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4. Acting automatically: Ryle on habits and knowing how

Lars Hertzberg

Abstract In discussing knowing how, Ryle presents a dichotomy between skills and habits. It is argued that this dichotomy is problematic. Ryle runs together two senses of acting automatically: the expression may be used to explain an ability to perform successfully without paying heed to what one is doing or to explain why a performance misfires. Ryle's skill-habit dichotomy is dependent on these senses not being kept apart; once the distinction is noted, Ryle's dichotomy dissolves.

Keywords knowing how | skill | habit | automatic | Gilbert Ryle

1. THE INTELLECTUALIST FALLACY

The chapter on knowing how is the most widely read and discussed part of Gilbert Ryle's classical work *The Concept of Mind*.[1] There appear to be two important strands of argument in the chapter. One is the critique of the so-called intellectualist account of human skills, and the other is the dichotomy between skills and habits. The first of these strands of argument I believe to be deep and important, while the second seems to me to be somewhat problematic. In any case, I do not believe the second strand is essential to the first, the way Ryle apparently takes it to be.

Ryle summarizes the target of his critique of intellectualism as follows: "it is important to correct from the start the intellectualist doctrine which tries to define intelligence in terms of the apprehension of truths, instead of the apprehension of truths in terms of intelligence."[2]

Ryle's point is quite straightforward. Consider, for instance, putting together a piece of furniture from IKEA. How are we able to do it? In putting together an IKEA bed for the first time, I will probably be guided by a set of instructions which was enclosed in the package I brought home from the store. If I am very handy, I may figure out how to do it on my own. In the latter case, it is natural to suppose

1 Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (London: Hutchinson's University Library, 1949), 25–61.
2 Ryle, *The Concept of Mind*, 27.

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that I will draw up a set of instructions before my mind's eye. More generally, it may be thought, our ability to perform demanding tasks, such as putting forward an argument, finding our way around town or preparing a spaghetti bolognese can only be explained by assuming the presence in my mind of a set of instructions, a map or a drawing which informs me of the steps I have to go through. What is involved in performing a complex task, then, could be taken to be modelled on how we might convey the requisite steps to another person. Acting intelligently, we think, is made possible through our conveying the steps to ourselves.

This seems like a common sense account of skilful performance. However, it should not be hard to see that this account is problematic. For me to be guided by the instructions, I have to know how to apply *them*. This in itself is a skill – or rather a number of skills. For instance, I need to know what a screw and a screwdriver are, how a screwdriver is used, etc. Normally, we apply such instructions as a matter of course without thinking about it as the exercise of a skill (though I think we are all familiar with cases in which interpreting an instruction manual may be a highly demanding task). However, if we assume that all skilled performances are guided by sets of instructions, knowing how to apply the instructions seems to require a higher order set of instructions, and so on *ad infinitum*. But clearly, the idea of an infinite series of instructions makes no sense.

This is the infinite regress argument, which has been advanced by Ryle and many others (it is also to be found in Schopenhauer, for instance). The upshot of this is that we are forced to assume that some skills, at least, can be employed without guidance. Some doings may be based on inner representations, but ultimately acting on an inner representation requires an ability simply to do things.

What are the attractions of intellectualism? There seem to be two paths leading to this impasse. (Ryle construes the intellectual temptations underlying this dilemma slightly differently from the way I present them here.) One is connected with the common experience that certain tasks are too complex for us to carry them out without rehearsing the steps in our mind. As we all know, in some cases we need to follow a conscious procedure in order to complete a difficult task. Thus to carry out a complex calculation without the aid of pen and paper, we may need to say the numbers out loud or to ourselves. With simpler calculations, on the other hand, we may be able to see the answer right away. Here no conscious procedure is required. The need to lean on a procedure (what might be called a mental "crutch") varies from one person to the next. When I play chess I have to do surreptitious moves with my fingers when planning a move. I attribute that to my poor grasp of spatial relations; I'm sure most players don't need to move their fingers either physically or mentally. In fact, there are people who can do amazing arithmetical feats without employing any method.

