

“The Critique of Scientism: Ryle and Oakeshott on Tacit Knowledge”
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For the past two hundred years or so, philosophers, sociologists, and political theorists who have been skeptical about the claims of modern scientific or rationalistic epistemology have relied upon some version of the concept of tacit knowledge or one of its cognates to support an alternative account of the grounds of human beliefs and actions.¹ These thinkers have claimed that those who believe that the methods and conclusions of modern natural science should be the model and standard of any sort of epistemological arguments have mistakenly reduced the rich variety of human knowledge to a single abstract and inadequate measure. Instead, these critics of scientism posit that there is some ineliminable aspect of human knowledge and action which is dependent in some way upon unstated assumptions, presuppositions, practices, or tacit knowledge. Most of these accounts of tacit knowledge suffer from serious internal difficulties related to the reification of the varieties of tacit knowledge themselves and/or the complexities of transmission and location of such knowledge.²

However, of the various writers who have made such claims, Gilbert Ryle and Michael Oakeshott have offered accounts of tacit knowledge which do not suffer from many of the weaknesses of traditional accounts. Both writers provided critiques of scientism, that is, the notion that the methods of the natural sciences and the model of rationality taken from their

¹ I have used the term ‘tacit knowledge’ to refer synonymously to both Ryle’s conception of ‘knowing-how’ and Oakeshott’s conception of practical knowledge, though there are differences between the ways in which Ryle and Oakeshott connect tacit knowledge with other philosophical. Some of these differences will be examined later in the paper. ‘Tacit knowledge’ was the term used by Michael Polanyi to refer to his claim that “we know a great deal that we *cannot tell*, and...that which we know and *can* tell is accepted by us as true only in view of its bearing on a reality beyond it.... [thus,] the idea of knowledge based on wholly identifiable grounds collapses.” Polanyi’s version of the centrality of tacit knowledge is dependent upon other often confused and confusing claims concerning the ontological and metaphysical reality corresponding to tacit knowledge. I have focused on Ryle and Oakeshott because both present clearer elaborations of tacit knowledge while avoiding the metaphysical baggage associated with Polanyi’s supposed realism. See Michael Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension* (New York: Anchor Books, 1967) 61.

² For an insightful critique of modern theories of social practice, see Stephen Turner, *The Social Theory of Practices: Tradition, Tacit Knowledge, and Presuppositions* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994).

practices is or should be the model for rationality as a whole. Ryle referred to the target of his critique as 'intellectualism', while Oakeshott called it 'rationalism'. However, the term 'scientism' gets to the heart of the problem, which is the faulty generalization of the methods of science to all fields of human knowledge. Ryle's primary epistemological questions concerned the relationship between the tasks of philosophy and the tasks of natural science, and his conclusion was a kind of epistemological pluralism which distinguished between a knowledge of how to do things which is connected with capacities and dispositions, and a knowledge that certain facts, or theorems are true. Ryle is not always clear about the relations between these two types of knowledge, sometimes reversing the scientific claim by insisting that 'knowing-how' is the primary form of knowledge, and is, in fact, a condition of any 'knowing-that'. Oakeshott's primary epistemological concerns were similar to Ryle's, though he was particularly adamant about both the theoretical irrelevance and the practical dangers of the scientific approach to politics and morality. Oakeshott's conclusions were similar to Ryle's as well, sometimes suggesting that practical knowledge was a different kind of knowledge than technical knowledge and logically prior to technical knowledge, while at other times suggesting that technical knowledge was both parasitic upon practical knowledge and not particularly useful because of its abstract character. Ryle is best understood as having claimed that tacit knowledge or 'knowing-how' is distinguishable from explicit knowledge or 'knowing that'; that neither is reducible to the other; but that tacit knowledge is temporally and logically prior to explicit knowledge and is a condition which makes explicit knowledge possible. Oakeshott's arguments about the connection between tacit or practical knowledge and explicit or technical knowledge suggest that

he believed that tacit knowledge is not only temporally and logically prior to explicit knowledge, but that explicit knowledge is in some ways reducible to tacit knowledge.³

For both thinkers, the character of tacit knowledge is best understood in terms of the contrast between certain things known but not reducible to explicit and formulaic expression and other things known but more or less completely reducible to explicit and formulaic expression. In the context of a larger discussion including an examination of the thought of Ryle and Oakeshott, Stephen Turner described tacit knowledge as “the unspoken and often inarticulable conditions of thought and articulation, normally conditions that are acquired or learned other than through the kind of explicit claims normally associated with the term ‘knowledge’.”⁴ Thus, one can know how to speak English, while knowing little about grammar, and, more importantly, while being unable to formulate the explicit rules of English grammar; or one can know how to swim without being able to offer a technical explanation of the laws of dynamics involved in aqueous self-propulsion; or one can know how to paint without knowing anything about the chemical composition of paint, about the history of art, or even about the philosophy of art. Both Ryle and Oakeshott also insisted, however, that the sum of tacit knowledge is not some mystical or reified collective consciousness, but instead is learned by immersing oneself individually in various practices, institutions, discursive formations, or interpretative communities. The location of tacit knowledge is in the individual and the transmission of such knowledge takes place from individual to individual.

