of “moral knowledge” are two ways of talking about the same thing. I depart from this usage in also talking of Ryle’s Worry as an ethical one. The ethical, as I understand it, is concerned with how to live *generally*, whereas the moral is concerned more specifically with how to live *with other people*. In discussing Ryle’s views, however, I follow his usage.

⁸Kremer (2017) briefly discusses this topic in the final few paragraphs of his paper, but his discussion deserves expansion as well as some clarification. Hermann (2013) also engages with Ryle’s later work on virtue and knowledge.

do with the goodness or meaningfulness of a life—it is thus an ethical worry. But unlike the other, this worry for Ryle, himself a philosopher, is an eminently practical one—it is a concern with *living* a meaningful life. In regard to this worry, too, he saw know-how as the answer. He came to hold that the philosopher’s characteristic kind of knowledge is knowledge-how, rather than knowledge-that, and thus that the practice of philosophy is a sensible one after all.

In elaborating on these points in this paper, I begin as Ryle recommends, by discussing his Worry. I then turn to his intellectual worry. The resulting picture will, I hope, serve as an important supplement to Kremer’s history of the Intellectualism debate and to the anti-Cartesian story of Ryle’s interest in know-how.

2. A Philosophical Crisis

It is widely appreciated that Ryle shared various philosophical dispositions with Ludwig Wittgenstein. Both are seen, for instance, as having anti-Cartesian and pseudo-behaviouristic philosophical views and as preferring linguistic and therapeutic philosophical methods. But comparisons along these lines tend to be made between Ryle and the so-called “later Wittgenstein”, especially of the 1953 *Philosophical Investigations*. Much less widely appreciated is the influence of the “early Wittgenstein” on Ryle. It was Wittgenstein’s 1921 *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, however, that first captivated Ryle and that set the tone and task for his philosophical career. And this is because it was the *Tractatus*, according to Ryle, that threw philosophy in England in the first half of the 20th century into crisis.⁹

As Ryle tells this story, philosophers at the turn of the century were moving beyond a psychologistic view of philosophy

⁹Ryle sometimes gives equal weight in this story to the Logical Positivists (see, e.g., Ryle 1970, 9–10), but seemingly because he saw Wittgenstein’s work as also momentous for helping *resolve* the crisis, his focus tends to be on Wittgenstein.

(Ryle 1951, 250ff; see also Tanney 2013, 94ff). He reports that from Locke through Bradley, philosophers had tacitly understood their activity as a psychological one and had debated their issues as if they were psychological issues—as if the philosopher’s job was to describe how the mind works. But by the late 19th century, psychology had started being practiced in labs and clinics, and this made philosophy’s armchair psychology suspect. As a result, philosophers were being forced to re-conceive of what they were doing and to understand their job in other terms.

Ryle says that, for a time, philosophers took shelter in Platonic idioms. They thought of themselves as concerned not with the workings of the mind but with the domain of “abstract” or “conceptual” entities, entities like possibilities, essences, timelessly subsisting universals, numbers, truths, falsities, values, and meanings. Doing so had the double benefit of enabling philosophy to keep its status as a *science* (viz., the science of abstract entities), as well as of enabling it to keep its status as an *autonomous* science, independent from (or else foundational to) other sciences.

In the period at the start of the century, Ryle says that philosophers “tried not to mind the dream-like character of [this] new asylum” (Ryle 1951, 252). But Bertrand Russell, in his attempts to ground mathematics in logic, ran into a paradox which would lead to their disenchantment:

Russell, in his inquiries into the logical principles underlying mathematics, found that he could not well help constructing statements which had the logically disturbing property that they were true only on condition that they were false, and false only on condition that they were true. (Ryle 1951, 252)¹⁰

Ryle comments that Russell found a solution to this paradox but that it was Wittgenstein who drew the solution’s crisis-inducing

¹⁰Ryle presumably refers here only to Russell’s semantic paradoxes, rather than the logical ones, such as “Russell’s paradox”.

conclusions for logic and philosophy—and, in doing so, set the task for Ryle’s own generation of philosophers.

Put one way, both Russell and Wittgenstein thought that the paradox could be resolved by distinguishing, on the one hand, between truth and falsehood and, on the other, between meaningfulness and meaninglessness. Both agreed that the statements Russell had found (that were true only on condition that they were false, and false only on condition that they were true) were in fact neither true nor false but meaningless—they were, as Ryle puts it, “nonsensical simulacra of statements” (*ibid.*). Russell, however, thought of nonsense as relative to a language, such that a statement that was nonsensical in one language needn’t be nonsensical in all languages.¹¹ Wittgenstein agreed that nonsense is relative to a language but thought that at least *one* language must non-relatively make sense; and he thought that whatever is nonsense in *that* language is nonsense full stop.

Wittgenstein thus came to hold in the *Tractatus* that it was the job of the logician and philosopher to determine not the substantive truth and falsehood statements but, rather, their making or not making sense. The philosopher, he thought, does not study abstract entities but, rather, determines what can and cannot be significantly said. The further, crisis-inducing implication was then just a step away:

In the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein came to the frustrating conclusion that . . . [t]o try to tell what makes the difference between significant and nonsensical talk is itself to cross the divide between significant and nonsensical talk. Philosophizing [as well as logic] can, indeed, open our eyes to [principles of sense and nonsense], but it cannot issue in significant statements of them. Philosophy is not a science; it cannot yield theories or doctrines. (Ryle 1951, 253)

¹¹We see evidence that this was Russell’s view, at least at the time of the *Tractatus*, in the introduction that he wrote for that book. Potter (2002) discusses these issues, and the differences between Wittgenstein and Russell on them, in more detail. See also Landini (2004) for a detailed look at Russell’s varying approaches to the paradoxes.

According to the early Wittgenstein, the conception of philosophy which he had reached had the implication that to do philosophy is to cross the bounds of sense, thus making philosophical practice itself a kind of nonsense. As he saw it, this meant that all of philosophy's problems and statements are mere pseudo-problems and pseudo-statements, formed of the non-sensical and, hence, strictly speaking, of the unsayable. He could thus think of himself as having "solved" all of its problems.¹²

As Ryle and others saw it, however, the *Tractatus* rather set them an urgent, existential task:

We were [then] facing what was in effect the . . . challenge of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* . . . We philosophers were in for a near-lifetime of enquiry into our own title to be enquirers. Had we any answerable questions, including this one? (Ryle 1970, 10)

As Ryle expresses this in the introduction to his *Collected Papers*, the problem was that philosophy had considered itself a science, concerned with discovering truths, theories, and doctrines. But the *Tractatus* had raised some troubling questions:

What sort of an enquiry is philosophy as distinct from Natural Science, Mental Science, Mathematics, Theology and Formal Logic? What, if any, is its proprietary subject-matter? What, if any, is its peculiar method? (Ryle 1971a, ix)

These questions occupied Ryle from the point of the *Tractatus* onward, not merely as theoretical questions but as practical ones, concerning how he and other philosophers were to understand themselves, as well as whether they could understand themselves as doing anything meaningful at all.

