Welcome back. Today we are going to begin what will be the last two lectures for this part of the course. Our subject is knowledge a mental state or is knowledge a state of mind, and we’re going to meet again our good old friend, Gilbert Ryle. I think the best way to start is to talk about two different ways in which we use the verb to know. That is, there’s two different senses that are attached to this word and depending upon the context, one or the other of these senses come into play. They’re very different senses of the word.

First, I think, is the one that we most commonly identify with the verb to know and that is what I’m gonna call the epistemic or propositional sense of the word in which the typical form is I know that P, where P can be any proposition. And so I know that 2 + 2 = 4. I know that mammals are warm-blooded. I know that the moon is not made out of green cheese. I know that in the game of chess the first move always goes to the person playing the white pieces, and so on and so forth. Actually, now I’m wondering if that last one is actually true. Let’s pretend it is.

This sense of the verb to know, this use, implies that someone literally has a certain proposition in their head. It refers to a person’s having a true belief of one kind or another. But there is another sense of the verb to know, another use to which we employ this verb, and that is what I’m gonna call the performative sets or the performative views which typically takes the form I know how to Q. Where Q is some activity, some performance, some task. I know how to ride a bicycle. I know how to swim. I know how to play chess. I know how to identify the conclusions that follow from a set of premises. These are all performative uses of the verb to know. What
they indicate is a certain competency in performance. They indicate that one is able to
do something well.

Now, one of the things that I hope has become evident over this course or that I
hope we’ve begun to establish is a series of ideas or notions that philosophers
traditionally have held with respect to human nature and human behavior and human
thought. That is, I hope that we’ve been accumulating a sense of the traditional ways
that philosophers have thought about human beings. Let’s just sort of itemize some of
these that we’ve learned thus far and add yet a third — yet another that’s gonna be
relevant to our discussion of Ryle here today and next time.

The first traditional philosophical view that we encountered in the course was
what I called the mentalistic view. That was that deliberate human behavior, voluntary
behavior, is the result of an antecedent mental state. That human voluntary behavior is
directly caused by human thoughts, by cognitions. That was the first sort of traditional
view we encountered that we called mentalism.

The second view that we encountered we called rationalism. This was the view
that — or at least one sense of the word rationalist — is this idea that human beings are
defined by their rationality or their reasonableness, and that therefore no one should
believe or act upon a belief unless that belief has rational justification, has rational
grounds.

Well, now I want to add a third traditional philosophical view that’s relevant to the
subject that we’re talking about now, and this is what Ryle calls intellectualism.

Intellectualism is the view that all instances of knowing how — knowing how to ride a
bicycle, knowing how to play chess, knowing how to infer conclusions from premises — that all instances of knowing how are reducible to instances of knowing that. That being able to perform tasks competently is a result of having first possessed a body of knowledge in the propositional sense, a body of true beliefs, which lead us in competent performance. So the idea is, well, what makes a person a competent chess player is that they have internalized a set of true beliefs about chess playing that then serve as rules or instructions in playing chess. And it’s because the person has these true beliefs about chess, has this knowledge that, that he is able then to play chess well. That he is then able to exhibit his knowledge how.

This view Ryle refers to as intellectualism. The view that human thought and behavior are to be understood as the result of an antecedent act of cognizing, and particularly that instances of competent performance are reducible to or derivable from instances of propositional knowledge, knowing that such-and-such is the case, knowing that this-that-or-the-other are the case.

Ryle describes this intellectualist viewpoint in two places in the article that’s in your reading. The first is on page 212, second paragraph. Ryle says, “The prevailing doctrine — the traditional view — holds, one, that intelligence is a special faculty, the exercises of which are those specific internal acts which are called acts of thinking — namely, the operations of considering propositions — and, two, that practical activities merit their titles — intelligent, clever, and the rest — only because they’re accompanied by some such internal acts of considering propositions. That is to say, doing things is never itself an exercise in intelligence but is at best a process introduced and somehow
steered by some ulterior act of theorizing.” That’s one place where he describes the intellectualist view that I’ve just given an account of.

He puts it in a slightly different way on page 215. I think perhaps even a clearer way. At the top of the page he says, “Philosophers have not done justice to the distinction which is quite familiar to all of us, between knowing that something is 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. They assume that intelligence equates with the contemplation of propositions and is exhausted in that contemplation.”

