# *Can Knowing-How Skepticism Exist?*[*]

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[1] In a recent paper published in this journal (Berkeley 2002), István Berkeley argues (a) that knowing-how cannot be reduced to knowing-that, and further, (b) that knowing-that may be reduced to knowing-how. To argue (a), Berkeley raises, following Ryle (1949), three objections to *propositionalists*, who "wish to reduce 'knowing how to' to a special case of 'knowing that'" ([3])[1]. From (a) Berkeley draws two possible conclusions: the first, and minor one, is that "knowing-how and knowing-that represent two distinct and irreducible epistemic categories" ([15]), and the second, radical, one is that it is possible "to reduce knowing-that to a special case of knowing-how" ([16]), as what (b) states. The significance of insisting (a) and (b), in Berkeley's view, is that they can be used to undermine Western skepticism.

[2] The assumption, then, is that Western skepticism (which Berkeley calls "traditional skepticism"), no matter what its scope and form, builds on the category of propositional knowledge. Only within such a category can the epistemic gap between beliefs (or proposition content) and truth (an objective state of affairs, or reality) concerning those beliefs exist, and only then does the gap need to be filled (by, perhaps, proffering a reliabilist account of knowledge). It is the view of the skeptic, however, that any such effort must be in vain. For the sake of simplicity, let us call this *knowing-that skepticism*.

[3] If Western skepticism is only knowing-that skepticism, it is merely a threat to a certain type of knowledge, i.e., propositional knowledge. Furthermore, if Berkeley's application of Ryle is the correct one, and knowledge-that can be reduced to a form of knowledge-how, Western skepticism is deeply and irrevocably flawed, since it is difficult to formulate a non-trivial form of skepticism within the category of knowing-how (practical knowledge, competence knowledge, or skill). As Berkeley explains, "if we are dealing with a skill, ...a single incidence of the putative application of that skill will never be sufficient to establish the fact that S possesses that skill. Nor, on the other hand, will a single failure in the performance of that skill prove that S does not possess it. Even the most skilled marksman will occasionally miss the

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[1] Note references are to sections numbers in Berkeley (2002).

target" ([23]). The only skepticism that Berkeley can offer in the category of knowing-how is what he terms "Chinese skepticism", which doubts the *worth* or *utility* of possessing certain skill. Strictly speaking, however, Chinese skepticism is not a genuine skepticism about knowledge (no matter what type of knowledge). It "does not doubt that *we have knowledge*," but rather assigns to each individual the task "to critique the knowledge that we have" ([27]; my italics). The formulation of Berkeley's two arguments against skepticism, which I provide below, makes this relationship between Western skepticism and Chinese skepticism clear.

**The Argument from Knowledge Type (the Weak Version)**

P1. Western skepticism is formulated within the category of propositional knowledge (i.e., Western skepticism is knowing-that skepticism).

P2. Western skepticism can be applied to the category of competence knowledge only if knowing-how can be reduced to knowing-that.

P3. Knowing-that and knowing-how, contrary to the claims of the propostionalists, are sharply distinct.

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C. Western skepticism is restricted to the domain of propositional knowledge.

**The Argument from Knowledge Type (the Strong Version)**

P1. Western skepticism is formulated within the category of propositional knowledge.

P2*. Western skepticism cannot get off the ground if knowing-that can be reduced to knowing-how (since knowing-how skepticism, if any, must be Chinese skepticism, which is not a genuine skepticism at all).

P3*. Knowledge-that can be reduced to knowledge-how.

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C*. Western skepticism cannot get off the ground.

[4] My objection to Berkeley's criticism of Western skepticism is centered around two points. The first is that Berkeley has not succeeded in demonstrating that knowing-that skepticism is baseless, because he has not adequately shown that knowing-that *can be* reduced to knowing-how. The *most* Berkeley has shown is that *if* knowing-that can be reduced to knowing-how, *then* knowing-that skepticism cannot exist. Although Berkeley does tell us that we can reduce any propositional knowledge claim to knowing-how "simply by re-expressing that claim in terms of knowing-how", this is a claim that rests on a grammatical or verbal level to which *a priori* knowledge, inductive knowledge, knowledge derived from memory, or propositions found in the Theory of Relativity will not be so easily reduced. But let us say, for the sake of argument, that Berkeley does find a way to restate these types of knowledge as

knowing-how. Even if he can, this does not necessarily preclude the possibility of a type of knowing-how skepticism that is more substantial than Berkeley's Chinese skepticism. I will return to this point shortly. Before I do this, however, I will give a quick review of the two arguments.