By 1937, Ryle had come upon an answer to these questions that suitably satisfied him, though he seems to have continued to work out its details for the remainder of his career. It was an answer that would lead him, within a few years, to the notion of know-how. In his "Taking Sides in Philosophy" (1937), Ryle

¹²See Wittgenstein's Preface to the work.

gives both a negative and a positive construal of philosophy. On the negative side, he agrees with the view of the *Tractatus* that philosophy is not in the business of yielding theories or doctrines. Here he puts this as the point that philosophy is not about "taking sides", not about settling upon Idealism or Realism, Rationalism or Empiricism, Monism or Pluralism. Indeed, he argues that philosophy has no place for "isms" at all, save for in student examinations and as short-cuts in philosophical discussion. But on the positive side, Ryle nonetheless understands philosophy as a form of "discovery":

The real root of my objection [to taking sides in philosophy] is, I think, the view that I take of the nature of philosophical inquiry. I am not going to expound it in full, but a part of the view is that it is a species of discovery. And it seems absurd for discoverers to split into Whigs and Tories. (Ryle 1937, 320)

It seems absurd for discoverers to split into Whigs and Tories, the thought seems to be, because doing so requires having settled opinions or theories, and to settle upon a theory is, to that extent, to have ceased actively being a discoverer. Factions only make sense when one is no longer in the process of discovering; so factions in philosophy indicate that, properly speaking, it is not philosophy which is being done.

Ryle's view here may ultimately be untenable. But what matters for our current purposes are the details of his positive conception of philosophy as a form of discovery. Essential to this conception are not the theories in which philosophy results but, rather, its *method*. Philosophy, Ryle says, *is* its method, and its method is "dialectic" or "argument":

Philosophers do not make known matters of fact which were unknown before. The sense in which they throw light is that they make clear what was unclear before, or make obvious things which were previously in a muddle. And the dawning of this desiderated obviousness occurs in the finding of a logically rigorous philosophical argument. Something that was obscure becomes obvious to me

in the act of seeing the force of a particular philosophical argument. Nor can I make a short cut to that clarification by perusing the conclusions, but skipping the reasoning of the argument.

(Ryle 1937, 329–30)¹³

Once again, the fingerprints of the *Tractatus* are clear. Ryle agrees with Wittgenstein that philosophy is not in the business of propounding theories or doctrines, and he agrees that it *is* in the business of clarifying (or “throwing light on”) what was unclear before. But whereas the Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus* thus concludes that philosophy is nonsensical, Ryle disagrees. For Ryle, philosophers needn’t throw away any ladder, in Wittgenstein’s phrase.¹⁴ They rather have as their task to engage ongoingly in a method of dialectic or argument. As Ryle expresses later, marking his reason for departing from the *Tractatus* on this point, “Wittgenstein [in the *Tractatus*] had himself said very effec-

¹³One might reasonably wonder here whether Ryle is not himself taking philosophical sides (or, rather, meta-philosophical sides). He says, for instance, in concluding the paper, that one of the greatest discoveries that a philosopher can make is a discovery of a new *method* (Ryle 1937, 332). This might seem to imply that dialectic is *not* the only method of philosophy. It would be more charitable, however, to understand him as thinking that there are different methods of argument and dialectic, thus *sub-methods* of philosophy. This would especially seem the properly charitable view to take in light of his close acquaintance with phenomenology. (See, e.g., his review of Heidegger’s *Sein und Zeit* (1928), his “Phenomenology” (1932), his review of Farber’s *The Foundations of Phenomenology* (1946) and his later “Phenomenology Versus ‘The Concept of Mind’” (1962).) He clearly thought of phenomenology as a form of philosophy, so we should assume that he would have been willing to think of phenomenology as consisting of a *form* of argument or dialectic. Though this would still, in a sense, be taking sides.

¹⁴The most famous lines of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* are the first and the penultimate. The line referred to here is the penultimate, in which Wittgenstein expresses that philosophical statements clarify but are themselves nonsense:

My propositions are elucidatory in this way: he who understands me finally recognizes them as senseless, when he has climbed out through them, on them, over them. (He must so to speak throw away the ladder, after he has climbed up on it.)

He must surmount these propositions; then he sees the world rightly.

(Wittgenstein 1921, 6.54)

tive things, and talking effectively is not talking nonsensically” (1951, 253).¹⁵ So, though Ryle takes it as true that philosophy does not properly yield theories, he still holds that “it can be skilful or unskilful, successful or unsuccessful” (Ryle 1951, 253). It is not nonsense but rather consists of method, done well or done poorly.¹⁶ For Ryle, this was the answer to the philosophical crisis. But he continues to be concerned with it well after 1937.

His work on knowing-how constitutes a significant and crucial part of this continued concern. If philosophy really is to be a method and not a body of doctrines or truths, there must really be a distinction between *method* and *truth*. And if the philosopher is to be characterised as a discoverer and knower of method, rather than a discoverer and knower of truths, there must really be a distinction between knowing a method and knowing a truth. And these are precisely the terms in which he introduces us to the distinction between “knowing-how” and “knowing-that” in the presidential address of 1945, with the aim of showing that they are distinct and mutually irreducible concepts:

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, 3)

And later in the same work:

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

¹⁵Ryle, then, is an early “irresolute” reader of the *Tractatus*, as it has come to be called, though he understands Wittgenstein himself as having intended a resolute reading. (See, e.g., Conant and Bronzo (2016) on these different readings of the *Tractatus*.)

¹⁶It is worth noting (as Tanney 2013, n 3, does) that Ryle understands Wittgenstein as having come around to this view himself and as having exhibited it masterfully in the *Philosophical Investigations*. See, e.g., Ryle (1951, 255).

Though these claims are not explicitly meta-philosophical, when read against the backdrop of his meta-philosophical position of 1937, it becomes plausible that he saw this non-reducibility as crucial for philosophy. It suggests that he saw his task in securing the distinction between knowledge-how and knowledge-that as in part securing the status of philosophy itself.¹⁷

This point is further supported by a paper that Ryle seems to have been composing alongside the presidential address—both, apparently, rather hastily.¹⁸ A week prior to delivering “Knowing How and Knowing That” to the Aristotelian Society, Ryle also gave his inaugural lecture as Waynflete Professor at Oxford, “Philosophical Arguments” (1945b). This lecture is through-and-through meta-philosophical, and it is so in at least two ways relevant to the presidential address. First, Ryle’s explicit aim in the inaugural lecture is to exhibit the logical structure of a key method of philosophy—viz., *reductio ad absurdum* arguments.¹⁹ This is interesting in relation to the presidential address at least because *reductio ad absurdum* is the form of argument on which Ryle relies heavily there. His primary way of arguing that knowledge-how is not reducible to knowledge-that is to show that assuming otherwise results in vicious regresses—a kind of absurdity. It is thus plausible that he saw the two papers as closely connected.

And, second, Ryle also makes very clear in his inaugural lecture that the reason he is concerned to exhibit the logical struc-

¹⁷In the presidential address, Ryle does hold that knowledge-how is basic to *non*-philosophical disciplines as well—indeed, he could be read as arguing that knowledge-how is the basic form of knowledge *simpliciter*. What is distinctive about philosophy, for Ryle, at least in relation to some other disciplines, is that it does not *also* have knowledge-that as an aim. So while the various sciences, for instance, may also properly result in the propounding of facts, philosophy does not.