So philosophers traditionally have privileged knowledge in the epistemic or propositional sense over knowledge in the performative sense. More specifically, philosophers traditionally have tended to construe knowledge in the performative sense as the product of knowledge in the epistemic sense. It’s because we have true beliefs about certain things that enable us to engage — to perform competently in certain areas. This is what Ryle calls intellectualism. Of course, this is a technical sense of the word intellectualism. If you look up the word intellectualism in the dictionary, you’ll get a whole bunch of different meanings. Ryle is really using this as a technical term to describe this view — this account of the ideology of competent performance, of knowing how.

Let me point out — make one observation about this in case you’re thinking, “Well, gosh. This is just awfully abstract. This just sounds like a lot of linguistics.”
This actually has far-reaching implications. The way that we think about knowing how, the way that we think about competence and performance, has wide-reaching implications, in particular for education. Specifically, it implies that the teaching of skills is a matter of teaching explicit knowledge and that it should be conducted therefore by way of explicit instruction. So if you think of competence and performance as skill in various kinds of activities or practices, if you think of that as a product of having true beliefs, that is going to give you a certain — that is going to lead to a certain view about how skills should be imparted to people.

In particular, what it implicates is a sort of model of explicit instruction. It indicates what we think of as a sort of a kind of classroom learning. If you think about the classroom setting, the classroom setting is best suited — or is something like this one — is best suited for imparting truths. The audience is passive, the teacher is speaking, and this is conducive for transmitting true beliefs from one person to another. It is the best way of imparting knowledge that.

If you believe as intellectualists do that competence in performance, that skill in various tasks and activities, is directly the result of knowledge that, then it implies that the way to teach someone how to do something is to teach them a set of facts. Indeed, this is our ongoing prevailing assumption. Think about how many of the degree programs in a university are ultimately degree programs that prepare people in various skills and of the ability to do things. What is, for example, a degree in management but a degree in — a course of study in which one learns how to manage people. What is a degree in advertising or in marketing but a process in which one learns how to get
people to buy things? In other words, if you hold the intellectualist view of knowledge how, then that’s going to entail a particular view of education, one in which education is primarily a matter of imparting knowledge that.

In other words, it leads us away from a model of education as, let’s say, an apprenticeship. It used to be that the way you acquired a skill, the way that you learned how to do something, the way that you acquired competence in performance, was by way of apprenticeship, by being apprenticed to someone who already knew how to do whatever the task was that you were being trained in. But today increasingly skills, competencies, knowledge how is no longer imparted by way of apprenticeship, but is imparted in a classroom setting. And this reflects precisely the kind of intellectualist view of performance, the intellectual’s view of competence and performance, that Ryle is talking about. It has wide-reaching effects for education.

And if Ryle is correct — and I think he is — that, in fact, competence in performance is not a matter of explicit — of propositional or epistemic knowledge, that the intellectual’s view is false, then it means that the ways in which we are imparting skills are actually not the best ways of doing it. That our current model of education has a serious flaw. That it misunderstands what really is involved in imparting a competence in a skill as opposed to teaching someone explicit facts or truths. As we go on, I think this will become clearer and I will point to it in places where it’s particularly relevant — this implication for education.

Ryle has two main theses in this essay and they are, of course, related. The first is that Ryle believes that knowing how is not reducible to knowing that. That we
cannot explain competence in performance by referring to some pre-obtained body of
knowledge in the first sense, in the epistemic sense. That the ability to play chess
cannot be explained in terms of a person having first acquired some body of true prop
statements about chess playing. That the ability to ride a bicycle is not the result of
some pre-obtained body of knowledge — let’s say in the form of instructions or rules —
about bicycle riding. So the first thesis that he’s gonna — his first thesis is that
knowing how is not reducible to knowing that, that competence is not the product of
epistemic knowledge.

The second and even more challenging — and I think sort of brilliantly radical
thesis that Ryle makes in this paper — is that he says in fact knowing how is prior to
knowing that. That is, in order to be able to acquire knowledge in the epistemic sense,
in order to be able to know that \(2 + 2 = 4\), or to know that mammals are warm-blooded, I
must first already know how to do a number of things. That is, Ryle wants to invert —
the intellectual thinks that knowledge that is prior to knowledge how. That first you
internalize a body of true propositions and then you are able to, using them as
instructions, go out and perform competently.

Ryle wants to turn this around. Ryle wants to say you already need to be able to
perform competently in order to be able to acquire any propositional knowledge at all.
In order to know that \(2 + 2 = 4\), I already have to know how to do various things. Thus,
knowledge how is prior to knowledge that and not the other way around, as the
intellectual maintains. Ryle says this very plainly on page 215 in the second paragraph
at the beginning: “I want to turn the tables and to prove that knowledge how cannot be
defined in terms of knowledge that. Further, that knowledge how is a concept logically prior to the concept of knowledge that."

