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Seumas Miller on Knowing-How and Joint Abilities

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Seumas Miller (2020) develops a rich set of interconnected views on abilities, joint abilities, knowing-how, joint knowing-how, epistemic abilities, joint epistemic abilities, and collective knowledge. As this list indicates, Miller covers quite a lot of ground in his paper, and I will not attempt here to discuss all of the ideas he introduces, nor will I give an overview of how his different views hang together. Instead, in this reply, what I want to focus on is examining some of the details of what Miller says about two of the key topics on this list, namely, knowing-how and joint abilities.

1. Miller Against Ryleanism and Intellectualism

The two most prominent views of knowing-how are *intellectualism* and *Ryleanism*. Intellectualism is the view that knowing how to Φ is a kind of knowing-that, where the usual suggestion is that knowing how to Φ is a matter of knowing some true proposition about a way or method of Φ -ing.¹ Ryleanism is a view consisting of two theses: a negative claim—*anti-intellectualism*—that knowing how to Φ is not any kind of knowing-that, and a positive thesis—*abilitism*—that knowing how to Φ is some of kind of dispositional capacity or ability to Φ .²

Miller appears to reject both of these views. In relation to the Rylean's positive thesis, Miller briefly offers two different lines of argument for distinguishing “the notion of an ability from the admittedly closely related notion of know-how” (198). The first argument involves an appeal to basic abilities, that is, abilities to perform basic actions (roughly, actions that are performed directly and not in virtue of performing some other action). Miller claims that “basic abilities can exist in the absence of know-how” (200), and in support of this claim he cites the oddity of his saying that he knows how to raise his arm. And Miller suggests that this oddity is explained by the fact that knowing-how is a matter of possessing a learned technique or intellectual procedure rather than an ability.

The second argument Miller offers against abilitism is the familiar one that someone can know how to Φ whilst lacking the ability to Φ , like Stanley and Williamson's (2001) case of the master pianist who loses her arms in an accident and, thereby, loses her ability to play the piano but not her knowledge how to play the piano.

Against intellectualism, Miller appears to endorse the familiar complaint that knowing a proposition about a way to Φ does not appear to be a sufficient condition for knowing how to Φ . For example, following Stanley and Williamson (2001) again, consider Hannah, who has never even attempted to ride a bike and, thereby, does not know how to ride a bike. Nonetheless, Hannah could know that *that* way [pointing at someone else riding a bike] is a way for her to ride a bike. In which case, it seems clear that mere propositional knowledge about how to ride a bike does not suffice for knowing how to ride a bike.

¹ See e.g. Brogaard (2009), Pavese (2015), Snowdon (2003), Stanley (2011), and Stanley and Williamson (2001).

² As the name indicates, the Rylean view of knowing-how is indebted to Ryle (1946, 1949) but the exact relationship between this view of knowing-how and Ryle's original views is complicated and contested. Recent philosophers who either endorse Ryleanism or other related views include Elzinga (2019), Fridland (2013), Habgood-Coote (2019), Kremer (2016), Löwenstein (2017), and Markie (2019).

Miller seems to endorse this objection—or something in the neighbourhood of it—when he claims “that knowing how evidently involves more than propositional knowledge concerning a learned technique or intellectual procedure” because “knowing how entails actual possession of the technique or intellectual procedure in question” (Miller 2020, 199). It is not clear to me how to interpret Miller’s notion of possessing a learned technique or intellectual procedure (I will return to this issue shortly), but I take it that what Miller is suggesting here is that when one possesses a technique or procedure for Φ -ing this will dispose one to success in Φ -ing in a way that mere propositional knowledge about how to Φ does not.

In the end, I think we should join Miller in rejecting both abilitism and intellectualism (or, more carefully, at least certain first-pass versions of these views). But it is worth noting that there is considerable room for Ryleans and intellectualists to resist the quick arguments that Miller gives against their positions.

Starting with what Miller says about basic abilities, this line of argument is not persuasive as it stands. For one thing, to my ear, there is nothing all that odd about someone claiming to know how to raise their arm. Others clearly agree, as many authors just assume that basic intentional actions are actions that an agent knows how to perform, and then they use that as a premise in arguments for conclusions about the nature of knowledge-how or other related topics (e.g., Hornsby 2005; Setiya 2008, 2012). And the relevant conclusions are often in the neighbourhood of the claim that knowing-how cannot be equated with knowing, or in any other way possessing (so contra Miller’s view), techniques or procedures for Φ -ing.