¹⁸Ryle had been released from his military duties just a month or so prior (Kremer 2017, 36).

¹⁹Ryle had made the idea of absurdity central in his methodology in his earlier “Categories” (1938). “Philosophical Arguments” (1945b) can be seen as a further fleshing out of that idea.

ture of *reductio ad absurdum* arguments is that he is concerned, once again, with the status of philosophy itself. In introducing his topic in “Philosophical Arguments”, he expresses this worry about the status of philosophy much as we have seen it above:

Philosophers have in recent years given much consideration to the nature, objectives and methods of their own inquiry. This interest has been due partly to a certain professional hypochondria, since the conspicuous progress made by other studies has induced in philosophers some nervousness about the scale of their own successes. Partly, also . . . [t]he exposition of the logical credentials of different sorts of scientific conclusions has posed in a bright if painful light the corresponding questions about the foundations of philosophical doctrines. (Ryle 1945b, 196)

It is directly following this passage that Ryle states his aim of exhibiting the logical structure of *reductio ad absurdum* arguments, making clear that his underlying aim in doing so is to legitimate philosophy. And he again emphasizes here that philosophy is not in the business of yielding doctrines or truths but of method—he compares the practice of philosophy to the practice of an engineer who discovers the strength of various materials. The philosopher, he says, similarly tests the strength of philosophical propositions and arguments. At the time of writing and delivering “Knowing How and Knowing That”, then, Ryle is clearly still concerned with securing the foundations of philosophy. In particular, he is concerned to secure its methods; so it would be surprising if he did not see the similar (though more basic) importance of showing that knowing such methods is irreducible to knowing truths.

Finally, it is worth noting that in hindsight, Ryle paints a similarly meta-philosophical picture of *The Concept of Mind* itself. In his “Autobiography”, Ryle reports that having taken up the Waynflete Professorship in 1945, he thought that he ought to

apply, and be seen to be applying to some large-scale philosophical crux the answer to the question that had preoccupied us in the 1920s, and especially in the 1930s, the question namely “What

constitutes a philosophical problem; and what is the way to solve it?" (Ryle 1970, 12)

As we have seen, his answer to the latter question is “argument and dialectic” and, primarily, “*reductio ad absurdum* arguments”. As he saw it, “what was needed now was an example of the method really working, in breadth and depth and where it was really needed” (*ibid.*).²⁰ In fact, Ryle initially took as his “large-scale philosophical crux” the problem of the freedom of the will; but he later settled upon the concept of mind. He thus describes *The Concept of Mind* as a “philosophical book” with a “meta-philosophical purpose” (*ibid.*). In light of this, it would seem that his anti-Cartesianism is better seen as the vehicle of his project in that book than its fundamental end. The fundamental end was showing that philosophy had a job to do and could do it. This was Ryle’s *Worry*—a practical ethical impetus for his interest in know-how.

3. Know-How and Virtue

We now turn to the more theoretical ethical impetus for Ryle’s interest in know-how—what I have above called his ethical “intellectual worry”. In this respect, the influence of the ancient Greek philosophers on Ryle, like the influence of the early Wittgenstein, is not widely appreciated. On reading the presidential address of 1945, one is thus likely to take the numerous references to Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle as mere asides. He casually begins the paper by mentioning that the Intellectualist legend perhaps derives from Plato’s account of the tripartite soul; later mentions that Aristotle’s solution to Socrates’ puzzle of *akrasia* fails because it assumes a form of Intellectualism; claims, in passing, that the notion of know-how also resolves Socrates’ puzzle about why human excellence cannot be imparted; and, finally, states

²⁰Ryle’s famous “category mistake” arguments (used liberally in *The Concept of Mind*) are also forms of *reductio ad absurdum*.

that Aristotle’s “ἔθισμός” (*ethismos*) is better understood in terms of “know-how” than in terms of the usual translation, “habituation”. In fact, each but the third of these points is made in an *actual* parenthetical aside. But it is little accident that Ryle would have been engaging with the Greeks here, and also little accident that he would have been thinking of know-how as having direct ties to virtue.

A first reason for this is that Ryle was steeped in ancient Greek philosophy. Not only did he study Greats (or “Classics”) as an undergraduate at Oxford (Ryle 1970, 1–3) and, subsequently, teach Greek philosophy “in some detail” to Oxford undergraduates (*ibid.*, 11); he also published numerous exegetical (and often quite technical) reviews, articles, and a book on the topic.²¹ Reactions to Ryle’s work in ancient philosophy are mixed, but he clearly studied the Greeks closely.²²

²¹Amongst his work in ancient philosophy are “Plato’s Parmenides” (1939a), “Review of F. M. Cornford *Plato and Parmenides*” (1939b), “Letters and Syllables in Plato” (1960), “The ‘Timaeus Locrus’” (1965a), “The Academy and Dialectic” (1965b), “Dialectic in the Academy” (1965c), *Plato’s Progress* (1966a), and “Plato” (1967). This is not to mention the numerous other articles in which Ryle notes ancient Greek or Roman philosophers in passing, relating them to his immediate topic. His engagement with the history of philosophy seemed to have been spurred, at least in part, by an aversion to the kind of philosopher-worship that he sometimes witnessed in Cambridge at the height of Wittgenstein’s popularity. He notes that when visiting the Moral Sciences Club, the “veneration for Wittgenstein was so incontinent that mentions, for example my mentions, of other philosophers were greeted with jeers. . . . This contempt for thoughts other than Wittgenstein’s seemed to me pedagogically disastrous for the students and unhealthy for Wittgenstein himself. It made me resolve, not indeed to be a philosophical polyglot, but to avoid being a monoglot; and most of all to avoid being one monoglot’s echo, even though he was a genius and a friend” (Ryle 1970, 11).

²²Charles Kahn’s (1968) review of Ryle’s *Plato’s Progress* is informative here. Kahn reports that Ryle had already made important contributions to Plato scholarship but that *Plato’s Progress* is more interesting for what it tells us about Ryle’s own view of philosophy than what it tells us about the life and philosophy of Plato. In *Plato’s Progress* we once again see Ryle emphasizing a view like the one expressed in his “Taking Sides in Philosophy”—“[P]hilosophy is

That he did would help to explain why Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle came readily to mind when he was writing “Knowing How and Knowing That”. The presidential address was presented just a month or so after Ryle had been demobilized from four years serving in military intelligence—likely meaning that the paper (along with his inaugural lecture as the Waynflete Professor) would have been written in a rather short period of time (see, again, [Kremer 2017](#), 36). If this is so, it would make sense for Ryle to have leant on material that he knew well.