[5] Perhaps the most obvious target of the first argument is the third premise, P3. The accuracy of Ryle's distinction has recently been reconsidered and criticized by Stanley and Williamson (2001). However, since Berkeley's purpose in his article seems to be the application of Ryle's distinction, and not its reevaluation, I will not critique Berkeley on these grounds. In fact, there is a more conspicuous weakness in the premise that the two arguments share in common, P1. It is Berkeley's contention that Western skepticism has to be formulated within the category of propositional knowledge, but this is not necessarily so. It is conceivable that there is a kind of knowledge which is expressed by neither knowing-that nor knowing-how, and that a kind of skepticism exists about such knowledge. What comes to mind is knowledge of language. Michael Dummett has long argued that we should ascribe *knowledge* of a meaning-theory for a particular language to speakers, and the mode of such knowledge cannot be propositional, merely practical, or unconscious in a Chomskyan sense; for Dummett, "the classification of knowledge into theoretical and practical (knowledge-that and knowledge-how) is far too crude to allow knowledge of a language to be located within it" (Dummett 1993: x). Assuming Dummett is right, i.e., the mode of knowledge of language is implicit, the following kind of skepticism might arise: When theorists of language face two *extensionally equivalent* meaning-theories (see Quine 1972 and Evans 1981) and try to decide which theory should be ascribed to a speaker as the content of his linguistic knowledge, and when all linguistic evidence, as Quine suggests, is restricted to a speaker's behavioural dispositions, there is no such thing as psychological reality for which a meaning-theory is true, and, subsequently, no room for knowledge of language.

[6] For the moment, let us merely assume the premises P1, P2, P2*, and P3 are acceptable, and turn our focus to the strong version of the argument. I also assume P3* is correct, i.e., "S knows that p" can be reduced to "S knows how to do q". The question to ask is: What *should* "q" be? If knowing-how or competence knowledge does play an important role in Berkeley's full account of knowledge, it is worthwhile to characterize the concept very precisely. Berkeley tells us that the infinitive verbs which are suitable for substitution for "q" in "S knows how to q" are "verbs which refer to skills which require intelligent capacities, may be learned, and which refer to skills which may be demonstrated on more than one occasion" ([13]). Simple dispositions and a single manifestation of an ability are not adequate in characterizing competence knowledge, since the former may be mere conditioning,

and the latter may be a fluke.

[7] But is Berkeley's notion of knowing-how sufficient for characterizing competence knowledge? Ironically, one of Berkeley's examples provides the contradiction to his argument. He mentions the case of "S knows how to identify objects." The ability to identify objects, at first glance, seems trivial, but is not as simple as we generally think or as Berkeley seems to believe it is. When someone asks me to pass him a pen, I can do this easily, and do it on more than one occasion. But I also could respond to the request by passing the salt, or a glass of water, or any one of a variety of different objects. When I pass the pen, however, I identify *that* (the pen), and thus implicitly or tacitly possess, among other things, *concept* of pen, and demonstrative concepts. I am not saying that one has to articulate the concept PEN or give an accurate definition of "pen" when manifesting the ability to identify a pen; rather, I am referring to the *conditions* on the ability to identify objects such as a pen. It is not only the ability to identify objects that requires possession of (implicit) concepts, either. Arithmetic, chess, playing a musical instrument, and speaking a natural language all require such concepts.[2]

[8] Finally, if complex ability or competence knowledge is concept-involving (or, to put it even more strongly, is concept-constitutive), then one can imagine certain new forms of skepticism. For one thing, we can doubt whether an imaginary character in Kripke-like or Goodman-like thought experiments knows how to do addition or identify green objects. The character can successfully *manifest* his abilities to do "addition" or identify "green" objects; however, the concepts he implicitly possesses are "quus" rather than "plus", and "grue" rather than "green". In such cases, it is disputable whether the character *really* knows how to do addition, or identify green things. (One can insist that a necessary and sufficient condition for S's knowing how to do *q* is that S can manifest *q*, which would negate the skepticism that I raised—but the price, it should be noted, is that there will no longer be any difference between someone doing addition and quaddition.) Another kind of knowing-how skepticism may arise when one assumes that the implicit concepts that constitute a complex ability are individuated holistically and externally. It is then *possible* the whole system of concepts is isolated from, or misrepresents, the so-called reality. But knowing-how skepticism in these two cases is different from Berkeley's Chinese skepticism. The first skepticism does not claim that a subject S cannot play, say, chess or an instrument, but casts doubt on the *constitutive* element of S's competence knowledge. Competence knowledge is always displayed by its possessor's manifestation or performance; however, manifestation should not be confused with constitution.

[2] The idea that knowing-how is concept-involving is inspired by, but not the story of, Searle's notion of the Background (see e.g., Searle 1983).

Therefore, even if a person can manifest his abilities to identify water or do addition, a skeptic still could cast doubt on the concepts which are required in constituting the abilities in the following ways: Do such concepts even exist? How should the concepts be individuated (internally or externally)? Does a subject *correctly* possess, though tacitly, the concepts that are required?

[9] Even when we assume that Berkeley is right and that all knowledge is identical with or can be reduced to knowing-how, his argument still lacks a complete explanation of what competence knowledge within knowing-how requires. Ultimately, this will involve rejecting a more sophisticated, constitutive form of knowing-how skepticism than his Chinese skepticism example and the rejection of that example provides.

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The purpose of this document is to certify that the paper "Can Knowing-How Skepticism Exist?" by Cheng-hung Tsai of Taipei, Taiwan has been formally accepted for publication in The Electronic Journal of Analytic Philosophy. It will appear in early 2006. This paper was subject to a rigorous refereeing process. Please address any questions to ejap@louisiana.edu.

Yours Faithfully,

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