

Practical Knowledge Revisited*

Kieran Setiya

Sarah Paul's acute objections to "Practical Knowledge" provide a welcome opportunity to revise and clarify its argument.¹ In outline, that argument has four parts. First, a defence of the claim that it is impossible to act intentionally without some belief about what one is doing. Second, an argument that such beliefs cannot be formed by inference from sufficient prior evidence; in particular, they cannot be inferred from knowledge of one's intention, since the inference might not take place, while the belief is necessarily present. Third, objections to David Velleman's account, on which it is epistemically permissible to form the beliefs involved in acting intentionally when, and because, one knows that they will be supported by sufficient evidence once formed.² And fourth, an argument that *knowledge how* plays a pivotal role in explaining when and why it is permissible to form beliefs about what one is doing without sufficient prior evidence. One is epistemically justified in forming the belief that one is doing ϕ involved in doing ϕ intentionally, only if, and because, one knows how to ϕ . Since this epistemic role could not be played by knowledge of a proposition, knowing how is not reducible to knowing that.

Paul is willing to concede the argument in step two and the critique of Velleman in step three. What she denies are the claims about belief and knowing how with which my article begins and ends. In this reply, I take these issues in turn.

I. INTENTION AND BELIEF

Inspired by Anscombe's bold assumption that one cannot be doing ϕ intentionally if one does not know that one is doing ϕ ,³ "Practical Knowledge" makes its way, by a series of qualifications, to this:

(B) If A is doing ϕ intentionally, A believes that he is doing it, or else he is doing ϕ by doing other things, in which he does believe.⁴

Among the difficulties for Anscombe's original claim is Davidson's carbon-copier, who is making ten copies by pressing hard on the paper, but is not sure that the copies are being made.⁵ This is consistent with the qualified principle, (B), since the carbon-copier is making the copies by pressing hard on the paper, and he believes that he is doing that. Other cases are more difficult. As Paul observes, when I clench my fist as I slowly recovery from paralysis, I may be doing so intentionally without the belief that I am clenching my fist or that I am taking further means.⁶ In response to this, we can retreat yet further:

(B*) If A is doing ϕ intentionally, A believes that he is doing it or is more confident of this than he would otherwise be, or else he is doing ϕ by doing other things for which that condition holds.⁷

This principle is satisfied when I clench my fist intentionally, post-paralysis, since I am at least more confident that I am clenching it than I was before I began.

Against this proposal, Paul has two principal complaints. The first is that moving from (B) to (B*) undermines my attempt to argue from a belief condition on intentional action to "cognitivism about intention," on which intention consists in a belief about what one is doing – or, in the prospective case, what one is going to do – albeit one that has the power to motivate action.⁸ Although it makes sense to talk about partial belief, as when I am unsure that I am clenching my fist, Paul argues that the corresponding intention is not in any way "partial," and that I do not intend to clench my fist only to some degree. Now, I am persuaded that "partial intention" is not a good phrase for the phenomenon I have in mind, and I regret suggesting otherwise.⁹ The view is rather that, once we recognize degrees of confidence, we should think of intentions as motivating states that involve at least partial belief.¹⁰ We can do this without suggesting that the degree of belief involved in one's intention corresponds to one's degree of commitment to its end, as opposed to one's confidence in achieving that end, in light of one's other beliefs. That is why it is misleading to call intentions that involve only partial belief "partial intentions." The point remains that thinking of intentions in this way explains (B*). If intention did not involve even partial belief, what would prevent me from executing my intention in doing ϕ , and thereby doing ϕ intentionally, without being any more confident that I am doing it, or that I am taking further means, than I would otherwise be? The necessity of (B*) is still an argument for cognitivism about intention, in this modified form.