There are gonna be two major steps or parts to this argument. Two major steps in the argument. The first is that Ryle is going to demonstrate through a series of examples that knowledge of a set of truths, knowledge in the epistemic sense, is simply not sufficient to explain competent performance. So he’s gonna take a number of examples of competent performances and show that no matter how much propositional knowledge the person has prior to the performance, that propositional knowledge is not sufficient to explain the competent performance. So one of the examples he’ll give, for example — he’ll say, “Look. You might have a lousy chess player, someone who’s just lousy at chess. Let him go and memorize all the rules of chess. Let him memorize all the major chess tactics. Let him go memorize a book on chess playing. The mere fact of having that knowledge, that knowledge that, will not necessarily make him a good chess player. He could still be a lousy chess player, even after having memorized all of this information, all of this factual knowledge about chess playing.” And I think that this is obviously true. This is one of the examples that Ryle is gonna give. But he’s gonna give a whole bunch of examples of competent performances which cannot possibly be explained by the prior possession of some body of facts.

The second thing that he’s going to do is he’s going to demonstrate again through examples that the acquisition and application of factual knowledge are, in fact, competencies themselves. In other words, the very process by which one obtains knowledge in the propositional sense — all right. The very process of finding out that 2
+ 2 = 4, that process is itself a competency in performance. That is, a type of performance that requires competency. In addition, the ability to deploy that knowledge is itself a matter of competency, right? So the reason why a chess player—a lousy chess player won’t necessarily become a good one simply by imbibing a set of true propositions about chess, by having a bunch of true beliefs about chess, is because that knowledge that, that propositional knowledge, is only of use in the performance if the person knows how to deploy the information.

And so the second part of the argument in a sense exploits the intellectualist’s own position. The intellectualist wants to say, “Look. In order to perform competently, in order to know how to do something, you first have to have a bunch—a set of propositional knowledge. You have to know that x is true, that y is true, that z is true.” And what Ryle says is, “Look. In order to be able to know that x is true, that y is true, that z is true, you already have to have some competence.” Competence in knowledge acquisition. And in order to adequately deploy that knowledge which the intellectualist says has to be deployed in order to explain competence, that also requires a competence in deploying the facts that one has come into possession of.

So Ryle wants to say, “Look. There’s a kind of infinite regress that could form here.” An infinite regress, of course, is simply a regress into infinity. So the intellectual says, well, you have to have propositional knowledge in order to have performative knowledge. But then Ryle comes back and says, “But in order to acquire propositional knowledge, you already have to have performative knowledge.” Which, if the intellectualist is correct, will then require some further antecedent body of
propositional knowledge. And I hope you will see that that will then lead us into an infinite regress.

So there are two major stages to Ryle’s argument. The first is simply to demonstrate that knowledge of truth is not sufficient for competency in performance, that knowledge of that is never enough to explain knowledge how. And the second is to show that the capacity to acquire knowledge of that and to deploy that knowledge requires that one already be competent in certain performances, would already be able to do certain things that one already has knowledge how.

Now, this is very difficult material, mostly because it requires us to think in a way that we’re not accustomed to and it inverts the traditional ways of thinking about things that are probably very much deeply entrenched in our consciousness. And so I don’t want to load too much into one session. I’m going to leave it at this. What we’ve done today is simply outlined the structure of Ryle’s argument. We’ve identified what his thesis is, we’ve outlined how he’s gonna arrive at the thesis, and we’ve given some background on these two different senses of the verb to know, which of course is what Ryle is talking about. These two senses of the verb to know and their relationship to one another, all in an attempt to break what Ryle takes to be an intellectualist myth. Very much like Ryle earlier in the course tried to break the mentalist myth, if you can recall back to the beginning of the course.

What we’re gonna do next time is we’re going to examine in detail the two theses that Ryle wants to make and the arguments for them. We’re gonna go through each of the stages of his argument and make some more observations about the relationship of
this issue to education, which I think is the most important connection that this very otherwise esoteric topic has to practical life. In terms of things to think about, I’m not going to ask you to come up with a lot of original ideas about this, but simply to try as best you can to digest the two theses that identify in the text, the two theses that I outlined as well as the arguments that I’ve outlined for those theses.

And so with that, I will see you all next time.