

Explanation to Intellectual Action and Regress Argument¹

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In this article, we point out the problem on Stanley and Williamson's reconstruction of Ryle's regress argument to refute their critique toward Ryle's argument. We identify the object of Ryle's criticism through analysing some intellectualisms which try to solve the regress argument. To reconcile the contradiction of intellectualism and anti-intellectualism, we propose a moderate version of intellectualism – Intellectual Explanation Thesis – which does not lead to infinite regress while maintains the necessary connection between knowledge-how and knowledge-that. This alternative thesis introduces a criterion for judging whether an action is intellectual or not, therefore offers a new perspective on the complex relationship between intellectual action and knowledge.

Keywords: Ryle, intellectualism, regress argument, knowledge-that, knowledge-how, Intellectual Explanation Thesis

INTRODUCTION

The mind–body problem stands as a core issue in the field of philosophy of mind, and the discussion that it triggers has consistently attracted much attention. In his book *The Concept of Mind*, Gilbert Ryle tries to refute the 'Official Doctrine' of the mind-body problem which hails chiefly from Descartes. According to the Official Doctrine, every human being has both a body and a mind. Human bodies 'are in space and are subject to the mechanical laws' and 'inspected', whereas 'minds are not in space, nor are their operations subject to mechanical laws. The workings of one mind are not witnessable' (Ryle 1949: 1–5). Ryle wants to prove that the Official Doctrine is a 'category-mistake' by contradicting intellectualism (ibid: 16).

Ryle points out that people generally have reached on consensus that, first, there is a difference between human activities and mechanical activities, and second, intellectual operations are the core of mental conduct. On the contrary, intellectualist doctrine tries to define intelligence in terms of the apprehension of truths, instead of defining the apprehension of truths in terms of intelligence. It is intrinsically a private operation (Ryle 1949). The imputation of 'knowing how' to 'knowing that' is one reflection of this fact.

According to Ryle's point, 'knowing how' is for someone to know how to perform tasks; 'knowing that' is for someone to know certain standards or certain criteria. We are much

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more concerned with ‘knowing how’ than with ‘knowing that’ when we talk about one’s intellectual operations. Meanwhile, the intellectualist imputes knowing how to knowing that. It follows that the operation which is characterised as intelligent must be preceded by an intellectual acknowledgment of these rules or criteria (*ibid*).

In order to defend intellectualism, Jason Stanley and Timothy Williamson (2001) stage a reconstruction of Ryle’s argument. They point out that the regress in Ryle’s argument is applicable only for intentional actions, and thus is not enough to threaten intellectualism. However, their reconstruction of Ryle’s position and criticism are fairly problematic.

Scholars, including Brian Weatherson (2016) and Will Small (2017), have pointed out that apart from the intellectualism defended by Stanley and Williamson, there are other intellectualist positions, which focus on the close connection between knowing that and knowing how without committing to the simplistic equation of two. In this sense, not all varieties of intellectualism will be refuted by Ryle. But they do not specifically explain what such varieties of intellectualism are like, how they judge what are or are not intellectual operations, and in what sense a position can be deemed intellectualist.

This work has been carried out by Carlotta Pavese (2021). She points out that knowing that only needs to be the evidence for knowing how, and this will suffice to avoid infinite regress. Nevertheless, Pavese does not explain how knowing how provides evidence for knowing that, or how this thesis judges what is or is not an intellectual operation.

The purpose of this article is to clarify and advance these often rather confusing debates and outline a moderate version of intellectualism to reconcile the conflict between intellectualism and anti-intellectualism. In Section 2, we demonstrate the invalidation of the refutation of Stanley–Williamson to regress argument by analysing their reconstruction of Ryle’s regress argument. We clarify the object of Ryle’s criticism through analysing the problems which lie in some attempt to solve the regress argument. In Section 3, we offer a new intellectualism – what we call the Intellectual Explanation Thesis, which is also partly inspired by Pavese’s work. The Intellectual Explanation Thesis is a moderate version of intellectualism which has the following characteristics: 1) it diverges from the Stanley–Williamson ‘radical version’ of intellectualism, but conforms to those two thinkers’ emphasis for intentionality in intellectual actions; 2) it provides a solution to escape from the infinite regress presented in previous versions of intellectualism; 3) it integrates with Ryle’s explanation on intellectual operations and offers a framework that reconciles divergent perspectives on the nature of intellectual performances.

RYLE’S VICIOUS REGRESS ARGUMENT

The Reconstruction and Refutation of Stanley–Williamson

Stanley and Williamson consider that Ryle’s argument should include the following premises:²

Action Premise (AP): If one Φ s, one employs knowledge how to Φ .

Contemplation Premise (CP): If one employs knowledge that p , one contemplates the proposition that p .

² The names of the following three theses came from Cath (2013); Stanley and Williamson do not name them in their essay.

At the same time, intellectualists hold the following view:

Simple Identity Thesis (SI): To know how to Φ is to know that p (for some relevant proposition p concerning a way to Φ).