³ Jeremy Fantl, using Ryle’s terminology, distinguishes between weak anti-intellectualism, which merely claims that ‘knowing-how’ and ‘knowing-that’ are distinct forms of knowledge, and strong anti-intellectualism, which reverses the scientific order of knowledge and claims that ‘knowing-that’ can be reduced to ‘knowing-how’. I suggest that Ryle and is somewhere in the middle of these two arguments, and Oakeshott tends toward a strong version of anti-intellectualism. Jeremy Fantl, “Knowing-How and Knowing-That,” *Philosophy Compass* 3 (2008) 451-470.

⁴ Stephen P. Turner, *Understanding the Tacit* (New York: Routledge, 2014) 1.

II. Intellectualism, Scientism, and Rationalism

Though both understood scientism as an intellectual problem dating to the time and work of Descartes, the immediate though implicit object of Ryle's and Oakeshott's critique of scientism was logical positivism, which was the most prominent school of analytic philosophy during the formative years of both men's university education.⁵ Ryle, as a young philosopher, was committed to its program and his critique often reads like that of a disappointed suitor, while Oakeshott remained more or less faithful to the idealism of Hegel and Bradley and was, thus, never attracted to it at all. Logical positivism was based upon the idea that the logic and methods of the natural sciences and/or mathematics ought to be the basis of philosophical and all other types of explanation because these were the most perfect explanatory languages (i.e. they reflected the world most perfectly [pictured it] or reflected the nature of meaningful propositions most perfectly).⁶ The school, if it can be called such, was identified with Moritz Schlick and the Vienna Circle on the European continent and represented in Britain by A.J. Ayer.⁷

Like Bertrand Russell, who believed that philosophy consisted of constructing a "logically perfect language," the logical positivists were preeminently concerned with refining the use of language.⁸ The positivists had a great deal of respect for both mathematics and the natural sciences, and a serious distaste for the traditional philosophical field of metaphysics.

⁵ For an account of the state of the discipline of philosophy in the 1920s and 1930s (at least at Oxford and Cambridge), see G.J. Warnock, *English Philosophy since 1900* (London: Oxford University Press, 1958) and J.O. Urmson, *Philosophical Analysis: Its Development Between the Two World Wars* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956).

⁶ Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* was a central text for both logical atomism and logical positivism. The later work of Wittgenstein stands in stark contrast to his earlier work in rejecting the possibility of an ideal language offering an exact picture of the world. A minority of Wittgenstein scholars, however, see significant continuity between his early work and his later work. See, for example, Cora Diamond, *The Realistic Spirit: Wittgenstein, Philosophy, and the Mind* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995).

⁷ See Bertrand Russell, *The Philosophy of Logical Atomism* (Chicago: Open Court Classics, 1985: reprint, 1918, 1924) and A.J. Ayer, *Language, Truth, and Logic* (New York: Dover, 1952: reprint, 1946).

⁸ Bertrand Russell, *Logic and Knowledge* (New York: MacMillan, 1956) 198.

Their primary accomplishment was the creation of a method or standard by which meaningful statements could be distinguished from meaningless statements. Thus, interestingly enough, the verification principle, as the standard was named, was not immediately concerned with the truth or falsity of statements but with their status as ‘real’ or meaningful statements as opposed to meaningless ones. The verification principle itself consisted of two criteria. The meaningfulness of any statement could be determined either by its possibility of being verified empirically, or by its being tautologically true.⁹ Therefore, the positivist claim about epistemology consisted of the notion that actually knowing something meant having a justified true belief concerning the object of knowledge. Of course, the only proper justification was the verification principle, and thus one could only have justified true beliefs about tautological statements or empirically verified statements.¹⁰

The implications of the verification principle for political philosophy were quite obvious. The language of politics, like the languages of morals, religion, and art, were not, according to the principle, meaningful, and, thus, the philosophical traditions of political philosophy, ethics, theology/philosophy of religion, and aesthetics were summarily read out of the discipline.¹¹

However, the implications of the verification principle for the older Aristotelian conception of

⁹ For the most well-known and lucid elaboration of the verification principle, see Ayer, *Language, Truth, and Logic*, 5-16, 35-38. To the consternation of the logical positivists, John Wisdom accused the verification principle of being the kind of thing that they despised most, i.e., “a metaphysical theory.” John Wisdom, “Metaphysics and Verification,” *Mind* 47 (1938) 454.

¹⁰ Ryle wrote a critical essay about the verification principle and dismissed its application outside the realm of the natural sciences and mathematics. He noted that, “to say of a statement that what it tells us is how we should establish whether what it tells us is true or false leaves the ‘it’ suspended.” Gilbert Ryle, “The Verification Principle,” *Collected Essays: 1929-1968* (London: Routledge, 2009) 304

¹¹ The analytic tradition, more broadly considered, did produce two distinct moral philosophies at the time. The first one, intuitionism, was associated with G.E. Moore and it suggested that goodness was a simple unanalyzable property which was merely intuited by normal human beings. The second, emotivism, which was associated with C.L. Stevenson, claimed that moral judgments were merely disguised statements of preference intended to get others to feel the same. See G.E. Moore, *Principia Ethica* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1903), C.L. Stevenson, *Ethics and Language* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1944), and G.J. Warnock, *Contemporary Moral Philosophy* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1967).

phronesis or practical reason were just as severe. Practical knowledge was not considered knowledge at all because, not being completely articulable, it was neither susceptible to empirical verification nor tautologous.