That Ryle took a *general* interest in ancient Greek philosophy, however, does not explain why specifically *ethical* topics came to mind. Why did they? A large part of the answer is that prior to his military service, Ryle had already written a paper making use of a distinction much like that between knowing-how and knowing-that, and that paper had an explicitly ethical aim. In 1940, he had published “Conscience and Moral Convictions”, which made central use of a distinction between “operative knowledge” and “academic knowledge”. One of its main conclusions had been that *genuine* moral knowledge is operative rather than academic; and, as we will see, he often talks of operative knowledge as “knowledge how”. Ethical topics came to mind in writing “Knowing How and Knowing That”, then, because Ryle had already been writing and thinking of the distinction in ethical terms. And by the time of the presidential address, he had begun to explore it explicitly in terms of a favourite question of the ancients: namely, “Is virtue a kind of knowledge?” He clearly thought that the notion of know-how helped to answer this question. As we will see, the asides of the presidential address form an argument for the same answer given in the earlier paper—an answer which Socrates had been drawn to but which Aristotle had denied: that virtue is a kind of know-how, or skill.

not adherence to a tenet or membership of a church or party. It is exploration” ([Ryle 1966a](#), 9). Also interesting to note is that Ryle conjectures that Plato himself experienced a philosophical crisis around the time that Aristotle would have been a student, banning dialectic from the Academy as a result.

At some point after the presidential address, Ryle himself gives up on this answer, but in the address itself he clearly sets out to resolve the ancients’ question affirmatively, by seeing virtue as a kind of skill. His interest in know-how thus has this more intellectual ethical impetus as well. In the following sections, I look first to Ryle’s early paper concerning moral know-how, before turning to “Knowing How and Knowing That”, and then to subsequent work on virtue and knowledge.

3.1. “Conscience and Moral Convictions” (1940)

In “Conscience and Moral Convictions” (1940), Ryle is primarily interested in what he thinks of as a puzzling fact: that while one can have moral *convictions* about the behaviour of others, one cannot similarly have pangs of *conscience* on others’ behalves. One’s conscience says only, “I ought not to have done that” (for instance), not, “They ought not to have done that”. Convictions, on the other hand, can concern either. Ryle had always assumed that a pang of conscience was simply an expression of knowledge or conviction that some action-type or particular action is right or wrong, making pangs of conscience coextensive with felt convictions.²³ But he now wishes to understand the puzzling fact that conscience and moral conviction can come apart.

He does so by making and putting to use a distinction between “operative” and “academic” knowledge, defining each by the public test for its possession. He offers five such tests—two for the possession of academic knowledge, two for the possession of operative knowledge, and one for the possession of a state which he says is “between” the other two ([Ryle 1940](#), 33). If an agent *academically* knows a moral principle, Ryle says, they will (1) utter the principle regularly, relevantly, and without hesitation and (2) similarly utter other things which presuppose the principle. An agent with such knowledge, he says, has a principle as part of

²³Ryle uses “knowledge” and “conviction” interchangeably, so I will do the same here.

their “intellectual furniture”. If, on the other hand, the agent is in a state *between* academic and operative knowledge, they will also (3) be ready or eager to persuade others of the principle and to dissuade them of acting inconsistently with it. An agent in this state, Ryle says, possesses “respect” or “admiration” for the principle.²⁴ And, finally, if an agent *operatively* knows a moral principle, they will (4) behave in accordance with the principle regularly, relevantly, and without hesitation and (5) similarly feel guilty, resolve to reform, etc., when having failed to do so. In this case, Ryle says, the agent has the principle as part of their “real nature”.²⁵

Academic knowledge and operative knowledge, as Ryle describes them, are different *ways* of possessing rules or principles.²⁶ Academic knowledge is possessing a rule less than one ought to, whereas operative knowledge is possessing it properly. Operative knowledge, that is, is *proper* knowledge of a rule. It is knowledge such that one is disposed to act in accordance with the rule. He thus understands proper *moral* knowledge as operative knowledge, though he intends the same to be true of knowledge of rules of conduct generally:

To know *properly* the rules of grammar is to be able to talk correctly, to correct mistakes and to wince at those of others. A man’s party manners show whether he “knows” the rules of etiquette; his ability to *cite* “Etiquette for Gentlemen” does not. (Ryle 1940, 187)

²⁴Ryle does not specify whether this state includes academic knowledge.

²⁵It is unclear as well whether he intends operative knowledge to *include* academic knowledge. Sometimes it seems so; other times it seems not.

²⁶“I suggest that the solution of the puzzle, which, I think, is a genuine one about the syntax of ‘conscience’ and of ‘moral conviction’, is in this direction. What is it to *have* a moral conviction? Or, what is it to *have* principles?” (Ryle 1940, 32). Notice that this suggests a difference between the distinction here and the distinction of “Knowing How and Knowing That”. In the later paper, Ryle distinguishes between the kinds of knowledge in terms not only of *how* what is known is known (*viz.*, in terms of ability to *say* how to perform a given action vs. ability to *perform* the action) but also in terms of *what* is known (true propositions or facts vs. ways, methods, or rules).

And here, he also speaks in terms of “know-how” and “skill”:

In a certain sense, I, having read the text-books and been a spectator, know how to swim; that is, I know what actions people must take to progress in a desired direction in the water, with nostrils clear of the water. But no one would say that I really know how to swim or that I have swimming-skill, unless when I do it myself I usually succeed. (*ibid.*, 188)²⁷

Just as the proper manifestation of know-how or skill is skilful performance, Ryle says, so the proper manifestation of conscience is good conduct. Conscience involves having convictions in an *operative* way, such that one is disposed to act in accordance with the principle about which one is convicted (and is reluctant to act badly, and feels remorse when one does so, etc.). And just as it would be absurd to say that one has “skill or expertness in the swimming of others” (*ibid.*), so it would be absurd to say that one has pangs of conscience about the behaviour of others. One may have pangs of conscience about *how to respond* to the behaviour of others, but not about their behaviour itself. Ryle thus concludes that whereas conviction may express either operative *or* academic knowledge, conscience expresses only operative knowledge. This is why conscience says only, “I ought not to have done that”, and not, “They ought not to have done that”.

The interesting point for our purposes is that in this 1940 paper, Ryle claims that to know a moral rule *properly* or *really* is to know it operatively, rather than academically. For, again, he claims that knowing operatively *is* knowing-how.²⁸ And he is also happy to talk of operatively knowing a moral rule as (for instance) *being honest*—hence, in terms of virtue. These two points make for a smooth transition from talking primarily in terms of operative

²⁷Ryle is less concessive in “Knowing How and Knowing That”. He does not allow, for instance, that having read a swimming textbook is sufficient for knowing how to swim in any sense.

²⁸He says, for instance, “To know *operatively* the rules [of calculation] is to know how to calculate” (Ryle 1940, 37).

and moral knowledge in “Conscience and Moral Convictions” to talking in terms of knowledge-how and virtue in “Knowing How and Knowing That”.²⁹

3.2. “Knowing How and Knowing That” (1945)

On the face of it (and indeed for the most part), Ryle’s presidential address of 1945 concerns a very different issue to that of “Conscience and Moral Convictions”. It concerns intelligence *generally*, by discussing intelligent behaviour generally. As noted above, he begins the address by disparaging Plato’s tripartite account of the soul and its concomitant account of human action, claiming that it is a possible source of “the Intellectualist legend” which he himself aims to disprove (Ryle 1945a, 1).³⁰ With the earlier paper as background, however, the ethical undertones of this and the other asides concerning the ancients become more prominent. Here, I will discuss each of the asides relevant to his thinking here of virtue as a kind of knowledge-how.