Now, there may be a temptation to think that we always go through a procedure when we solve an intellectual task. It is just that if the task is simple enough or if we are proficient enough, we may do so surreptitiously: we do the calculation so fast that we do not even notice, or maybe it all takes place in the unconscious. This view of skilled performance is consistent with the common experience that in acquiring various skills, we may at first need to concentrate on the way to proceed, but gradually less and less attention is required for applying the skill. Hence it may be natural to suppose that after a while, the thought processes have receded to the background or have become so smooth we are not even aware of them, but they still play a role.

This picture of things gets support from the fact that in very many cases in which we carry out some task more or less automatically, we may nevertheless afterwards give an account of the way we did it, or we may, for instance, explain why we chose this rather than that way of proceeding. In doing so, it may be thought, we are actually recalling the swift thought processes that supposedly were present at the time of acting. (However, if the thought processes are taken to have occurred unconsciously, we cannot, of course, be taken to be recalling them.)

The problem with this view, however, is that the postulation of surreptitious thought processes is arbitrary. Since, by definition, they are not experienced, there is no empirical evidence of their existence, nor is it logically necessary to assume that the solving of such and such tasks would only be possible with the aid of actual intellectual processes.

A second path to intellectualism goes through our inclination to draw conclusions about what phenomena are like on the basis of the form of words we use in talking about them. Thus, when we describe someone either as thinking what she is doing or as acting without thinking, it is natural to suppose that the verb "thinking" indicates a process or activity – something taking place, or failing to take place, in the agent's mind alongside the action. More generally, we are inclined to assume that to every noun there must correspond an object, to every adjective a state, to every verb a process or activity. We do recognize, however, that in a great many cases this presumption does not hold: we do not imagine that taxation is an object, that being expensive is a state, that owing somebody money is a process or an activity. But when it comes to psychological words, the presumption is easier to hold on to. We can imagine all kinds of things going on in the obscure recesses of the mind. Of course, "thinking" is sometimes used to refer to a mental activity consciously carried out concomitantly with our performing some task. So it is easy to suppose that what goes on when we engage in an activity of thinking is also going on when we perform some task with thought, even if we are not conscious of any thinking going on. The activity is, perhaps, relegated to some mental-neurological limbo.

Now resisting this temptation is a central concern of Ryle's *Concept of Mind*. As he puts it:

> It is being maintained throughout this book that when we characterize people by mental predicates, we are not making untestable inferences to any ghostly processes occurring in streams of consciousness which we are debarred from visiting; we are describing the ways in which those people conduct parts of their predominantly public behaviour.[3]

And later:

> The sense in which a person is thinking what he is doing, when his action is to be classed not as automatic but as done from a motive, is that he is acting more or less carefully, critically, consistently, and purposefully, adverbs which do not signify the prior or concomitant occurrence of extra operations of resolving, planning or cogitating, but only that the action taken is itself done not absent-mindedly but in a certain positive frame of mind.[4]

Ryle's attack on intellectualism, then, is important on two levels. On the one hand, it is a critique of a conception of humanity which is deeply entrenched in our culture. This conception tends to locate the foundation of what is distinctively human in "cognition", in "the thinking part" – in an ability to represent reality to ourselves, to handle abstract symbols and to assess the truth-value of sentences. As Ryle puts it:

> … both philosophers and laymen tend to treat intellectual operations as the core of mental conduct; that is to say, they tend to define all other mental-conduct concepts in terms of concepts of cognition. They suppose that the primary exercise of minds consists in finding the answers to questions and that their other occupations are merely applications of considered truths…[5]

This aspect of Ryle's discussion is well brought out by Rupert Read in his essay "A Wittgensteinian/Austinian Qualified Defense of Ryle on Know-How", where he argues that the topic "matters beyond the dusty, abstract confines of philosophy". He then goes on to say:

3 Ryle, *The Concept of Mind*, 51.
4 Ryle, *The Concept of Mind*, 111.
5 Ryle, *The Concept of Mind*, 26.

> The so-called tacit and implicit, the phenomena of life that enable any activities at all and that are crucially responsible for our well-being, are easy to neglect when we are in the grip of a certain mode of philosophical reflection. We are influenced by a prejudice to want to understand in terms of neat pictures, according to the kind of concrete and easily transferrable expression characteristic of propositions. Know-how is less tangible and (at least when reflecting and not practicing) more multifaceted.[6]