II. Ryle

However, it was clear to many that there were serious problems with the verification principle, namely that it was neither empirically verifiable nor tautologous.¹² Gilbert Ryle was one of the first philosophers to observe the weaknesses internal to the principle, especially in its more ambitious formulation. Ryle's most famous work was *The Concept of Mind*, which was published in 1949, but he was already writing articles critical of logical positivism in the 1930s. The most important contributions to the critique of rationalism made by Ryle concerned the distinction between 'knowing-how' and 'knowing-that', but his observations on the nature of philosophy itself and the notion of the category mistake are also relevant.

Regarding the character of philosophy itself, Ryle believed that it consisted, for the most part, in clarifying linguistic confusion. For example, in 1932, he wrote, "I would rather allot to philosophy a sublimer task than the detection of the sources in linguistic idioms of recurrent misconstructions and absurd theories. But that it is at least this I cannot feel any serious doubt."¹³ There are expressions that ordinary users of language use perfectly competently but, because of their logical grammar, they tend to confuse philosophers. For example, the phrase 'no one is home' is grammatically similar to the phrase 'Mr. Jones is home', but, of course, the

¹² There were serious internal divisions within the Vienna Circle about the meaning of the verification principle from its original formulation. For an account of the permutations of the verification principle, see Warnock, *English Philosophy since 1900*, 43-51.

¹³ Gilbert Ryle, "Systematically Misleading Expressions," *Logic and Language, 1st Series*, Antony Flew, ed. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1952) 36. (essay first published in 1932). Ryle wrote a series of essays expounding this view, including "Systematically Misleading Expressions," "Categories," "Philosophical Arguments," "Ordinary Language" before writing *The Concept of Mind*. These are collected in Gilbert Ryle, *Collected Essays: 1929-1968* (London: Routledge, 2009).

ordinary person doesn't believe that there is an entity called 'no one' who happens to be at the house. Further, Ryle claimed that philosophy adds nothing to our competence in engaging in the various practices which constitute our world. Indeed, Ryle introduced *The Concept of Mind* with a kind of disclaimer, suggesting that "the philosophical arguments which constitute this book are intended not to increase what we know about minds, but to rectify the logical geography of the knowledge which we already possess."¹⁴ Philosophy bakes no bread, paints no masterpieces, makes no one moral, engages in no scientific discovery, and disproves no religious dogma, but it can straighten out linguistic tangles by revealing the proper relationship between various kinds of statements.

Instead, Ryle posited an epistemological pluralism that distinguishes between a variety of human activities and the knowledge that is appropriate to each. He wrote that "there are many branches of methodical inquiry into the different departments of the world...[and] all employ their own standards or criteria by which their particular exercises are judged successful or unsuccessful."¹⁵ With specific reference to the claims of science as a master discipline, Ryle responded by arguing that philosophy does not proceed either by deduction/demonstration or by induction. In the case of the former, there are no accepted or self-evident axioms from which to deduce necessary truths, while, in the case of the latter, philosophical arguments cannot be falsified or corroborated by empirical observations.

According to Ryle, "philosophy is the replacement of category-habits by category-disciplines."¹⁶ Ryle was here pointing to what would be one of his lasting accomplishments: the elucidation of irrelevant antinomies between the philosophical, scientific, and mathematical

¹⁴ Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind*, reprint (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984) 7.

¹⁵ Gilbert Ryle, "Philosophical Arguments," *Collected Essays: 1929-1968* (London: Routledge, 2009) 203.

¹⁶ Ryle, *The Concept of Mind*, 8.

languages and the practical languages with which we navigate the world. Indeed, *The Concept of Mind* consisted of an extended demonstration of the effects of category errors concerning the use of concepts related to mental operations. Specifically, Ryle made the argument that the mind/body problem in philosophy is the result of treating the facts of mental life as if they were the facts of physical life. As he wrote, “the phrase ‘there occur mental processes’ does not mean the same sort of thing as ‘there occur physical processes’, and...it makes no sense to conjoin or disjoin the two.”¹⁷ This idea of the category mistake was central to Ryle’s most successful works, and he defined it as “the presentation of facts belonging to one category in the idioms appropriate to another.”¹⁸ Thus, the notion that the conclusions of the natural sciences can in some form or fashion prove that God does not exist, or that the various sacred texts can in some way prove that one form of government is best, or that art offers moral lessons are all examples of category errors. Ryle was not overly concerned with delineating precisely in what the distinction between categories consisted, but he maintained the kind of linguistic and practical pluralism which also characterized the work of others who wrote about tacit knowledge, including Oakeshott. Indeed, Ryle claimed that “the truth is that there are not just two or ten different logical *métiers* open to the terms or concepts we employ in ordinary and technical discourse, there are indefinitely many such different *métiers* and indefinitely many dimensions of these differences.”¹⁹ Ryle’s claim here directly contradicted the notion that there ought to be, or, more importantly, could be an ideal language to which these other logical *métiers* might aspire.

¹⁷ Ryle, *The Concept of Mind*, 22. An example of a category confusion as the basis of a joke is the old line “she came home in a flood of tears and a sedan-chair.”

¹⁸ Ryle, *The Concept of Mind*, 8.