Paul's second complaint is that there are counterexamples. Suffering from Alien Hand Syndrome, with a reliable tendency to button my own shirt by automatic,

unintentional action, I decide to button my shirt intentionally, in the process becoming *less* confident that I'll succeed.¹¹ According to Paul, this scenario conflicts with (B*). But in fact, this is not at all clear. While I may become less confident that I *will* successfully button my shirt, do I become less confident that I am doing so *now*, even as I start to button it intentionally? Surely not. A less contentious illustration of Paul's thought might be one in which I decide to breathe steadily, and do so intentionally, even though I know that my autonomic system is more reliable and so become less confident that my breathing is steady. The problem is that Paul's interpretation of such examples as making trouble for (B*) rests on an optional reading of the counterfactual "more confident than he would otherwise be."¹² What is the relevant alternative? In the case where I intentionally control my breath, I may not be more confident that I am breathing steadily than I would be if I were breathing under the guidance of my autonomic system, but I *am* more confident than I would be if had no such intention and my autonomic system were shut down. If this is how we understand the commitments of (B*), the putative counterexample fails.

Well, how should we understand (B*)? What matters here is not which reading of the counterfactual is more natural, but the fact that even the modest interpretation of (B*) that evades the counterexample implies that we sometimes lack sufficient prior evidence for the partial beliefs involved in intentional action. The interest of (B*) is in the support it lends to this possibility, and that support remains. Suppose, for instance, that I first hold my breath, pausing the autonomic mechanism, and then start breathing steadily. Unless (B*) is more radically mistaken than our example suggests, it still requires an increase in confidence that I am breathing steadily for which I have no antecedent grounds.

It may help to pause at this point and say more about what is at stake in such possibilities. There is, I think, a profound conflict in action theory between those who follow Anscombe in seeing a close connection between intentional action and knowledge of what one is doing, and those who do not. Principles like (B) and (B*) are attempts to capture one aspect of the Anscombean view, which could be more obscurely but more accurately expressed in speaking of the will as a capacity for practical knowledge. To exercise the will in doing something is, in the paradigm case, to know what one is doing in a special way: not by observation or inference. Like other capacities for knowledge, however, the will can operate imperfectly, or with epistemic impediments, yielding mere belief, or partial belief, or some adjustment in confidence.¹³ This is what generates exceptions to Anscombe's own incautious claim, that we know whatever we are doing intentionally, and to (B), and – though we have not seen such examples yet – perhaps even to (B*). If one is convinced, as I am, that Anscombe was tracking something of importance to action theory, one will react to further difficulties not by giving up such principles altogether, but by further revising them, and perhaps, finally, resorting to the obscure but accurate formula above. That the will is a capacity for knowledge of action apart from perception and inference is consistent with the existence of intentional actions that cannot be known in that distinctive way.

The point of these reflections is not to make a case for the Anscombean view, or to claim that it is irrefutable, but to suggest that further progress will have to address the deeper sources of that view. This cuts both ways. Even if I am right that Paul's objections to (B*) can be answered, that does not amount to evidence on its behalf. Her no-doubt-continuing scepticism indicates that we have reached stalemate. Elsewhere, I try to give

more systematic arguments for intention as a species of belief, as part of the best account of instrumental reason,¹⁴ of the impossibility of believing at will,¹⁵ and of how we know what we intend.¹⁶ In the rest of this article, I focus on a systematic argument against this view, pressed forcefully by Paul, that the beliefs it invokes are epistemically problematic. If intentions involve beliefs, forming an intention on the basis of desire, as we often do, looks like wishful thinking: coming to believe that one is acting in a certain way, or that one is going to, because one wishes it were true. How can this fail to be irrational?

II. MORE ON KNOWING HOW

As Paul remarks, I do not accept Velleman's answer to this question, according to which we are, in general, epistemically licensed to form beliefs without sufficient prior evidence so long as we know that they will be supported by sufficient evidence once formed.¹⁷ Instead, I appeal to knowledge how to ϕ as a condition for the epistemic justification of decision: forming the belief that one is doing ϕ – or, in the prospective case, that one is going to do it – that figures in one's intention.