I should point out that the intellectualist conception can be understood in two closely related ways. On one understanding, the representations on which our actions are based must somehow be *lodged* in our mind and steer our ways of proceeding without having to be brought to consciousness; on the other understanding, we must *rehearse* them to ourselves before we carry out those actions or while we act. (On the first view, it is not always made clear whether those representations are to be thought of as mental or neurological states.)

Ryle's critique shows a fruitful route for philosophical clarification. He is exhorting us to resist a form of apriorism that holds us captive, one that concerns the ways in which words have meaning. He might have said, though this was not a way he would express himself: rather than assume that the meaning of words (in this case the word "thinking") is constituted by their referring to some object, state or activity (their referent being identifiable independently of the use of the word in question), start your inquiry by looking at the actual use made of them in contexts of human conversation.

2. A NOTE ON VOCABULARY

So far, so good. What I wish to argue, however, is that in place of the *a priori* assumptions he has got rid of, Ryle has constructed a new dichotomy which gives rise to some of the same kinds of problems as those he meant to set aside. By this I mean the distinction between, on the one hand, *knowing how*, or, as he also labels it, skills, intelligent capacities or exercises of intelligence, and, on the other hand, habits, that is, things we, as he also puts it, do automatically.

First I wish to make an observation about vocabulary. Someone who wishes to translate Ryle's chapter on knowing how into German, Swedish or Finnish, for instance, will run into nearly unsurmountable difficulties. It is an accident of English – and I believe of French and maybe many other languages – that there

6 Rupert Read, "A Wittgensteinian/Austinian Qualified Defense of Ryle on Know-How," *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* 39, no. 2 (2018): 405–429. The quotation is from p. 406.

exists a locution, "knowing how", which can be used to refer both to cases in which a person has the ability to actually carry out some task and to cases in which she knows how it is to be done (for instance, is able to instruct others), whether or not she is able to do it herself. In those other languages, however, there is no form of expression which brings these two notions together.[7]

Now, I do not wish to argue that the fact that Ryle's concept pair does not directly translate into some other language means that it has no philosophical interest. (Is there any philosophical problem that could survive translation into all human languages?) Regardless of this, Ryle's critique of the idea that our intelligent performances are grounded in our knowing things to be true still holds. His point is not dependent on the existence of the "knowing how" idiom – the temptation to consider cognitions to be the basic function of the mind is shared by speakers of those other languages as well.

Yet this difference between languages should make us more alert to the fact that the use of these concepts may not be so unified as we may suppose. It also means that certain arguments in defence of the intellectualist position turn out to be spurious. Thus it has been argued (by Jason Stanley and Timothy Williamson) that a pianist who lost her arms in a car accident may have lost her ability to play but may still retain her knowledge how to play the piano; hence, knowing how does not

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7 Ryle's German translator, Kurt Baier, puts this problem as follows in a footnote in his translation:

> Für das im englischen Titel dieses Kapitels verwendete Ausdruckspaar "Knowing how – knowing that" konnte der Übersetzer kein gleichbedeutendes deutsches Gegenstück finden. Ryle will hier sagen, "being able to do something" bedeute dasselbe wie "knowing how to do it". Im Deutschen kann man das aber durch keinen der beiden dem englischen "knowing how" ähnlichen Ausdrücke widerergeben. Der erste dieser Ausdrücke, "wissen, wie man etwas macht", heißt nicht dasselbe wie "etwas machen können". Denn es kann einer wohl wissen, wie man einen Autoreifen wechselt (so dass er es einem anderen sogar beschreiben oder zeigen kann), ohne es jedoch selber zu können, vielleicht weil er nicht stark oder geschickt genug ist oder weil er schlechte Augen hat. Wissen wie … ist eine Form des theoretischen Wissens, also nicht dasselbe wie das englische "Knowing how to …". Der zweite ähnliche deutsche Ausdruck, "Er weiß zu…" ist auch unpassend, weil er nicht allgemein an Stelle von "können" anwendbar ist. Man kann zwar unter Umständen von jemandem sagen: "Er weiß zu schmeicheln", aber man wird kaum die Frage, ob einer chauffieren kann, mit den Worten: "Weiß er zu chauffieren?" stellen wollen. Der Übersetzer musste sich daher damit begnügen, das englische Paar "Knowing how – knowing that" mit dem deutschen Paar "Können – Wissen" widerzugeben, das nicht wie das englische Paar sprachliche Bestätigung für Ryles These liefert, das Können sei eine Art des praktischen Wissens. (Ryle, *Der Begriff des Geistes*. Ditzingen: Reclam 1969, 26.)