¹⁹ Gilbert Ryle, *Dilemmas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1954) 10. In this book, Ryle addressed several ‘quarrels between theories’ which dissolved by pointing out the different logical grammar involved in each, including a notable examination of the fatalism/free will question.

Ryle related his critique of category confusions to what he understood to be a fundamental misunderstanding about the character of human knowledge. He considered questions about human rationality and human knowledge in almost everything that he wrote, but his most extended and detailed treatment of the subject appears in his essays on the distinction between ‘knowing-how’ and ‘knowing-that’.²⁰ In these various essays, but particularly in “Knowing How and Knowing That” and in the second chapter of *The Concept of Mind*, Ryle explored and criticized a particular understanding of human knowledge which he referred to as the doctrine of intellectualism. According to Ryle, the doctrine consisted of the following claims:

that intelligence is a special faculty, the exercises of which are those specific to internal acts which are called thinking; that practical activities merit their titles ‘intelligent’, ‘clever’, and the rest only because they are accompanied by some such internal acts of considering propositions (and particularly ‘regulative’ propositions);...[and that] doing things is never itself an exercise of intelligence, but is, at best, a process introduced and somehow steered by some ulterior act of theorizing.²¹

Intelligence, so conceived, is necessarily identified with occult operations which necessarily precede any judgment, decision, or action. According to Ryle, these operations were generally understood in terms of constructing rule-like formulations meant either to explain the operations of the external world or to provide guidance in acting in that external world. The intellectualist doctrine about intelligent activity or judgment raised a series of questions concerning the connection between its description of rational thought and action, and any possible human intellection. For example, when thinking about something, how does one decide which rule

²⁰ Ryle essay titled “Knowing How and Knowing That” was published in 1946, but he was already writing about such questions in an essay published in 1940 titled “Conscience and Moral Convictions.” A chapter in *The Concept of Mind* (1949) was devoted to the distinction between ‘knowing-how’ and ‘knowing-that’, and the distinction would continue to inform his work on human rationality in such later essays as “On Forgetting the Difference Between Right and Wrong (1958),” and “A Rational Animal (1962).” For all of these essays, see Ryle, *Collected Essays: 1929-1968*.

²¹ Ryle, “Knowing How and Knowing That,” 222.

amongst the many possible rules under consideration is relevant to what one is considering? Does one need a rule to decide how to decide which maxim to choose, and then a rule to decide how to decide which rule about which maxims to choose, and so forth; does one need a rule about how to apply the maxim and a further rule about how to choose the proper rule about how to apply the maxim? According to Ryle, the doctrine of intellectualism suffered from two different logical problems, the critique of which has together become known as Ryle's regress.²² Ryle noted that, "if the intelligence exhibited in any act, practical or theoretical, is to be credited to the occurrence of some ulterior act of intelligently considering regulative propositions, no intelligent act, practical or theoretical could ever begin."²³ That is, if a prerequisite of intelligent action is to have previously considered and decided on a set of correct rules for the particular situation at hand, the decision on which rules are appropriate must be decided by a previous intelligent consideration, *ad infinitum*. Without already possessing some sort of intelligence or knowledge about a particular way of making judgments about the proper or relevant rule-like statements to consider in any situation, there could be no entry into the realm of intelligent consideration at all. Further, Ryle claimed that:

if a deed, to be intelligent, has to be guided by the consideration of a regulative proposition, the gap between that consideration and the practical application of the regulation has to be bridged by some go-between process which cannot by the pre-supposed definition itself be an exercise of intelligence and cannot, by definition, be the resultant deed.²⁴

That is, if one must consult the rule-book in one's head before acting, then one must also have some other sort of faculty which is neither a rule-book nor an action that tells one how to apply the proper rule. This faculty then is divided between a rule-consideration aspect and an

²² In his critical examination of Ryle's regress, Fantl only addresses the first of the two regresses. Fantl, "Knowing How and Knowing That," 453-455.

²³ Ryle, "Knowing How and Knowing That," 223.

²⁴ Ryle, "Knowing How and Knowing That," 223.

execution aspect which would then need another faculty to reconcile these two, *ad infinitum*.²⁵

Ryle attributes both of the errors of intellectualism to category errors which operate in a similar fashion to what he called the doctrine of ‘ghost in the machine’.²⁶ Thus, acting intelligently or cunningly or bizarrely or stupidly is not the result of some occult phenomena occurring within the skull, but is an attribution of a certain capacity or incapacity in the successful completion of any activity, whether it is solving a mathematical problem, composing a sonata for flute and violin, climbing Mt. Fuji, or dealing with one’s in-laws.

Ryle’s solution to the intellectualist problem was to distinguish between two types of knowing. For Ryle, ‘knowing-that’ is connected largely to factual and theoretical matters. One knows (or does not) that Austin is the capital of Texas, or that the voting age in Brazil is sixteen, or that it’s against the rules in American football to tackle someone by the facemask, or that arson is illegal. ‘Knowledge-that’, then, is knowledge that is susceptible to being fully and explicitly articulated, either as a fact or set of facts, as a theorem or hypothesis, or as a rule or set of rules. This type of explicit knowledge is certainly a distinguishable type of knowledge. However, according to Ryle, another erroneous aspect of the intellectualist doctrine was its reductionist claim that all knowledge is ‘knowledge-that’ or explicit knowledge.