As Ryle explains it, the Intellectualist legend for which Plato is perhaps responsible is to be understood as positing at least two faculties in explaining human action. The first is Intelligence, whose function is to “consider propositions”, or think. Intelligence on its own, however, as the legend has it, cannot effect action. It is thus thought to require, as Ryle calls it, “a go-between faculty”—a faculty that is incapable itself of considering propositions but that is capable of effecting action in ac-

²⁹Ryle makes at least two further points in “Conscience and Moral Convictions” that foreshadow “Knowing How and Knowing That”. The first is that knowledge how to behave does not *cause* a person to behave in a certain way but, rather, *is* a disposition to behave, feel, and even think in certain ways (1940, 34 & 38). And the second is that such a view denies “the hallowed distinction between cognition, emotion, and volition” (1940, 38). The latter point, especially, will remain important in Ryle’s post-1945 work on virtue and knowledge.

³⁰Despite the hedging “perhaps”, we can nonetheless safely call Ryle’s attitude toward Plato’s account one of “disparagement”. It is a career-long objective of Ryle’s to oppose tripartition and even partition. John Ackrill’s “In Defense of Platonic Division” (1970) has Ryle’s attempts as their subject.

cordance with propositions. This go-between faculty, Ryle says, is often understood as “the Will” or “Volition”.³¹ According to the Intellectualist legend, Intelligence thus commands Volition to effect a given action and, so long as the agent is not subject to overly strong Appetite, Volition does so. The result is intelligent human action, rather than, for instance, overly appetitive or honour-seeking action.³²

As already noted, Ryle’s main strategy in arguing against this account is to show that it results in vicious regresses. His general explanation of why it does so is as follows. The Intellectualist legend assumes that Volition is incapable of considering regulative propositions. But unless it *is* capable of considering regulative propositions, Volition could never effect actions in accordance with regulative propositions. That is, unless Volition is able to understand the propositions commanded by Intelligence (and, hence, itself *think*) it will be incapable of applying those propositions. To effect action, then, Ryle says, Volition must itself have a faculty of Intelligence (call it “Intelligence*”). But given that a faculty of Intelligence, on its own, is supposed to be unable to effect action, Volition will also require its own faculty of Volition (call it “Volition*”); and then because Volition* will need to understand the regulative propositions commanded it by Intelligence*, it will in turn require its own faculty of Intelligence (call it “Intelligence**”)—and so on. The result is that infinitely many tasks of thinking will need to be completed before intelligent action can occur. And this, Ryle suggests, implies that the Intellectualist legend is an absurd one.³³

³¹He also notes that “Feeling” is sometimes made to play this role. For simplicity, I refer just to Volition here.

³²These three (including Appetite) are akin to the Reasoning, Spirited, and Appetitive parts of the soul in Plato’s tripartite account in the *Republic*. Ryle seems to have disliked the *Republic* from early on. He reports in his “Autobiography” that the many “Plato-venerating philosophy tutors” at Oxford “treated the *Republic* like the Bible, and to [Ryle] most of it seemed, philosophically, no better” (Ryle 1970, 2).

³³The regress I have explicated here is the second of two kinds of regress on

The most general lesson that he draws from this regress is that the Intellectualist legend cannot be right, at least in detail. But the more specific lesson, and the lesson that he puts to use in the remainder of the paper, is that intelligence is required not only for considering propositions but for applying them. Ryle himself introduces this principle into the Intellectualist legend, to explain how Volition might be able to apply the propositions given it by Intelligence. But the subsequent regress is meant to show that the point must be understood in a particular way: viz., as meaning that applying a proposition cannot be just another instance of thinking (Ryle 1945a, 6). This is why, as we saw above, Ryle concludes that a person's intelligence must be as directly exhibitable in some of his doings as it is in some of his thinking. For it is by assuming that intelligence is only directly manifested in *thinking* that the Intellectualist legend ends in vicious regress. It assumes that Intelligence can only think and not also perform other tasks, so even giving Volition such a faculty to carry out the thoughts of Intelligence does not help to explain how it could apply those thoughts. Somewhere along the way, intelligence must be directly exhibitable not only in acts of thinking but in doings that are not acts of thinking. The Intellectualist legend had only *seemed* tenable, Ryle thinks, because that point had not been properly recognized. And he thinks that properly recognizing it requires recognizing the distinctness of knowledge-how, which is exercised not just in thinking but directly in other kinds of action as well.

How does the point that applying propositions takes intelligence bear on the seemingly disparate question of whether virtue is a kind of knowledge? We see the answer only gradually. A

which Ryle relies in the presidential address. The first, though similar, relies not on the notion of a go-between faculty but on the simpler point that if an act can only be intelligent by reference to a further (earlier) act of considering propositions, no intelligent act could ever be performed. This is the form of argument that has received the most attention in recent discussions of know-how.

few pages later, in the second aside that concerns us, Ryle claims that the Intellectualist legend explains why Aristotle's treatment of *akrasia* fails. Having just said that applying truths requires intelligence and that knowing how to apply a truth cannot be a matter merely of knowing some further truth(s), he makes the following aside:

This is the point where Aristotle's attempted solution to Socrates' puzzle broke down. "How can the back-slider know moral and prudential maxims and still fail to behave properly?" This is only a special case of the general problem. "How can a man be as well-informed as you please and still be a fool?" "Why is a fool not necessarily an ignoramus?" (Ryle 1945a, 6)

Ryle does not tell us what he takes Aristotle's attempted solution to Socrates' puzzle to be, but we know what it was: the akratic agent, Aristotle says, *knows but doesn't know* (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1147b1–18). I state this ambiguously because it is a matter of debate precisely what Aristotle intends. He might intend that the akratic agent "knows the relevant maxim or proposition but not *really*" (i.e., knows it partially but not fully), or he might intend that the akratic agent "knows one proposition but not another".³⁴ For Ryle to think that Aristotle's solution fails, however, and fails

³⁴And, indeed, the Aristotle passage is ambiguous:

The explanation of how ignorance is dispelled and the incontinent [i.e., akratic] recovers his knowledge is the same as in the case of the person who is drunk or asleep, and is not peculiar to this way of being affected. We must refer here to the natural scientists.

Since the last premise is both a belief about what is perceived, and controls actions, it must be this that he does not have when he is being affected, or this that he has in such a way that the having of it amounts not to knowing it, as we saw, but saying the words as the drunk speaks the words of Empedocles.

And because the last term does not seem to be universal, or related to knowledge in the same way as the universal term, the result Socrates was seeking seems to follow. The knowledge present when someone comes to be affected by incontinence, and that is "dragged about" because he is affected, is not what is thought to be real knowledge, but only perceptual knowledge.

in a way predicted by the Intellectualist legend, he must think that the correct interpretation is the latter. He must think that Aristotle's view is that the akratic agent considers the relevant proposition but lacks knowledge of *another* proposition that, if it were known, would enable the agent to act in accordance with the first. Aristotle, too, then, as Ryle understands him here, succumbs to the Intellectualist legend.