Paul wants to know "how [such knowledge] is supposed to play this epistemic role."¹⁸ It is, I think, fair to protest that the account of knowing how in "Practical Knowledge" was thin. Some details are supplied below. But I want to resist Paul's way of framing the question to which this account responds. As John McDowell writes in a related context, when a philosopher wonders *how* something is possible, "one's first move [...] should be to ask: why exactly does it look to you, and why should it look to me, as if such-and-such a thing (e.g. baseless authority about oneself) is *not* possible?"¹⁹ In order

to have force, the question must be followed up with the rudiments of an impossibility proof. The question "How is this possible?" asks where the apparent proof goes wrong. Like Grice before her, however, Paul gives no explicit argument against the possibility of knowing what one is doing, or what one is going to do, without sufficient prior evidence.²⁰ And the implicit problem is hard to locate. It is, for instance, no use claiming that we always need sufficient prior evidence in order to be justified in forming a belief. For apart from begging the present question, that assumption is refuted by the possibility of self-knowledge. I do not ordinarily need evidence to know, or come to know, that I believe that *p*. If it is said that knowledge without prior evidence is restricted to mental states, and cannot extend to what one is actually doing, we need to be told why – especially in light of externalist doctrines that make psychological facts inextricable from facts about the world outside our skins.²¹ The upshot is that no-one has yet proposed a credible argument that we cannot know what we are doing intentionally, or what we are going to do, without sufficient prior evidence. Without that argument, there is no clear content to the question how such knowledge is possible.

Still, there is work to do. Observing that critics have failed to give a sceptical argument is one thing, allaying suspicions that there might be such an argument is another. That will be the aim of the following pages. The project of "Practical Knowledge" was more modest, and its question more innocent – though I take responsibility for writing in a way that left this fact unclear. Having argued that the beliefs involved in doing ϕ intentionally are not formed on the basis of sufficient prior evidence, and having questioned Velleman's claim that we are entitled to form just any belief for which we know we will have sufficient evidence after the fact, we can ask,

more perspicuously, *when* a subject is justified in coming to believe that p without sufficient prior evidence. The answer is not "never," nor is the demand for prior evidence always out of place. It is irrational to engage in wishful thinking or to make a cognitive leap of faith. How is forming an intention any different? My proposal was that one is justified in coming to believe that one is doing ϕ or that one going to, by forming an intention, "if and only if one's decision is an exercise of knowledge how to ϕ and one has knowledge of ability in the simple conditional sense":²² if I intend to be doing ϕ , I will be doing so in fact.

This proposal needs revision and expansion. Before we turn to our principal topic, a word about knowledge of ability. The presence of this condition in my account was in part a concession to Velleman, for whom knowing that I am able to ϕ is both necessary and sufficient to justify me in forming an intention-belief, so long I will know that I have formed it and thus have adequate evidence that I am acting as I intend. I allowed this condition to be necessary, but I denied that it is sufficient. I am no longer sure that this concession was right. Must one know that one is able to ϕ , as well as knowing how to ϕ , for one's decision to be epistemically justified? Perhaps it is sufficient that one knows how to ϕ and has no reason to doubt one's own ability.²³

That issue is secondary here. More important are questions about the nature and epistemology of knowing how. Here I begin with a disclaimer. My view is emphatically not that knowing how to ϕ provides a source of evidence that would "tell the agent which action to expect."²⁴ That it does not play this role is central to my argument against the reduction of knowing how to knowing that.²⁵ As Paul insists, I hold that the beliefs

involved in our intentions share with wishful thoughts the property of being formed without sufficient prior evidence, though not the property of being irrational.²⁶ When I decide to clench my fist, I form the intention of doing so. But I do not form it on the basis of sufficient evidence that I am going to clench my fist. Instead, I form this intention on the basis of practical thought, and the reasons for doing so are practical reasons. Knowing how to clench my fist is among the conditions in virtue of which I am epistemically justified in forming the belief that figures in my intention. Unlike evidence, however, it does not justify this transition by making it more likely that the belief is true, before it is formed. Even combined with knowledge of ability, knowing how to clench my fist is not a sound basis on which to predict that I am doing so, or that I am going to do so in the future.²⁷