Ryle rejected the notion that ‘knowing-that’ is the only meaningful kind of knowledge and, instead, insisted that there exists a different kind of knowing which is not reducible to ‘knowing-that’. ‘Knowing-how’, according to Ryle, is not necessarily a capacity to answer a question correctly but to engage in a practice intelligently or skillfully or, sometimes, successfully. One knows how to play chess, to ride a bike, to participate in politics, or to speak a

²⁵ ***There are some similarities between Ryle’s second regress and Wittgenstein’s examination on the application of rules where he observes that the application of a rule cannot be reduced to rule following because such a reduction introduces its own regress.

²⁶ Ryle, *The Concept of Mind*, 15-18.

language. ‘Knowing-how’ or tacit knowledge is knowledge that is not susceptible to being fully and explicitly articulated, but consists in capacities, dispositions, and skills. Ryle wrote that:

When a person knows how to do things of a certain sort (e.g., make good jokes, conduct battles or behave at funerals), his knowledge is actualized or exercised in what he does. It is not exercised...in the propounding of propositions or in saying ‘Yes’ to those propounded by others. His intelligence is exhibited in deeds, not by internal or external dicta.²⁷

The fact that tacit knowledge cannot be made fully explicit does suggest something vague, mysterious, and perhaps even unphilosophical, and raises the question of how tacit knowledge manifests itself in thought, actions, and judgments. Ryle himself often seemed to conflate two different conceptions of tacit knowledge, claiming both that it is a capacity of some sort and that it is a disposition of some sort. Thus, he wrote that “knowing how to behave is exhibited by correct behavior, just as knowing how to cook is exhibited by palatable dishes,” while he also insisted that “knowing *how*...is a disposition [which is] is to be bound or liable to be in a particular state, or to undergo a particular change, when a particular condition is realized.”²⁸

If it is a capacity to act, then it seems to suggest that we ought to conclude that a professional football player with a serious knee injury no longer knows how to play football, which is false to experience and use. On the other hand, if it is a disposition to act in certain ways in certain situations, then successful activity or even full capacity is not central to tacit knowledge. Indeed, one of the primary distinctions between ‘knowing-how’ and ‘knowing-that’ is that the former is always a matter degree, while the latter is often a matter of all-or-nothing. One can sort of know how to snow ski, but one can’t really sort of know that the President of the United States serves a four year term.

²⁷ Ryle, “Knowing How and Knowing That,” 228.

²⁸ Ryle, “Knowing How and Knowing That,” 232, and *The Concept of Mind*, 46, 43.

Further, Ryle claimed that both the temporal and logical priority of these types of knowledge are erroneously reversed by intellectualists, and that it is ‘knowing-how’ that necessarily precedes ‘knowing-that’ both temporally and logically. For example, we learn our native language long before we are introduced into the rules of grammar and even longer before we learn instrumental rules on how to make an effective speech. Indeed, it is the case that, without ‘knowing-how’ to use our ‘knowledge-that’, our ‘knowledge-that’ is meager and fleeting. One might imagine a scenario in which a person was taught the alphabet of a foreign language (both the sounds of the letters and the pictorial representation) without being taught anything else about it. Of course, a person’s learning such an alphabet would have likely been impossible without that person having a prior capacity or disposition to know her way around a language, but, even with such prior ‘knowing-how’, it is likely that her retention of the memorized alphabet would be both meaningless to her and short-lived unless accompanied by an actual education in the alphabet’s language. Ryle referred to such rote memorization as “the museum-possession of knowledge” which he contrasted unfavorably with “the workshop-possession of knowledge.”²⁹ The possession of some sort of ‘know-how’ is the condition of effectively possessing any ‘knowledge-that’.

Indeed, Ryle claimed that the acquisition of ‘know-how’ is or ought to be the primary function of education. Ryle wrote that “we learn *how* by practice, schooled indeed by criticism and example, but often quite unaided by any lessons in...theory, [indeed] intelligent practice is not a step-child of theory. On the contrary, theorizing is one practice amongst others.”³⁰ Education, even at the highest level, takes place on the model of the apprentice/master relationship, and the skills, capacities, and dispositions of the master are not acquired by the

²⁹ Ryle, “Knowing How and Knowing That,” 235.

³⁰ Ryle, *The Concept of Mind*, 41, 26.

memorization of facts, but by the inculcation of practical ‘know-how’ by the master and the steady progress of the apprentice. Judgments of intelligent actions have more of the character of connoisseurship than measurement, and there are no foolproof methods of getting things right.

Ryle’s incisive observations about the logical absurdities of contemporary epistemology played a significant role in the rise of contemporary theories of social practices, and his often epigrammatic style served as an entertaining counter to the obscurity of continental philosophy and the sterility of analytic philosophy. He offered a muted and second-order sort of philosophy, which, while deflating the pretensions of philosophy and philosophers, also preserved a space for the examination of linguistic muddles, the distinctions between categories of practice and the sort of epistemological traditionalism that rejects ideological politics or ethics. His elucidation of tacit knowledge and his critique of intellectualism were exemplifications of his deflationary view of philosophy, and, unlike Oakeshott’s version of tacit knowledge, were not connected to any attempt to defend a grand philosophical system.