It should be noted that some philosophers share Miller’s intuitions about the oddness of saying that someone knows how to perform a basic action (e.g., Snowdon 2003). But even if Miller’s intuitions are right and it is infelicitous to say “I know how to raise my arm” there is still an obvious gap between the claim that an ascription sounds odd and the claim that it is false, after all, any oddness here might be explained by pragmatic factors that are consistent with the ascription being true.

Furthermore, suppose Miller is right and basic abilities are abilities that we possess without possessing the corresponding knowledge-how. This would show us that the notions of ability and know-how are distinct, as Miller claims, but it wouldn’t show us that abilitism is false. For the thesis that knowing-how is a kind of ability only entails that all states of knowing-how can be identified with certain abilities, and not the reverse. So, a Rylean could conceivably maintain that knowing-how is a special kind of ability (cf. Markie 2019), whilst also granting that basic abilities can be possessed without the subject being in a corresponding state of knowing-how.

The second argument against abilitism that Miller appeals to—that there are cases where subjects know how to Φ without having an ability to Φ —has been an important one in the literature. But there is something approaching a consensus now that this argument fails (see e.g., Fridland 2015; Löwenstein 2017; Markie 2019). A common strategy in replying to this objection is to appeal to idea that knowing how to Φ does entail that one would reliably succeed in Φ -ing, but only in a relevant set of counterfactual circumstances (Hawley 2003). The suggestion then is that the pianist does lose the ability to play the piano *in her current*

physical circumstances, but she also retains the ability to play the piano *in circumstances in which she has arms*.

Turning to the insufficiency objection against intellectualism, this is an important and much-discussed objection. But, again, there is a standard response to it. This response concedes that merely knowing propositions of the form '*w* is a way for me to Φ ' (like Hannah does) is not sufficient for knowing how to Φ . However, it is then claimed that there is a special kind of knowing-that which is not only necessary but sufficient for possessing knowing-how. The most well-known version of this response says that knowing how to Φ is a matter of not only (i) knowing, of some way *w*, that Φ *w* is a way for oneself to Φ , but also (ii) in possessing this knowledge, one has to entertain *w* under a *practical mode of presentation* (Pavese 2015; Stanley 2011; and Stanley and Williamson 2001). Others suggest that the insufficiency problem can be solved by appealing to distinctively executive or practical ways of knowing (Waights Hickman 2019; Cath 2020) that need not involve practical modes of presentation.

2. Knowing How as Possessing Techniques or Procedures

For the reasons just outlined, I don't think Miller presents a convincing case for his claims that knowing-how should be distinguished from abilities and knowing-that. But, to be fair, establishing these claims is not a central focus of his paper, and further arguments could be marshalled in support of them. Let us suppose then, if only for the sake of argument, that Miller is right and that knowing how to Φ is neither a matter of possessing an ability, nor is it a matter of possessing mere knowledge-that. An obvious question at this point for Miller is: What is knowing-how if it is neither an ability nor a kind of knowing-that?

As mentioned earlier, Miller does tell us that knowing-how consists of the possession of a learned technique or intellectual procedure. However, that answer just delays the problem here, as Miller never says what it is to possess a learned technique or intellectual procedure for Φ -ing. And two of the more obvious suggestions one might make about what it is to possess a technique or procedure for Φ -ing—that it is a matter of possessing an ability to Φ in a certain way or, instead, a matter of knowing some relevant proposition about a way or method for Φ -ing—do not seem to be available to Miller given his claims about knowing-how being distinct from both abilities and knowing-that.

A third suggestion that could be made here is to claim that possessing a learned technique or procedure for Φ -ing is a matter of possessing a form of acquaintance (or objectual) knowledge, where the object of knowledge is the relevant way of Φ -ing itself (cf. Bengson and Moffett 2011). But this view is also unavailable to Miller because he explicitly endorses the tripartite distinction (found in many textbooks) according to which knowing-how, acquaintance knowledge, and knowing-that are each distinct and mutually irreducible forms of knowledge. So, we are still left with a puzzle about what knowing-how is according to Miller.

In line with points made earlier, Miller could identify possessing a technique or procedure with a special kind of knowing-that which meets some further relevant condition like, say, a practical mode of presentation condition. For this approach would allow Miller to still claim that knowing-how is distinct from mere knowing-that, whilst also giving him an account of

what it is to possess a technique or procedure in terms of possessing this special kind of knowing-that.

However, Miller seems to commit himself to there being a more fundamental distinction than this between knowing-how and knowing-that when he writes (203):

... Sosa argues persuasively that knowledge requires that one's true belief be acquired because of the competent use of a reliable method (Sosa 2015). Many, but by no means, all, of the methods in question are learned intellectual procedures or involve learned intellectual procedures. To the extent that they do they involve know-how, at least on my account of know-how.