"Wissen zu schmeicheln" could perhaps be rendered as "Knowing *when* to flatter" – it's a question of being able to put flattery to good use, rather than simply being good at flattering. Analogous points could, I believe, be made about Swedish or Finnish.

entail ability.[8] This challenge could not even be formulated in German or Swedish: she might of course very well retain her knowing how in the sense of knowing *how one plays the piano*, though she would lack it in the sense of being able to play.

3. SKILL VS. HABIT

Now, an essential part of Ryle's account of knowing how – of intelligent performance – is the attempt to contrast it with acting from *habit*. Ryle does not have very much to say about the meaning of the word "habit", apparently assuming that we are all clear about its use. In fact, the uses of the word "habit" is a theme that seems to be largely neglected within contemporary analytic philosophy.

The word "habit", of course, has a variety of uses; it is, we might say, a family concept. First, let me sketch some of its uses, and then I'll go on to look at the role the word plays in Ryle's account.

Ryle often qualifies the word "habit" with the word "automatic". But, of course, there are many habits that are not, or need not be, automatic. Thus, the word "habit" will sometimes carry a favourable sense, as when we speak of someone having good work or study habits or of a person habitually being polite or generous.

Again, it may be someone's habit to take a walk in the afternoon or to have a drink before dinner, to go to Madeira in the spring, or to watch the World Cup in football every fourth year. When someone acts in one of these ways, we may say she acts "in accordance with habit". This is a kind of habit that one may take up (though it may also be formed spontaneously). Someone may invoke such a habit as a justification for doing or not doing this or that; others may be willing to respect his habit, to try to accommodate it, or they may try to make him abandon his habit or make an exception from it, etc. Habits, here, are similar to motives.

Most people will have habits of this kind. In itself, attributing some such habit to a person is a neutral description, though we may on occasion accuse someone of giving such habits too prominent or fixed a role in governing his life. In other cases, the recurrence may be considered reprehensible, as when we speak of habitual drinking or (nowadays) smoking or using cocaine. The expression "true to habit" tends to carry a negative ring, as when it said of someone "True to habit, he left her for another woman". All of these cases involve a recurrence of behaviour or

8 Jason Stanley and Timothy Williamson, "Knowing How," *Journal of Philosophy* 98 (2001): 411–444. The relevant passage is on p. 416. Cited in Stina Bäckström and Martin Gustafsson, "Skill, Drill, and Intelligent Performance: Ryle and Intellectualism," *Journal for the History of Analytical Philosophy* 5 (2017): 40–55. See p. 46, n. 7.

response, though the nature of the recurrence may vary: "often", "at regular intervals", "at given occasions", etc.

These, it appears, are not the sorts of habit Ryle has in mind (though on one occasion he mentions smoking as an example of a habit). Ryle writes:

> When we say that someone acts in a certain way *from sheer force of habit*, part of what we have in mind is this, that in similar circumstances he always acts in just this way; that he acts in this way whether or not he is attending to what he is doing; that he is not exercising care or trying to correct or improve his performance; and that he may, after the act is over, be quite unaware that he has done it. Such actions are often given the metaphorical label "automatic".[9]