III. Oakeshott

Oakeshott’s critique of scientism, which he referred to as rationalism, and his elaboration of the distinction between practical and technical knowledge are quite similar to Ryle’s critical examination of intellectualism and his insistence on the distinction between ‘knowing-how’ and ‘knowing-that’. Oakeshott was a great admirer of Ryle’s work and wrote a very positive review of *The Concept of Mind*, and later in his life introduced Ryle when Ryle gave ‘The August Comte Memorial Lecture’ at the London School of Economics in 1962.³¹ However, Oakeshott’s

³¹ Oakeshott remarked that *The Concept of Mind* “is a piece of philosophical writing in the highest class [which] has something of the vitality and the power of standing on its own feet which belong to the philosophical classic.” Michael Oakeshott, “Review of *The Concept of Mind*,” *The Concept of a Philosophical Jurisprudence: Essays and Reviews 1926-51*, Luke O’Sullivan, ed. (Exeter, UK: Imprint Academic, 2007) 318. For an insightful account of the relationship between Ryle’s ‘knowing how’ and ‘knowing that’ and Oakeshott’s practical and technical knowledge, see Leslie Marsh, “Ryle and Oakeshott on the “Knowing-How/Knowing-That” Distinction,” *The Meanings of Michael Oakeshott’s Conservatism*, ed. Corey Abel (Exeter, UK: Imprint Academic, 2010) 143-160

distinction was connected to his epistemological pluralism in a more explicit way than was Ryle's. Oakeshott's modal distinctions between practical, scientific, historical, aesthetic, and philosophical knowledge informed his critique of scientism, and also distinguished his conception of category errors from Ryle's. His first discussion of practical knowledge took place in *Experience and Its Modes*, the only one of his works which is expressly idealist in its metaphysical commitments. However, his most extensive treatment of practical knowledge occurred in the essays which were eventually collected in *Rationalism in Politics*.

In *Experience and Its Modes*, Oakeshott considered practical activity as modally distinct from the worlds of history and science, but still maintained that it was, like history and science, philosophically incoherent. His treatment of practical knowledge in the work hinted at some of the arguments that he would make about tacit knowledge in his later essays, but were more critical than constructive. However, from the 1940s to the 1960s, Oakeshott wrote a series of essays which offered both a sustained critique of what he called modern rationalism, and provided his account of tacit knowledge, which he referred to as practical knowledge. Oakeshott located this account of tacit knowledge within a broader concept of traditional activity, which, according to Oakeshott, provides the spring from which projects, purposes, and values emerge. Oakeshott's understanding of traditional activity also entailed that tacit or practical knowledge was not restricted to the world of practice, but, instead, played a central role in both our moral and prudential activities and our explanatory undertakings. However, like Ryle, Oakeshott wavered between merely distinguishing between practical and technical knowledge and reducing technical knowledge to a parasitic offspring of practical knowledge. Oakeshott's version of tacit knowledge is best understood as an attempt to distinguish between tacit and explicit knowledge while maintaining that

tacit knowledge is a necessary condition for the existence of explicit knowledge, with the latter in many cases approaching the character of nescience.

In his most famous essay, “Rationalism in Politics,” Oakeshott provided a potted historical account of the rise of scientism, or as he called it, rationalism, in western philosophy and its spread to other activities such as religion, art, morality, and politics.³² It was, in fact, the infection of practical life by scientism that exercised Oakeshott’s intellectual imagination far more than its philosophical inadequacy. However, the critique of scientism afforded him the opportunity to offer a version of tacit knowledge which bears a remarkable similarity to Ryle’s account of ‘knowing-how’. The essay was first published in 1947, while Ryle’s essay titled “Knowing How and Knowing That” was published a year earlier in 1946, so it is quite likely that each formulated his own version of tacit knowledge independently from the other.

In the essay, Oakeshott claimed that contemporary thought is dominated by a rationalist or scientific disposition which denies the character of knowledge to anything other than its particular version of sovereign reason. According to Oakeshott’s characterization, the Rationalist is skeptical, yet optimistic, and tends to be well-trained instead of well-educated. The Rationalist rejects the value of experience and denies the possibility that unexamined tradition holds any real value, instead insisting that practical reason consists of the testing of the rationality of institutions, and the administration of rational programs. Rationalists identify tradition with changelessness because they do not understand any change but planned self-conscious change. They substitute an ideology, an abridgment of tradition, for tradition itself. Human conduct is considered to consist of problem solving, and the proper analogy of this conduct is that of an engineer solving a series of unconnected

³² I use the terms ‘scientism’ and ‘rationalism’ interchangeably. Oakeshott admitted that he wasn’t offering an authentic academic history of rationalism, but instead a “foreshorten[ed]...account.” Michael Oakeshott, “Rationalism in Politics,” *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays: New and Expanded Edition* (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Press, 1991) 18.

crises. Oakeshott claimed that, here, human “activity is recognized as the imposition of a uniform perfection upon human conduct.”³³

However, Oakeshott’s primary objection to this sort of scientism was neither practical nor historical, but epistemological. Oakeshott suggested that there are two types of knowledge, practical and technical, which, though not completely separable, are distinguishable. He maintained that technical knowledge “is susceptible of precise formulation” in rules or recipes or theorems or factual propositions, while practical or traditional knowledge “exists only in use, is not reflective, and cannot be formulated in rules.”³⁴ These two types of knowledge are involved in every human activity, even scientific and historical research. Technical knowledge is the knowledge of the book, and its formulation and presentation appear to give it the qualities of completeness and certainty. Conversely, practical knowledge, because it is manifested only in activity itself and resists reduction, appears imprecise and uncertain. To use one of Oakeshott’s favorite examples, a person who is capable of reading can memorize the recipes in a cookbook and thus know a great deal of facts about such recipes, but the skills and judgments of an experienced chef cannot be reduced to a set of explicitly stated rules, instrumental or otherwise.