Miller is endorsing Sosa's idea here that knowledge is true belief acquired through the competent use of a reliable method, and he is also suggesting that when the relevant belief-forming method involves an intellectual procedure of some kind it will thereby involve knowing-how. The idea then is that knowing-how is sometimes a precondition for the possession of knowing-that. And there is at least a strong *prima facie* tension between that idea and the idea that knowing-how is any kind of knowing-that.

It seems then that Miller won't endorse a view on which knowing-how is even some special kind of knowing-that. And I suspect he would say the same thing about abilities and acquaintance knowledge. In which case, I am still unsure what knowing-how is according to Miller. One further option here would be to identify knowing-how with some propositional attitude state other than the knowing-that relation (cf. Cath 2011 and Glick 2011), but I do not know if that is an option Miller would be amenable to. Another possibility would be to treat possessing a learned technique or intellectual procedure as some kind of primitive notion, but that strikes me as being a very unattractive option.

3. Joint Abilities and the Reduction Hypothesis

I want to turn now to what is probably the most central notion of Miller's paper, namely, his account of joint abilities. On Miller's view, a joint ability is an ability that meets the following two conditions: (i) it is an ability to achieve a collective end that is possessed by two or more agents together, and (ii) none of these agents possess an individual ability to achieve that same end. In explaining this notion, Miller (200) relies heavily on the following example:

Consider four men, A, B, C and D, pushing a car that has run out of petrol along a road to a nearby petrol station. Assume that in fact A has the ability to push the car to the petrol station without any assistance from anyone else; likewise, B has this ability. Let us refer to such an ability—an ability wholly possessed by one person—as an individual ability. By contrast, C could only do so if C had assistance from someone else (either A or B or D in the circumstances in question) and, likewise, D could only do so if D had assistance from someone else (A or B or C in the circumstances in question). Such an ability—an ability not wholly possessed by one person but rather possessed jointly by two or more persons—is a joint ability.

All four agents are participating in one successful joint action, but only C and D are thereby exercising a joint ability according to Miller. This is because A and B could perform this same action on their own and, hence, they only satisfy condition (i) and not condition (ii), whereas C and D can only perform this action with the aid of others and, hence, they meet both conditions (i) and (ii).

Miller goes on to distinguish joint abilities from both group abilities and what he calls conjunctions of individual abilities. Joint abilities are distinct from group abilities because a group ability is still “possessed by a single entity and, therefore, the ability in question while it is a species of individual ability, albeit the entity in question is a collective entity, it is not a joint ability” (200). And Miller also uses the car example to make the distinction with conjunctions of individual abilities claiming that “if A and B were to push the car to the petrol station without assistance from anyone else (without assistance from either C or D in the circumstances in question) then A and B would be exercising a conjunction of individual abilities, but not a joint ability” (201).

It is clear then that, for Miller, joint abilities are importantly different from collections of individual abilities. But I’m not sure how deep this distinction is meant to run. In particular, I would be interested to know if Miller would contest the following reduction hypothesis: whenever two or more agents possess a joint ability to Φ their possession of that joint ability can be fully analysed in terms of a combined set of relevant individual abilities possessed by those agents to perform *other* distinct actions that constitute sub-actions involved in Φ -ing.

Imagine that Miller’s two agents C and D are together pushing the car to the petrol station. These two agents are performing a joint action and, according to Miller’s analysis, their joint action is also an expression of their joint ability to push the car to the petrol station, because of the fact neither of them could perform this action on their own. But, even granting all these assumptions, I see no reason why we can’t analyse this joint ability exhaustively in terms of the individual abilities of C and D. In particular, the respective individual abilities of C and D to perform an action of pushing the car with a certain amount of force (which is insufficient to move the car on its own), and their individual abilities to coordinate these pushing actions with another person etc.

Presumably, Miller would not deny that the possession of such individual abilities is a necessary requirement for two or more agent to together possess a joint ability to Φ . The question is whether he would grant that possessing the right set of individual abilities is not only necessary but sufficient for two or more agents to possess a joint ability to Φ . At one point, Miller cites Birch’s work on joint know-how, and Birch’s view is one on which “joint know-how is reducible to an interlocking package of individual know-how states” (Birch 2019, 3339). Miller seems to regard Birch as something of an ally, which might indicate that he would be happy to endorse the parallel claim that joint abilities are reducible to an interlocking package of individual abilities. But, on the other hand, Miller’s insistence, in many places, on distinguishing joint abilities from conjunctions of individual abilities strongly suggests that he would reject this reduction hypothesis.