Again, Ryle's alternative to the legend, as well as his own solution to the puzzle of *akrasia*, turns on his notion of knowledge-how. On Ryle's account, whereas knowledge-that involves the ability merely to think or consider true propositions, knowledge-how involves an ability to intelligently act in accordance with them. Whereas exercising knowledge-that means merely "acknowledging principles in thought", exercising knowledge-how means "intelligently applying them in practice" (Ryle 1945a, 8). And knowledge-how, according to Ryle, is the more basic. "Rules, like birds", he says, "must live before they can be stuffed" (*ibid.*, 11).

Ryle's distinction has faced various challenges since he first introduced it, but important for our current purposes is just how he puts the distinction to use in answering the question of whether virtue is a kind of knowledge. Virtue, he says in the third aside relevant to us, is a kind of knowledge-how. And this, he thinks, helps to solve not only Socrates' puzzle about *akrasia* but also a further Socratic puzzle about why virtue cannot be taught by lecture alone. The agent in possession of knowledge-how, Ryle says, possesses a dispositional excellence, an excellence of character as concerns the action or activity they know how to perform, and this excellence is not something that can be taught by imparting propositions alone but, rather, requires training or discipline:

Socrates was puzzled why the knowledge which constitutes human excellence cannot be imparted. We can now reply. Learning-how differs from learning-that. We can be instructed in truths, we can only be disciplined in methods. (Ryle 1945a, 15)

Virtue, that is, is a kind of knowledge-how rather than knowledge-that; and knowledge-how, Ryle suggests, cannot be "imparted". If correct, this also solves Socrates' puzzle about *akrasia*. The akratic agent possesses propositional knowledge of the relevant kind but not knowledge how to behave. As a result, they are not disposed to act in an excellent way.

Ryle makes a similar point in the fourth and final aside relevant to our discussion. Shortly after making the previous point, he suggests that though Aristotle's "*ἔθισμός*" (*ethismos*) is standardly translated as "habituation", it is better understood as meaning "having become disciplined" (Ryle 1945a, 15). For Ryle, whereas habituation results in a kind of mindless behaviour, discipline results in knowledge-how—an intelligent ability not only to act correctly but (similar to the "operative knowledge" of "Conscience and Moral Convictions") also to detect and correct mistakes, and to improve. At least in this respect, then, Ryle interprets Aristotle's account of ethical virtue as correct, as acknowledging that the virtuous agent has "learned how" to act correctly. He merely insists that this should be understood as acquiring knowledge-how, rather than knowledge-that—since, as he understands it at this point, virtue *is a form of knowledge-how*.

3.3. Subsequent work on virtue and knowledge

It is commonly held that in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle had argued fairly convincingly that virtue is *not* a skill (*τέχνη/technē*). It is unclear whether in arguing that virtue *is* a skill in "Knowing How and Knowing That", Ryle recognizes himself as disagreeing with Aristotle on that point.³⁵ Whatever the case

³⁵Ryle does not make explicit reference to *technē* in "Knowing How and Knowing That" (1945a). In his "Letters and Syllables in Plato" (1960), he translates "*τέχνη*" as "science". And in "The Academy and Dialectic" (1965b), he translates it as "art". In his "Can Virtue be Taught?" (1972), though he does not mention *technē* by name, he does refer to Aristotle's discussions of "skill and virtue" generally, and this "skill" is clearly what Aristotle would have designated by "*τέχνη*".

may be, he later comes to abandon the view, for reasons that are, if not exactly Aristotelian, certainly related to Aristotle's own.

Kremer (2017) comments briefly on this shift. Noting some of the connections Ryle makes between know-how and virtue, he agrees that at the time of the presidential address and even earlier, Ryle holds that virtue is a skill. He says, however, that as early as *The Concept of Mind*, Ryle has begun to be suspicious of the idea—adding that, by the end of his career, Ryle has come to think that virtue is not *any* kind of knowledge (Kremer 2017, 36). The trajectory of Ryle's thought, however, is more complex than this suggests. For, first, even after *The Concept of Mind*, Ryle returns for a time to the view that virtue *is* a kind of knowledge. And even in his final paper on the topic, though he concludes by saying that virtue is *not* a kind of knowledge, there is some tension in his view. Here, I briefly discuss three post-1945 works in connection with these points: *The Concept of Mind* (1949), "On Forgetting the Difference Between Right and Wrong" (1958), and "Can Virtue be Taught?" (1972).³⁶

In *The Concept of Mind*, Ryle does not *say* that virtue is not a kind of knowledge. But we do see him hesitating in speaking of moral know-how, and we do see him implying that such know-how would have to be dissimilar to other kinds. As we will see momentarily, both points are evident in the passage Kremer cites in support of his claim that as early as *The Concept of Mind*, Ryle has become suspicious of the idea that virtue is a skill. In the passage, similar to what we have seen elsewhere, Ryle is talking of moral knowledge right alongside other kinds of knowledge-how. He talks of it here, for instance, alongside knowing Latin. But moral knowledge, he seems to imply, is of a slightly different sort. He says plainly that knowledge of Latin amounts to knowing how to compose and construe Latin sentences, but he says that "moral knowledge, if the strained phrase is to be used at all, is knowing how to behave" (Ryle 1949, 316). He thus hesitates in

³⁶A fourth relevant piece would be "Jane Austen and the Moralists" (1966b).

using the phrase "moral knowledge" at all. This implies that the subsequent, "... is knowing how to behave", should be taken with a grain of salt. He seems to be having misgivings about the idea that virtue is a kind of knowledge, thus also about the idea that it is a kind of knowledge-how.

In the remainder of the quoted passage, we see a first sign that his reasons for having these misgivings might be similar to Aristotle's own for denying that virtue is a *technē*. The whole of the passage is as follows: "[M]oral knowledge, if the strained phrase is to be used at all, is knowing how to behave in certain sorts of situations in which the problems are neither merely theoretical nor merely technical" (*ibid.*). He thus implies that *even if* moral knowledge is a kind of know-how, it is not a merely *technical* kind; it is not a mere skill like being proficient at hitting a bullseye when one tries.³⁷ Unfortunately, if he has a more filled-out view at this time, he does not attempt to explain it.

In the later "On Forgetting the Difference Between Right and Wrong" (1958), Ryle has filled out his view on the matter to some degree, but he no longer has any misgivings about virtue being a kind of knowledge. His main topic, he says, is a puzzle first expressed by Aristotle—namely, Why can we not forget the difference between right and wrong?—though it turns out that his question is not quite Aristotle's. Aristotle's is a psychological question, about why the virtuous person *tends* to remain virtuous, whereas Ryle's is a conceptual question, about why it does

³⁷Indeed, earlier in *The Concept of Mind*, Ryle refers directly to Aristotle on this point, though not directly in relation to knowing-how:

Aristotle realized that in talking about motives we are talking about dispositions of a certain sort, a sort different from competences; he realized too that any motive, unlike any competence, is a propensity of which it makes sense to say that in a given man in a given walk of life this motive is too strong, too weak, or neither too strong, nor too weak. He seems to suggest that in appraising the moral, as distinct from the technical, merits and demerits of actions we are commenting on the excessive, proper or inadequate strength of the inclinations of which they are exercises.