On other occasions Ryle talks about "mere", "pure" or "blind" habit. In fact, the locution "she did it automatically" is frequently used in two quite different senses.[10] In some cases, it is used to account for a misstep – to explain, that is, why someone acted contrary to his intentions. William James has the example of someone retiring to dress for dinner but absent-mindedly undresses and goes to bed instead. There is also the classical case of dumping one's briefcase in the rubbish bin and continuing to work carrying the rubbish bag. Here we may speak about acting "from blind habit" or "from (sheer) force of habit." These descriptions may function as an excuse or anyway as an explanation. What happens here is that an ability grounded in repeated performances misfires: one is able to act without attending to what one is doing and accordingly does *almost* the right thing: dumps one object in the right place and correctly holds on to another object, only the object one dumps and the object one holds on to have been switched. Although the automatism comes from doing something repeatedly, in the present case one does not repeat exactly what one did correctly on those former occasions, but something crucially different.

Acting automatically may also have almost the opposite sense. I may marvel that Joe, unlike me, always remembers to turn off the light and switch on the burglar alarm when he leaves the office. His explanation might be that he turns off the light and turns on the alarm automatically. Here, his action being automatic would account for his being reliable in this matter. Or I might be impressed that he is able to negotiate the London traffic while carrying on a deep conversation about Kant's categories or a lively discussion about the recent crisis in Gaza. He tells me that he finds his way through the traffic automatically. Here its being automatic explains

9 Ryle, *The Concept of Mind,* 110; my italics.

10 A third use of "automatic" is in talking about tics: the kinds of senseless repetitive movements or sounds that people may produce half-voluntarily or involuntarily.

why his performance is effortless. In such cases, it could hardly be said that he acts out of blind habit or from the force of habit (though perhaps it could be said that he acts from pure or sheer habit). The word "automatically" is here used to characterize a degree of mastery. In fact, in practically all skilful performances, there are elements which do not require attention. Not to mention speaking.

On the whole, it does not seem fruitful to divide the things we do into those done attentively and those done automatically, but rather with most of the things we do there is an automatic aspect.

To say of someone that she was acting automatically, then, may be either to indicate a deficiency or a degree of mastery. Ryle seems unaware of this difference between uses. He writes:

> When we describe someone as doing something by pure or blind habit, we mean that he does it automatically and *without having to mind* what he is doing. He *does not exercise care, vigilance or criticism*. After the toddling age we walk on pavements without minding our steps.[11]

It would, of course, be nonsense to say that someone did not exercise care if her performance was spotless; saying so is a form of criticism. Ryle apparently overlooks the distinction between saying that someone does not exercise care and that she *does not need to exercise care* (which is a form of praise). It should be clear that it is only when it indicates a degree of mastery that habitual action should be of interest to Ryle. He wishes to contrast intelligent performance with a performance which is successful though not involving intelligence. Yet what marks off the thoughtful from the automatic performance on his account is *the ways on which the latter is deficient* through the lack of care or vigilance, through the degree to which it is "blind". In fact, switching between the two senses of automatic action is evidently crucial to Ryle's argument. If he were to concentrate on deficient performances, there would be no contrast to be made, and if he were to limit his consideration to successful performances, there would be no way of making the contrast. It is against the background of masterly performances stained by deficiencies that Ryle's notion of intelligent action stands out. Now, of course there will be such cases, just as there will be cases of what for Ryle would pass as intelligent performances that are marked by oversights, missteps, etc. – *as well as* habitual performances that leave nothing to be wished. Clearly, the intelligent–habitual distinction, as conceived by Ryle, is problematic.

11 Ryle, *The Concept of Mind*, 42; my italics.

At this point, someone might wish to counter our argument as follows: habit is habit. It is one and the same thing whether or not it is manifested in an unexpected success or in a failure to carry out one's intentions. It is a practical matter that we speak of acting habitually only when a certain type of explanation is called for, as when someone happens to make a mistake or when someone succeeds without effort. According to this line of thought, regardless of how the word "habit" is *used*, something being habitual is a fact which either holds or does not hold of any specific piece of behaviour. We might call this type of argument an "ontological" move.