Does Miller provide us with an argument against the reduction hypothesis? The best place to look for such an argument in Miller's paper, I think, is his discussion (202) of the case of two people dancing the tango:

Consider, for instance, a man and a woman dancing the tango together. While each dancer performs a somewhat different set of dance moves (one set constitutive of the male dancing role, the other of the female role), each performs his or her respective dance moves having as a collective end to do so in a manner that results in the creation of the dynamic and aesthetic relational configuration definitive of the tango dance. Accordingly, the joint action of dancing the tango involves a joint ability (and joint know-how)—as opposed to a conjunction of individual abilities (and individually possessed know-how). For the collective end of the joint action of dancing the tango consists not simply of the conjunction of the individual dance moves of the male dancer and those of the female dancer, nor of this in conjunction with joint coordination of their actions, but also of the (dynamic, aesthetic) relation between these two sets of dance moves. This relational configuration—call it the tango dancing relational configuration—involves two relata; the male dancer performing the male dance moves and the female dancer performing the female dance moves. However, being a relational configuration, the tango dancing relational configuration cannot be reduced to its relata; it cannot be reduced to the mere conjunction of the set of dance moves of the male dancer and those of the female dancer (nor of these dance moves taken together with their respective efforts to ensure coordination).

Obviously, Miller is right that for two people to perform a tango together they not only need to each perform the right bodily actions, but they also need to stand in all kinds of complex and dynamic relations to each other as they perform those actions. But contra what Miller seems to suggest here, the fact that a performance of a tango is a relational action does not support the conclusion that the joint ability of two dancers to dance the tango cannot be identified with their combined sets of individual abilities. If an agent's individual abilities were all and only their abilities to control and move their own body, then these points about the tango being a relational activity might support that conclusion. But such a construal of individual abilities is deeply implausible. For the abilities we attribute to individuals are typically not mere abilities of an agent to control and move their own bodies or minds, rather they are abilities to perform actions which essentially involve the agent standing in relations to things external to themselves.

An ability to catch a frisbee, for example, cannot be characterised as a mere ability to move one's limbs and close one's hands etc. Rather, this ability involves the performance and timing of such movements in response to one's perceptions of moving frisbees, and with the result that one succeeds often enough in holding on to a moving frisbee (at least in relevantly normal circumstances). So, the action of catching a frisbee is a relational action, but the ability to perform such an action is obviously still an ability that individuals possess. Or take the ability to be sensitive to other people's feelings. This is not the mere ability of an individual to say certain things or display certain behaviours, rather it is an ability to do and say the right things *in response* to the feelings and behaviours of other people. This is an ability then to perform actions that involve an agent standing in complex relations to other people

but, again, that fact is consistent with the standard assumption that individuals possess such abilities.

Related points apply to joint actions. Yes, the joint action of dancing the tango is a dynamic and relational action. But that fact seems perfectly consistent with the idea that the joint ability of two dancers to perform the tango together can be fully analysed in terms of their combined sets of individual abilities. For those individual abilities will include abilities to stand in various relations to their dance partner; for example, an ability to anticipate the movements of one's dance partner and respond appropriately, and an ability to realise certain aesthetic properties together with their dance partner etc. Of course, for two dancers to successfully perform a tango each of them will need to not only possess these individual abilities but also satisfy all sorts of other conditions, including relational conditions like, say, being in the same physical space as the other dancer, and recognising the intention of their partner to dance the tango with them. But that is not a problem for the reduction hypothesis because the hypothesis is about the conditions that two or more individuals need to meet in order for them to *possess* a joint ability, not the conditions they need to meet in order for them to *manifest* that ability.

Concluding Remarks

There is much of interest in Miller's paper that I have not commented on. What I have done is identify what I take to be some noteworthy challenges for Miller's views on joint abilities and knowing-how.

With respect to knowing-how, one challenge is that Miller's arguments for his negative claims about knowing-how (that it should be distinguished from abilities and knowing-that) are not convincing. The other, and more important, challenge is that Miller needs to clarify what it is to possess a learned technique or intellectual procedure, especially given his further claims that knowing-how should be distinguished from abilities, knowing-that, and acquaintance knowledge. With respect to joint abilities, if Miller does reject the reduction hypothesis then the challenge is to identify a promising argument against it. Miller seems to think that the relational nature of joint actions shows us that joint abilities cannot be analysed in terms of the individual abilities of more agents who jointly possess a joint ability. But, as we have seen, the relational nature of joint actions does not support that conclusion.

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