(Ryle 1949, 112)

not make sense to say that one has “forgotten” what one once “morally knew”.

His answer involves the claim that whereas genuine moral knowledge has *care* (or *love*, or *enjoyment*, or *admiration*) as a component, theoretical and technical knowledge do not. He brings out this point with an example concerning skills:

A person who has received technical instruction in tennis, music, or landscape gardening may, but may not, owe to his instructor a second debt of gratitude for having taught him also to enjoy these things. . . . Learning to enjoy, to love, or to admire is not acquiring a skill or a parcel of information. Nonetheless it *is* learning.

(Ryle 1958, 385)

Similar to skill at tennis or music or landscape gardening, moral knowledge must be acquired; but what is learned in acquiring moral knowledge is not a mere skill or bit of information. Just as the person merely proficient at tennis might enjoy or not enjoy tennis itself, so the person proficient at behaving well might enjoy or not enjoy behaving well. But unlike skill at tennis, which one can possess without caring about doing well in tennis, Ryle thinks that moral knowledge *requires* caring about right and wrong and about behaving well.

Rather than claiming that moral knowledge is a “strained phrase” as he had in *The Concept of Mind*, Ryle here claims that philosophers have been too stingy with it and related concepts. He says that the notions of *learning*, *studying*, *teaching*, and *knowing* are “ampler notions than our academic epistemologies have acknowledged” (*ibid.*, 385). And in response to the objection that learning to admire or enjoy is a two-part process comprising coming to know *and* coming to enjoy, he asks (and answers),

Why not add that sometimes coming to know is, also, *inter alia*, coming to admire or enjoy? . . . The reply that what is learned must be either a piece of information or a technique begs the question, since the question is, in part, “Why must it be either one or the other?”

(Ryle 1958, 387)

Ryle thus thinks it quite natural to talk of genuine moral knowledge, despite its requiring care. And he also takes the fact that moral knowledge does require care to provide the answer to his puzzle. The reason it makes no sense to speak of forgetting the difference between right and wrong, he says, is that moral knowledge requires caring about doing right and not doing wrong, and though one can *cease* to care, ceasing to care is not the same as *forgetting*.³⁸ This could explain why in *The Concept of Mind*, Ryle was hesitant to assimilate virtue to theoretical or technical knowledge; but, as in prior work, here he is perfectly comfortable with the idea that it *is* a kind of knowledge.

Ryle’s final paper on the topic is his “Can Virtue be Taught?” (1972). I want to look at this paper in some detail. On reading its final pages, it can be easy to think that he has come, firmly and finally, to the view that virtue is *not* a kind of knowledge. Indeed, that is what he explicitly concludes. This conclusion, however, sits uneasily with other remarks in the paper; and this internal tension casts some doubt on the sturdiness of his final position. I will argue that we thus have two options for reading this final paper: one which resolves the tension by ascribing to Ryle a simple mistake and one which sees this final paper rather as a microcosm of his career-long vacillation on the relation between virtue and knowledge. I do not, however, try to decide between these options.

As the title of the paper suggests, Ryle is once again concerned with Socrates’s question of whether virtue can be taught. More specifically, he is concerned with a particular version of that question: namely, “Why are there no *professional* teachers of

³⁸As McGrath (2015) has pointed out, Ryle’s reasoning here is somewhat perplexing. Even if knowing the difference between right and wrong does involve care, it is unclear why “ceasing to care is not forgetting” would entail “forgetting the difference between right and wrong is conceptually impossible”. Why not rather say that because caring is merely a *part* of knowing the difference between right and wrong, it *is* possible to forget the difference between right and wrong?

virtue?" He considers an answer inspired by Aristotle (viz., that virtues, like skills, cannot be taught by lectures alone but only by supervised practice), but he notes that this does not actually answer Socrates' question. For it does not explain why there are no professional teachers of virtue, even though there *are* swimming coaches and golf professionals and laboratory demonstrators. He believes, that is, that Socrates is asking not only why there *are* no professional teachers of virtue but, as it were, why the idea of a "professional teacher of virtue" does not make sense.

In beginning to answer this question, he repeats much of the content of his 1958 paper. He argues that acquiring virtue is not just a matter of acquiring information and not just a matter of acquiring technical knowledge, and he again claims that it is rather, at least most basically, a matter of coming to *care* about certain things:

We have now got Socrates' central question "How, if at all, can virtue be taught?" separated off from questions about acquiring information and acquiring proficiencies; and the odd thing about this central question now is that in one way we all know the answer to it perfectly well. We remember how our parents reprimanded certain sorts of conduct in quite a different tone of voice from that in which they criticized or lamented our forgetfulness or our blunders . . . In these and countless affiliated ways we were, in a familiar sense of "taught", taught to treat, and sincerely treat, certain sorts of things as of overwhelming importance . . . (Ryle 1972, 441)

And in posing the same potential objection from the 1958 paper, that coming to care is not *learning* anything, he again implies that philosophers have been too stingy with their epistemic concepts—this time by reference to the tripartitioning of the soul which we have seen him criticize elsewhere. Here, though, he is even more liberal with his epistemic concepts, implying that caring sometimes amounts even to *knowing*:

One source [of resistance to the thought that coming to care is learning something] is this. In our abstract theorizing about human nature we are still in the archaic habit of treating ourselves and

all other human beings as animated department stores, in which the intellect is one department, the will is another department and the feelings a third department . . . So we take it for granted that as the intellect is notoriously the one department into which lessons go, our wills and feelings are not themselves teachable. They cannot know anything; they cannot be more or less cultured or cultivated . . . This department store yarn is sheer fairy-story.

(Ryle 1972, 442)

In expressing a distaste for the view that the will and feelings are not themselves teachable and cannot know anything, Ryle seems to have given up on his earlier position that caring *cannot* amount to knowing. And though he also expresses a distaste for the "department store" talk in which this point is expressed, the lesson certainly seems to be that coming to care *can* amount to a kind of learning and coming to know. If that is right, these passages indicate a *doubling down* on his 1958 position that virtue is a kind of knowledge. For he had held in 1958 that virtue is a kind of knowledge *despite* thinking that care (one necessary component of virtue) is not. If he now holds that care sometimes *is* a kind of knowledge, that should only strengthen his commitment to the view that virtue is as well.