Now, such a move owes us an account of how cases of habit are to be identified without regard to the way the word "habit" is actually used. What might a "habit-in-itself" be apart from what we mean when we call something a habit?

Debates of this form tend to recur in philosophy, and I do not wish to go more deeply into the issue at present. However, it seems clear to me that this kind of move is not available to someone wishing to defend Ryle's distinction. The whole bent of his thinking is "anti-ontological". Someone wishing to single out habits as a distinct set of behaviours probably has something like the following in mind: when habits are formed, a causal link is set up in which certain (internal or external) clues trigger a form of behaviour, a link which bypasses the mediation of higher cognitive functions. What creates a habit is repeated doings. This causal history is what explains why one comes to act as one does without the aid of thinking. Thus, what looks like a smart performance may really be the product of complex machinery. The performing seal (to take one of Ryle's examples) is not really smart; its skilful handling of the ball is just the outcome of an extended drill. (How such a drill is achieved is usually left unsaid. It is simply assumed that we have to do with a machine-like performance, the precise nature of which does not matter).

Of course, we would not normally say that the seal is acting from habit, yet the seal's performance is taken to serve as a model of human habitual action.

Now there certainly are intimations of a causal-history conception of habit in Ryle's book. But this can hardly have been his well-considered position. Interestingly, in talking about habitual performances he on one occasion says that we give them "the *metaphorical* title 'automatic'."[12] In characterizing this use of the word "automatic" as metaphorical, he is clearly distancing himself from the causal-history conception. (But, in fact, if we do not hold on to the idea of a causal history, there is no reason to lump the seal's performance with human habits.)

Rejecting the causal-history conception would be in keeping with Ryle's whole approach to the issue. This becomes evident if we focus on the knowing-how side

12 Ryle, *The Concept of Mind*, 111; my italics.

of the divide. His point about thoughtful action is precisely that the thinking going into it is not to be understood as a "clockable" episode preceding or accompanying the action – acting with thought or unthinkingly is a matter of *how* one acts.

Now it would of course be utterly confusing to suggest that in the intelligent–habitual distinction one side is defined by the manner of acting and the other by the causal history of the behaviour. The basis for the distinction would have to be unified.

Stina Bäckström and Martin Gustafsson, in their paper "Skill, Drill, and Intelligent Performance: Ryle and Intellectualism", argue that Ryle is to be understood as making what they call a *formal* distinction between skilful performances and automatic behaviour. He is not arguing that skills are characterized by their causal history, but rather

> what Ryle wants to bring out is that something is a skill only insofar as it is situated in a logical space where questions about learning are *applicable*—where such questions *make sense*. For example, with regard to the clown we can ask questions such as: "When did you learn to trip like that?", "How did you learn it?", "Who taught you?", "Was it difficult to learn?", and so forth. That these questions are applicable does not exclude that they may occasionally receive answers such as "I didn't have to learn it, I just knew how to do it the first time I tried", "Nobody had to teach me", and so on. Rather, the central contrast is with merely automatic behavior in relation to which these questions make no sense at all (insofar as learning is conceived along Rylean lines, as involving not just mere drill but also stimulation of the pupil's own judgment through criticism and example). If a piece of behavior is purely automatic, we can instead ask things such as "When did this become a habit with you?", "Do you have any idea why you tend to respond like this?", and so on.[13]

The point is well taken. It serves to clarify the distinction between skilled actions and behaviour that is automatic in a more literal sense. However, I wonder whether it is helpful in illuminating the contrast between skilled and habitual actions – which according to Ryle are automatic in a metaphorical sense. In terms of the two forms of habitual behaviour we contrasted, habitual action in the sense of effortless performance would obviously seem to belong in the logical space where questions about learning apply. Habitual actions in the form of missteps, on the other hand, as was suggested, can also be accounted for in terms of things the agent has learnt, though in this case the relation between learning and performance is of a different

13 Stina Bäckström and Martin Gustafsson, "Skill, Drill, and Intelligent Performance," 47.

kind: the learning was misapplied. We would not ask, "Where did you learn to get your briefcase mixed up with the rubbish bag?" or "Was that a hard trick to pick up?"[14]

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