If it does not provide evidence of action, why believe that knowing how to ϕ is epistemically relevant to our intentions? First, because if (B*) holds, and Velleman's proposal fails, we need something to distinguish forming an intention-belief, when it is epistemically justified, from wishful thinking or a leap of faith. Knowing how is in the right place at the right time. Second, because the view that knowing how to ϕ does epistemic work helps to explain why it should count as knowledge.²⁸ Third, because knowing how is not only well located but well suited to this task.²⁹

In order to show this, I need to say more about what is involved in knowing how. In "Practical Knowledge," I wrote that "knowing how to ϕ is having the capacity to ϕ intentionally," but that the sense of "capacity" in play here is obscure, and not to be equated with ability in the simple conditional sense.³⁰ I still know how to move my arm

when I am unable to do so because it is being restrained. What sort of capacity do I then possess?

The first thing to note is that, as a general matter, capacities, like dispositions, can be "masked."³¹ Although it is disposed to break when struck, a glass carefully stuffed with packing materials may refuse to do so. Likewise, although I am capable of reciting the alphabet backwards, I may get it wrong when I am sufficiently tired. Once we reject the conditional analysis of dispositions, as refuted by masking, we can give a partly dispositional account of the capacity involved in knowing how. When I am doing ϕ intentionally as a basic action – not by taking further means – I must know how to ϕ ,³² and my knowledge consists in the disposition to ϕ in execution of my intention. (Since dispositions can be masked, this knowledge is consistent with inability, in the simple conditional sense.) When I am doing ϕ intentionally as a non-basic action, and I know how to ϕ , my knowledge consists in knowing basic means, and knowing how to take those means.

There are difficult questions here. How does such local knowledge – knowing how to ϕ here and now, on a specific occasion – relate to general knowledge how? What is the path from knowing how to bake pies to knowing how to bake this particular pie in this particular oven? Is general know-how just knowledge of generic means, or does it require knowledge how to take those means, or a capacity to find and take their instances in contexts that call for it?

Fortunately, we need not settle these questions in order to address residual puzzlement about practical knowledge, at least to some degree. We can focus on

knowledge how to ϕ that is exercised on a given occasion. Suppose that I am doing ϕ intentionally, as a non-basic action, by doing ABC. I form the intention to ϕ for whatever reason and execute that intention by taking those basic means. In "Practical Knowledge," I called the decision to ϕ itself an exercise of knowledge how.³³ Paul is right to question this.³⁴ Knowledge how to ϕ is a capacity to execute one's intention, not to form that intention in the first place. Apart from anything else, it is possible, if inadvisable, to form the intention of doing something I do not know how to do. According to the view set out two paragraphs ago, knowledge how mediates between intention and action. Part of what is involved in knowing how to ϕ , in the present case, is propositional knowledge that I can do it by doing ABC. That I know this proposition solves the mystery how I can know that I am doing ϕ *if* I know that I am doing ABC.³⁵ But how do I know that I am doing ABC? We can say at least this. If I know how to take those basic means, this knowledge consists in the disposition to execute the corresponding intentions. Since I have this disposition, it is no accident that, when I intend and thus believe that I am doing ABC, I am doing so in fact. Exercising basic knowledge how ensures non-accidentally true belief. To say this is not to endorse an epistemology on which its being no accident that a belief is true suffices for it to count as knowledge.³⁶ But it does pre-empt a residual source of scepticism, that the truth of beliefs formed without sufficient prior evidence could only be a matter of luck. When they are constituted by intentions, and one knows how to perform the relevant actions, that is not the case.