As I have already mentioned, however, he in fact concludes otherwise. He concludes that virtue is not a kind of knowledge. Having said that virtue is not a matter of having become well-informed (not a kind of informational knowledge) and not a matter of having come to know how to do anything (not a kind of technical knowledge), he says not that virtue is some *other* kind of knowledge (as he had allowed in 1958) but, rather, that it

does not very comfortably wear the label of "knowledge" at all, since it is to *be* honourable [for instance], and not only or primarily to be knowledgeable about or efficient at anything . . . Where Socrates was at fault was, I think, that he assumed that if virtue can be learned, then here, as elsewhere, the learning terminates in knowing. But here the learning terminates in being so-and-so, and only derivatively from this in knowing so-and-so—in an im-

provement of one's heart, and only derivatively from this in an improvement in one's head as well. (Ryle 1972, 444)

First, then, Ryle now implies that informational and technical knowledge *are* the only kinds. For he argues that virtue is not a matter of knowledge in part *because* it is neither of those. And, second, he now seems to imply that caring *cannot* amount to knowing. He contrasts "being so-and-so" with "knowing so-and-so", and the former is clearly meant to be a matter, most basically, of caring. An improvement in one's heart is now *contrasted* with coming to know anything, whereas the earlier passages seemed to aim precisely at discounting that tendency. There would seem, then, to be a tension in Ryle's thinking here. There is a tension at least in what he has written.

Unfortunately, I do not think the tension can be resolved within the paper itself. There are two *prima facie* routes for doing so, but neither succeeds. First, one might interpret Ryle's contrast of "being so-and-so" with "knowing so-and-so" not as denying that caring can be a kind of knowing (hence not as contradicting the earlier passages) but, rather, as asserting that even though caring sometimes *is* a kind of knowing, what is *not* a kind of knowing is the state one reaches when one's cares have led to corresponding changes in one's "other departments". In other words, one might interpret him as saying that even if each of the components of virtue is a kind of knowledge, virtue itself is not. Virtue, in that case, is more than the sum of its parts.

The problem with this interpretation is that after the above passage Ryle goes on to explicitly state that caring is *not* a kind of knowing, repeating his reason from 1958. He says that while "the acquisition of skills and keennesses [i.e., cares] can both be called 'learning' . . . the losing of skills and keennesses cannot both be called 'forgetting'" (1972, 445). He thus implies that only what can be forgotten can be known, such that caring is not a kind of knowing. Rather than resolving the tension with the earlier passages, then, this interpretation simply re-emphasizes it.

Alternatively, then, we might look for interpretative help from his answer to the main question of the essay ("Why are there no professional teachers of virtue?"), since this answer itself turns on what he takes for the nature of care. The first part of his answer is, again, that virtue requires learning to care about the right things. The second part is that *trying* to teach someone to care, with precisely that as one's aim, is bound to fail. Speaking specifically of moral teaching, he says the following:

[I]n matters of morality as distinct from techniques, good examples had better not be set with an edifying purpose. For such a would-be improving exhibition of, say, indignation would be an insincere exhibition . . . The example authentically set would be edifyingly *shamming* indignation. (Ryle 1972, 446; emphasis added)

Ryle's point here is that in having as one's *aim* to teach someone to care about something, one can only be teaching them *sham* care. And in that case, a professional teacher of virtue (because, in part, an intentional teacher of care) will necessarily be a failure. He thus holds that though cares can be *learned*, they cannot be *taught*.

He does not say so, but it might be that he takes such "teachability" to be another criterion for knowledge; he may hold that if something can be learned but not taught, it is not knowledge. That would be consistent with the claim in the latter part of the paper that care is not a kind of knowledge, as well as explaining the conclusion that virtue is not either. But in addition to being a bad reason—e.g., I cannot be taught how flowers smell, but I can certainly know—the point again only serves to reiterate the tension with the earlier passages, rather than to resolve it. Whereas he implies in the earlier passages that care *can* amount to knowledge, he denies this in the later passages.

This leaves us with two options in reading this final paper. The first is to ascribe to Ryle a simple mistake: he intended to imply in the earlier passages that the will and feelings can become learned, cultured, or cultivated but *not* that they can know

anything. We could here imagine that if the latter implication had been brought to his attention, he would have disavowed it and, perhaps, expressed himself differently, making clear from the beginning that he does not think that caring ever amounts to knowing. This reading would straightforwardly resolve the paper's internal tension. On the other hand, we might think that Ryle's thinking at this time is simply unsettled, much as it was in regard to the same topic in *The Concept of Mind*. The final paper would then be an exemplification of his career-long vacillation on the topic of virtue and knowledge, rather than expressing a final and settled position. This latter reading, though it would not resolve the paper's tension, would be in keeping with a philosopher who viewed philosophers as *properly* unsettled and constantly taking up questions anew, as concerned with practice and method rather than answers—as more like an “ebbing tide” than the “sediment” it leaves behind (Ryle 1937, 320).

4. Conclusion

In this paper, I have tried to introduce a new aspect of Ryle's thinking on knowledge-how—an ethical aspect, exemplifying itself both in his concern with whether there is any sense to being a philosopher and in his concern with whether virtue is a kind of knowledge. With regard to the former, he seems to have been fairly constant in thinking that knowledge-how secures the status of the philosopher and philosophy. The philosopher's proper concern is with method, rather than answers—so their proper kind of knowledge is knowledge-how, rather than knowledge-that. And with regard to the latter, while he begins by thinking that virtue, too, is a kind of know-how, he later comes to hold not only that it is not a kind of know-how but, further, (though perhaps with some tension) that it is not any kind of knowledge at all.

In concluding, it might be worth mentioning where current philosophy stands in regard to Ryle's two ethical worries, and

also where it might go. The nature of philosophy and its method is of course a regular topic of philosophical discourse, but it is not for us the *Worry* that it was for Ryle and his generation. Current existential threats to the practice of philosophy tend to come from outside it, rather than from within—from phenomena such as the corporatization of the university, rather than from the seeming senselessness of philosophy itself. Ryle's intellectual worry, on the other hand, is alive and well. Alongside the further revival of virtue ethics since his time, interest has also grown in the idea that virtue might be well-understood as a form of skill—the idea which he early proposed but later abandoned.³⁹ This debate is rich, but in my estimation it has yet to move much beyond Ryle's own arguments. In various forms, those proposing virtue as a skill still run up against the very problem that Ryle identified: that virtue seems to constitutively require something like care or commitment, whereas possession of a practical skill does not.⁴⁰

Where might this debate go? Proponents of the idea that virtue is a skill have yet to consider a view which we have seen Ryle tacitly deny, in denying that care is a kind of knowledge. They have yet to consider that care and commitment might themselves be forms of skill.⁴¹ Philosophy of mind in the wake of Ryle, however, has at least sometimes taken this idea more seriously. John Haugeland (1998), for instance, argues that what he calls “existential commitment” is a distinctive kind of skill. Interestingly, this is the very kind of commitment we have seen Ryle exemplify in his concern to secure the foundations of philosophy. It is commitment not merely to a thing (such as philosophy) but to its very possibility, or to its making sense. Admittedly, such a

³⁹Leading this revival has been Julia Annas (e.g., 1995, 2011). See also Russell (2015) and Stichter (e.g., 2016, 2018). For a critical perspective on some of this work, see Small (ms).

⁴⁰This point of Ryle's is given slightly different clothing in Dougherty (forthcoming).

⁴¹Of those concerned with skill and virtue, Roberts (1984) perhaps comes closest to doing so.

conception of commitment as a form of skill has not been pressed very firmly; but if it were to prove sound, not only might virtue be vindicated as a form of skill, but at least in terms of his commitment to philosophy, Ryle would prove to be a more virtuous philosopher than many currently give him credit for.

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