Like Ryle’s critique of intellectualism, Oakeshott’s initial critique of rationalism rested on the claim that the Rationalist not only asserted the superiority of technical knowledge but also completely denied the validity of traditional knowledge.³⁵ Oakeshott insisted the opposite, however, arguing that practical and technical knowledge are distinguishable types of knowledge and that, contrary to the Rationalist claim, it is practical knowledge which is logically and temporally

³³ Oakeshott, “Rationalism in Politics,” 10.

³⁴ Oakeshott, “Rationalism in Politics,” 12.

³⁵ As noted above, the logical positivism of the Vienna School and A.J. Ayer represents a prominent example of the type of thinking which Oakeshott characterizes as rationalism. Both tautologies and empirically verifiable propositions would be examples of technical knowledge. See A.J. Ayer, *Language, Truth, and Logic* (New York: Dover, 1952) 59-70 and 87-101.

prior to technical knowledge. Indeed, technical knowledge, being an abstraction from an already existing body of practical knowledge, is parasitic on such knowledge. For example, it is quite clear both historically and for the reasons posited in Ryle's first regress, that, in before the rules of grammar of any language can be formulated, there must first exist the actual practice of the language itself, and the practice of language, in turn, cannot be merely reduced to its grammar.

Oakeshott's initial account of tacit knowledge seemed to suggest that practical knowledge and technical knowledge are distinct, though not completely separable, with the latter being an abstraction from the former. However, Oakeshott didn't really make it clear what sort of epistemological status technical knowledge really had, other than being some sort of crib for beginners. In fact, Oakeshott claimed that practical and technical knowledge "are the twin components involved in every concrete activity...[N]owhere...can technical knowledge be separated from practical knowledge, and nowhere can they be considered identical with one another or able to take the place of one another."³⁶ This suggests that technical knowledge is in some way or another a necessary complement to practical knowledge, though Oakeshott's examples in the essay (cooking, painting, writing a poem, etc.) only served to defend his claim that practical knowledge is an aspect of every human activity and did not really refer at all to the necessity of having technical knowledge in order to engage in such activities.³⁷

Oakeshott offered a clearer account of the nature of tacit knowledge in his essay "Rational Conduct," while offering another critique of scientism. Like Ryle, Oakeshott associated the scientific doctrine that he was attacking with an erroneous conception of mind. Oakeshott claimed

³⁶ Oakeshott, "Rationalism in Politics," 12, 13.

³⁷ However, Oakeshott also argued that technical knowledge in its political form, as ideology, is only useful to those with almost no knowledge at all. He noted that ideology, which is an abstraction from the practical knowledge of a political tradition, offers "a magic technique of politics which will remove the handicap of [the Rationalist's] lack of political education." Oakeshott, "Rationalism in Politics," 28.

that scientism is characterized by its concern with the purposive, premeditated formulation of the ends of human activity, which also entails the purposive, premeditated formulation of the means to those ends. Thus, according to Oakeshott, scientism maintains that “the ‘rationality’ of conduct...springs from something that we do *before* we act; and activity is ‘rational’ on account of it being generated in a certain manner.”³⁸ The presupposition which constitutes this account of rationality is that individuals have an independent faculty, reason, which exists externally to the objects of reason. Oakeshott noted that “what needs to be assumed is the mind as a neutral instrument, as a piece of apparatus...and ‘rational’ conduct springs from the exercise of it.”³⁹ Mind is considered to be not only separable, but completely separate from the contents of mind. Human activity, here, is believed to be composed of articulate and discrete problems, purposes, and actions.

Oakeshott, like Ryle, rejected such a separation of mind and its objects, and argued that the separation mistakes an abstract distinction for an absolute division. Instead, he argued that the mind “is nothing more than hypostatized activity...[Mind] is the offspring of knowledge and activity,...[and is] composed entirely of thoughts.”⁴⁰ Mind, for Oakeshott, is constituted by thought, judgment, and activity, which are distinguishable but not separable from each other. Here, Oakeshott reiterated in shortened form his conclusions about the nature of experience found in *Experience and Its Modes*. Activity does not spring from a premeditation of ends and means accomplished after a purge of the mind. The consideration of principles, ideals, and ends is a possibility which grows out of conduct itself. Reflection necessarily follows activity. Oakeshott maintained that “doing anything both depends upon and exhibits knowing how to do it; and though part (but never the whole) of knowing how to do it can subsequently be reduced to knowledge in the

³⁸ Michael Oakeshott, “Rational Conduct,” *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* (Indianapolis: Liberty Press, 1991) 104.

³⁹ Oakeshott, “Rational Conduct,” 107.