At the close of her discussion, Paul mentions a related move. She complains that "if what is really doing the work is the role of know-how in ensuring that the believed-in

action will occur," we are back with Velleman's account, on which forming an intention is justified when, and because, one knows that one will have sufficient evidence after the fact.³⁷ But this is a mistake. For the emerging picture does not claim or imply that we are permitted to form just any belief for which we know we will have sufficient evidence. Unlike Velleman, it can condemn the leap of faith in which I form the belief that people will like me, knowing that if I believe it, they will.³⁸ Nor does Velleman give an epistemic role to the dispositions that partly constitute knowing how. For Velleman, forming the intention-belief that I am doing ϕ is justified by knowledge of ability, in the simple conditional sense. On my account, it is justified, in part, because the dispositions involved in knowing how to ϕ make the truth of that belief no accident. The state of knowing how to ϕ itself, not just a belief about that state, does epistemic work.³⁹

III. CONCLUSION

I have argued, first, that there are no clear exceptions to (B*), on the reading required by my argument – though I admit that there is work to do in motivating this principle and the picture of which it is a part; second, that we are owed a sharper formulation of the problem that gives content to the question *how* we can know what we are doing without sufficient prior evidence; third, that if the question is simply *when* and *in virtue of what* we have such knowledge, the answer may appeal to knowing how.

Footnotes

* For helpful discussion of these issues, I am indebted to Michael Bratman, Kim Frost, and Sarah Paul; and for valuable comments on the previous draft, to Henry Richardson and two anonymous editors at *Ethics*.

¹ Sarah Paul, "Intention, Belief and Wishful Thinking: Setiya on 'Practical Knowledge,'" *Ethics* 119 (2009): 546-557. Her paper is a discussion of Kieran Setiya, "Practical Knowledge," *Ethics* 118 (2008): 388-409.

² J. David Velleman, *Practical Reflection* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989).

³ G. E. M. Anscombe, *Intention*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1963), 11. See also Stuart Hampshire, *Thought and Action* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1959), 95, 102.

⁴ Setiya, "Practical Knowledge," 390; the names are taken from Paul, "Intention, Belief."

⁵ Donald Davidson, "Agency," reprinted in *Essays on Actions and Events* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 43-61, 50.

⁶ Paul, "Intention, Belief," 549, following Setiya, "Practical Knowledge," 390-1.

⁷ Setiya, "Practical Knowledge," 391.

⁸ Paul, "Intention, Belief," 550-1. Note that "cognitivism" here is distinct from, but presupposed by, what is now called "cognitivism" in the philosophy of practical reason. See Michael Bratman, "Cognitivism about Practical Reason," reprinted in his *Faces of Intention* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 250-64, and Kieran Setiya, "Cognitivism about Instrumental Reason," *Ethics* 117 (2007): 649-73.

⁹ Setiya, "Practical Knowledge," 396. For a different conception of partial intention see Richard Holton, "Partial Belief, Partial Intention," *Mind* 117 (2008): 27-58.

¹⁰ As proposed by D. F. Pears, "Intention and Belief," in *Essays on Davidson: Actions and Events*, ed. Bruce Vermazen and Merrill B. Hintikka (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 75-88, 78-9.

¹¹ Paul, "Intention, Belief," 553.

¹² The need for delicate handling of these counterfactuals was noted in Setiya, "Practical Knowledge," 391, n. 12.

¹³ See Pears, "Intention and Belief," 80-1.

¹⁴ Setiya, "Cognitivism." See also Jacob Ross, "How to be a Cognitivist about Practical Reason," *Oxford Studies in Metaethics* 4 (2009): 243-82.

¹⁵ Kieran Setiya, "Believing at Will," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 32 (2008): 36-52.

¹⁶ Kieran Setiya, "Knowledge of Intention," unpublished.

¹⁷ Setiya, "Practical Knowledge," secs. III and IV.

¹⁸ Paul, "Intention, Belief," 554.

¹⁹ John McDowell, "Response to Crispin Wright," in *Knowing Our Own Minds*, ed. Crispin Wright, Barry C. Smith, and Cynthia Macdonald (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 47-62, 57-8.