The above three propositions constitute 'infinite regress':

Suppose that one Φ s. By AP, one employs the knowledge how to Φ . By SI, he knows that p . So, by CP, he contemplates the proposition that p . Since contemplation of the proposition that p is an act, we can reapply AP, to obtain the conclusion that he knows the knowledge how to contemplate the position that p Since the regress is unacceptable and both AP and CP are true, SI and therefore the intellectualism based on it would be false.

This is the regress argument that Stanley and Williamson attribute to Ryle. Given this reconstruction, they express the disapproval of Ryle's criticism.

Firstly, they hold that AP can be true only when an action Φ is intentional. For example, when someone is digesting food, we do not claim that he is well informed of the knowledge-how to digest. Therefore, AP is false and should be rectified as in the following:

Intentional Action Premise (AP-Intentional): If one Φ s intentionally, one employs knowledge how to Φ .

Secondly, to counter CP, they cite the example given by Carl Ginet: 'one can get the door open by turning the knob and pushing it by performing that operation quite automatically ... without formulating that proposition or any other relevant proposition' (Ginet 1975: 7). It means that one does not contemplate the proposition of that knowledge when he employs the knowledge, while CP means that we certainly think about knowledge-that before we employ it. Therefore, this instance proves that CP is false.

Whether AP-Intentional is true or not, the Stanley-Williamson reconstruction itself is problematic. On the one hand, Ryle would not agree on AP, for he does not believe that all actions indicate that a relevant actor has relevant knowledge-how. In the instance given by Ryle, only the clown who trips and tumbles on purpose in the performance has the knowledge-how to trip (Ryle 1949). On the other hand, Ryle does not think that intellectualists will agree on AP, either. In fact, Ryle supports the version of intellectualism that confines AP to intellectual actions:

Intellectual Action Premise (AP-Intellectual): If one Φ s intellectually, one employs knowledge how to Φ .

Stanley and Williamson commit the strawman fallacy in their refutation of AP. Thus, even if this intentional version of the regress argument does not threaten SI, it does not mean that Ryle's regress argument is invalid. From the argumentative perspective, Stanley and Williamson give way too early in their discussion of the truth and falsity of CP. They should have responded head-on to the objection that 'CP always exists, but sometimes unintentionally', and further have proved CP false. The latter will fail to prove SI false insofar its two premises will not both stand. However, because Stanley and Williamson do not radically contradict CP, and their criticism of AP is based on a misunderstanding of Ryle, their criticism of regress argument is invalid. It is still possible for SI to be jeopardised by the regress argument.

Moreover, a question has been skipped over in the discussion above: is AP-Intentional a reasonable view? How does it relate to AP-Intellectual supported by Ryle? After all, although AP-Intentional is an outcome of Stanley and Williamson's strawman fallacy, this does not mean that AP-Intentional itself is meaningless. This question will be discussed later.

The Attempt to Solve the 'Regress Argument'

Many scholars' discussions of the 'regress argument' are based on the Stanley–Williamson work. It is more in line with Ryle's original intention to limit AP through intellectual actions: AP-Intellectual, CP and SI.

With respect to this modified reconstruction, a common idea is that Ryle does not necessarily think that one needs to 'contemplate' a corresponding proposition before he employs knowledge-that. For example, Yuri Cath (2013) argues that, compared with CP, Ryle may have been more inclined to the following view:

Employment Premise (EP): If one employs knowledge that *p*, one employs knowledge how to employ one's knowledge that *p*.

However, even if EP takes the place of CP, the threat of the regress argument to intellectualism remains. Therefore, if intellectualists wish to escape infinite regress, they need to explain that the Intellectual Trigger Premise therein is not true in the following abstract version of the regress argument:

AP-Intellectual

Intellectual Trigger Premise (TP): If one employs knowledge that *p*, one Φ s intellectually.

SI

In fact, the Stanley–Williamson refutation of CP can boil down to a critique of TP. Just as they point out through the door-opening case, on the one hand, in order to employ the 'knowledge-that' (namely that 'one can get the door open by turning the knob'), a triggering action (i.e. the contemplating of the proposition that 'one can get the door open by turning the knob') may be unconscious; because an unconscious action cannot be regarded as intellectual, no infinite regress will occur.³ On the other hand, the triggering action of contemplating that 'one can get the door open by turning the knob' may not even occur, and the said 'regress' naturally stops. Then TP will be false. Since Ryle would not necessarily agree on CP and since the Stanley–Williamson contradiction of CP is flawed, the argument above is still far from being a successful refutation.

What else then can intellectualists attempt to escape infinite regress? Some scholars point out that those who do not necessarily subscribe to SI can also avoid infinite regress. For example, Weatherson (2016) enumerates five different versions of intellectualism, only one of which would deem SI true. On the one hand, intellectualists can argue that knowledge-how is constituted or caused by knowledge-that; on the other hand, they can claim that knowledge-how need not 'always' but merely 'often' be constituted or caused by knowledge-that. These two pairs of views can recombinantly result in four intellectualist arguments, in which two weak intellectualisms are as the following:

Weak Constitutional Intellectualism: The possession of an intellectual skill is, often, constituted by a piece of knowledge.