⁴⁰ Oakeshott, “Rational Conduct,” 109.

form of propositions..., these propositions are neither the spring of the activity nor are they in any direct sense regulative of the activity.”⁴¹ It is clear that ‘knowing-how’ or practical knowledge not only precedes technical or propositional knowledge, but that the latter is parasitic on the former. Indeed, it is unclear what value, if any, Oakeshott placed on propositional knowledge.

For Oakeshott, propositional knowledge is the equivalent of what he earlier called technical knowledge and consists of rules, theorems, hypotheses, and facts which have been abstracted from the great variety of more or less concrete human practices. One of the doctrines of scientism is that the only authentic knowledge is propositional knowledge and that consideration of such propositions provides human beings with the appropriate questions and answers concerning rational action. However, Oakeshott claimed that “it is the activity itself which defines the questions as well as the manner in which they are answered.”⁴² Thus, ‘know-how’ or tacit knowledge arises from engaging in specific human practices, and knowing-how-to-get-along within such practices involves an immersion in the practice itself. An individual involved in any practice, whether it is playing the mandolin, building a woodshed, or conducting an experiment, understands a particular endeavor because of a commitment to and participation in the skills and expertise associated with that particular activity. Human beings are always and everywhere immersed in practices which existed before they were born and which condition the choices they make, which in turn reconstitute the practice itself. A chef doesn’t become a chef by reading a cook book; a violinist doesn’t learn how to play the violin by reading a music book; and an historian doesn’t become an historian by looking at history books. Each achieves her tacit knowledge of how to do these things by participating in the practice of cooking, violin-playing, and historical research. Projects are not formulated externally without knowledge of any particular practice, but are conditioned by

⁴¹ Oakeshott, “Rational Conduct,” 110.

⁴² Oakeshott, “Rational Conduct,” 118.

traditions of activity. Problems present themselves only within the context of a particular activity. Indeed, rationality, properly understood, is an internal quality of any traditional activity. The most authentic kind of human knowledge is the practical knowledge of knowing how to do things, like ride a bike, develop a scientific hypothesis, play the piano, recognize a decent argument, or write a sonnet. All human activity occurs within existing traditions of behavior, and individuals become conversant in these different idioms of activity through engaging in that activity. Thus, as Oakeshott argued, scientists, historians, poets, and philosophers all participate in traditional activities. The character of the explanatory languages of history, science, and philosophy differs in significant ways from the character of aesthetic expression and practical action, but all involve practical or tacit knowledge and their persistence depends upon individuals who know how to engage in them.

Oakeshott was also quite clear about how such practical knowledge is obtained. Learning is not concerned with the memorization of explicit or technical knowledge, but instead involves becoming fluent in a practice. Oakeshott observed that “the education by means of which we acquire habits of...behavior is not only coeval with conscious life, but it is carried on, in practice and observation without pause in every moment of our waking life...; what is begun as imitation continues as selective conformity to a rich variety of customary behavior.”⁴³ Thus, human beings are never without such tacit knowledge, and never cease to acquire novel ways of knowing how to do things. Oakeshott claimed that “learning is the comprehensive engagement in which we come to know ourselves and the world around us. It is a paradoxical activity: it is doing and submitting at the same time.”⁴⁴ Such knowledge is not a mystical or collective possession, but

⁴³ Michael Oakeshott, “The Tower of Babel,” *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* (Indianapolis: Liberty Press, 1991) 469.

⁴⁴ Michael Oakeshott, “Learning and Teaching,” *The Voice of Liberal Learning* (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Press, 2001) 35.

instead resides in an individual's capacity to engage in human practices in meaningful and intelligible ways. According to Oakeshott, "all we can be said to know constitutes a manifold of different "abilities," different amounts of knowledge being represented in different degrees of ability, and every complex ability being a manifold of simpler abilities."⁴⁵ These abilities inhere in individuals and they are learned from individuals, and such abilities manifest themselves in the capacity for intelligent judgment and action. And judgment, for Oakeshott, is "the tacit or implicit component of knowledge, the ingredient which is not merely unspecified in propositions but is unspecifiable in propositions. It is the component of knowledge which does not appear in the form of rules and which, therefore, cannot be resolved into information."⁴⁶

Conclusion

Oakeshott connected his perceptive account of tacit knowledge with a larger conception of modally distinct worlds of discourse, and, in this way, his account differed from Ryle's. However, both thinkers contributed to the re-emergence of a kind of traditionalist and pluralist epistemology which rejects the reductionism of scientism and acknowledges the multitudinous ways in which human beings know things. For both writers, authentic knowledge always involves a capacity which cannot be reduced to articulable explicit propositions. Knowledge depends upon being capable of using it in some way.

The philosophical significance of Ryle's and Oakeshott's conclusions is quite far-reaching. The acceptance of the priority of tacit knowledge involves the rejection of philosophical accounts of morality, politics, and the law which reduce them to a set of rule-like statements and a similar rejection of the reductionist accounts of epistemology. Such an

⁴⁵ Oakeshott, "Learning and Teaching," 44.

⁴⁶ Oakeshott, "Learning and Teaching," 49.

acceptance also offers an avenue through which metaphysics, ontology, and aesthetics can be conceived once again as meaningful philosophical endeavors.