²⁰ See H. P. Grice, "Intention and Uncertainty," *Proceedings of the British Academy* 5 (1971): 263-279, 268.

²¹ An influential discussion is Tyler Burge, "Individualism and Self-Knowledge," *Journal of Philosophy* 85 (1988): 649-63.

²² Setiya, "Practical Knowledge," 407.

²³ If the epistemic justification of decision requires antecedent knowledge of ability, and this knowledge is always empirical, there will be problems in the epistemology of learning how. Before I attempt a new kind of basic action, I may have no empirical evidence that I am able to perform it; if such evidence is required, I am not epistemically permitted to try! We can generalize this puzzle by asking whether, in coming to believe to some degree that I am doing ϕ , by forming that intention, I must be empirically justified in believing, to the same degree, that I am able to do it. If it is permissible to try without empirical evidence of ability, the answer must be no. There are two ways to make sense of this. On the first, I need not believe, or have any justification to believe, that I am able to ϕ , so long as I have no serious grounds for doubt. (Compare the "perceptual dogmatism" of James Pryor, "The Skeptic and the Dogmatist," *Noûs* 34 [2000]: 517-49.) On the second, I have *a priori* justification to believe, at least to some degree, that I am able to ϕ . (Compare Roger White, "Problems for Dogmatism," *Philosophical Studies* 131 [2006]: 525-57, sec. 9.) The issues raised by these remarks deserve a more sustained discussion than is possible here.

²⁴ Paul, "Intention, Belief," 556.

²⁵ Setiya, "Practical Knowledge," 407-8.

²⁶ This point is stressed in Paul, "Intention, Belief," 556.

²⁷ Setiya, "Practical Knowledge," 408.

²⁸ Setiya, "Practical Knowledge," 404-7. That Velleman cannot explain this was one of my complaints about his view.

²⁹ Here I echo and respond to Paul, "Intention, Belief," 554.

³⁰ Setiya, "Practical Knowledge," 407.

³¹ The term is due to Mark Johnston, "How to Speak of the Colors," *Philosophical Studies* 68 (1992): 221-63, 233. Its application to capacities is discussed by Michael Fara in "Masked Abilities and Compatibilism," *Mind* 117 (2008): 843-65, sec. 2. Despite my debt to Fara, my view differs from his (a) in giving the word "ability" to the simple conditional theorist, (b) in appealing to intentions and knowledge of means, not to what one is *trying* to do – the notion of trying is too opaque to be helpful here – and (c) in restricting attention to capacities exercised by acting intentionally (cf. Fara, "Masked Abilities," 849).

³² Setiya, "Practical Knowledge," 403-4.

³³ Setiya, "Practical Knowledge," 407.

³⁴ Paul, "Intention, Belief," 555.

³⁵ See Anscombe, *Intention*, 50.

³⁶ Compare Velleman's reliabilist interpretation of Anscombe (J. David Velleman, "What Good is a Will?" In *Action in Context*, ed. Anton Leist [Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2007], 193-215, 199-204). Apart from the fact that one need not be a reliabilist to stress the epistemic significance of non-accidental truth, Velleman mistakenly assumes that, for Anscombe, "an intention amounts to knowledge if it appropriately causes facts that make it true" (Velleman, "What Good is a Will?" 201) Anscombe emphatically denies that "the relation of *being done in execution of a certain intention*, or *being done intentionally*, is a causal relation between act and intention." (G. E. M. Anscombe, "The Causation of Action," reprinted in her *Human Life, Action and Ethics*, ed. Mary Geach and Luke Gormally, [Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2005], 89-108, 95) When she writes about practical knowledge as "the cause of what it understands," she means *formal* not *efficient* cause, and then only when "the description of the event is of a type to be formally the description of an executed intention." (Anscombe, *Intention*, 87-8)

³⁷ Paul, "Intention, Belief," 556.

³⁸ Setiya, "Practical Knowledge," sec. III.

³⁹ Here I am responding to a question raised by Paul, "Intention, Belief," 555.