Weak Causal Intellectualism: The possession of an intellectual skill is, often, caused by the possession of a piece of knowledge.

According to Weatherson, the two weak intellectualisms do not suggest that knowledge-how is always connected to knowledge-that. Therefore, before a performance that reflects

³ Here it mainly refers to the aforementioned Stanley–Williamson contradiction of the idea that 'the action of contemplation may be unconscious'.

knowledge-how, there is not necessarily a performance reflecting knowledge-that, thus the regress will not happen. Besides, Weatherson admits that the other two intellectualisms face other sharp criticisms even though escaping from the infinite regress. However, the felicitous of the two weak intellectualisms is enough to compete with Ryle's view.

Doubts About Weatherson's Thesis

Weatherson emphasises the tenability of the regress argument against SI and does not discuss these two intellectualisms in more detail. Precisely for this reason, his thesis may likewise be susceptible to two critiques.

The first critique is that it is meaningless to discuss an intellectualism different from SI when considering the effectiveness of the regress argument against intellectualism. Here we defend Weatherson's view from the following three points.

First of all, with respect to the intention of Ryle's argument, he does not regard SI as the only object of his criticism. The intellectualists whom Ryle wants to criticise are those who equate knowledge-how with knowledge-that and incorporate the application of criteria into intelligent performance. Therefore, the intellectualists who subscribe to SI will certainly be the target of Ryle's criticism. But this does not mean that the targets of his criticism are limited to the intellectualists who agree on SI.

Second, from the perspective of argumentative validity, the regress argument does not threaten SI alone. As mentioned by Small (2017), infinite regress is fundamentally rooted in the position that intelligent behaviour is appropriately guided by another intelligent performance but not just in the truth of SI.

And third, even if Ryle merely attempts to refute SI, with its argumentative validity limited, intellectualists would be entirely able to argue that they do not agree with SI, and that therefore the regress argument could not constitute a substantive criticism of intellectualists.

In the light of the discussion above, an inquiry into how intellectualism differs from SI is both necessary and significant for the evaluation of the regress argument.

Some may still argue that the two weak versions of intellectualism which merely use the term 'often' to link knowledge-how with knowledge-that are too weak and too broad to be considered as the 'aim' of intellectualists. It is also exactly the question that we try to ask of Weatherson. Specifically, firstly, these two intellectualist arguments do not prove the existence of any intrinsic, necessary connection between knowledge-how and knowledge-that, the connection of which as such is the very core of intellectualism. Secondly, these two arguments can merely indicate the nature that intellectual actions 'often' have; therefore, intellectualists need to further explain how these two intellectualist arguments can be used to determine whether an action is intellectual. From this point of view, Weatherson's argument is incomplete.

MODERATE INTELLECTUALISM

The Intellectual Explanation Thesis

Carlotta Pavese (2021) points out the close connection between knowledge-how and knowledge-that. An intelligent action might manifest one's knowledge-how in the case that it is guided by another action manifesting one's knowledge-that. On this reading, the regress is triggered. However, an intelligent action can also manifest knowledge-that by providing evidence for that knowledge-how in an epistemic sense. For example, the rings on a tree provide

evidence for the tree's age but are not guided by its age. Crucially, the regress does not arise in the epistemic sense of manifestation.⁴

Nevertheless, although this view does not lead to infinite regress, the intellectualists also need to explain the specific way in which knowledge-that serves as evidence for an intellectual performance. Indeed, Pavese's 'rings on a tree' have explained how a certain thing serves as evidence for another, though the former does not cause the latter. But this explanation cannot be used to judge whether a specific action is intellectual. The following is our attempt to do so:

Intellectual Explanation Thesis (IE): For a performance Φ , if one Φ s intelligently, one can explain Φ by some proposition p .

First, in the case of the clown given by Ryle, if we think that the clown's tumbles are an intellectual performance, we will believe that he can explain that performance. For example, if the clown's answer is 'That was my plan, I planned to make the audience laugh with a sudden tumble' and so forth, his tumbles will be considered an 'intellectual performance'. But if the clown cannot give any excuse, his tumbles will have nothing to do with intelligence at all (Ryle 1949).

A question about the above thesis may arise: In everyday life, we do not always ask others why or how they act and then judge whether they are acting intellectually. To this question, it needs to be clarified that IE only requires that an actor 'be able to' explain his performance, not that he 'actually' explains it. To borrow Ryle's view and terminology, what IE must test is just 'hypothetical and semi-hypothetical propositions' guided by the modal word 'can', that is, whether an actor 'can' give a proper explanation for his performance. Therefore, like Ryle, it requires that the judgement of whether an action is intellectual or not goes 'beyond the performance itself', and does not merely focus on the explanation of whether the action has been performed (see Ryle 1949: 33–34).

On the other hand, like Ryle's thesis, the IE judgment at most draws a distinction between knowledge-how and knowledge-that and emphasises the significance of the latter to the former. Thus, although IE can be viewed as an intellectualist thesis, it is not directly related to the 'Official Doctrine,' and thus is not necessarily refuted by Ryle's argument.

The Validity of Regress Argument in Intellectual Explanation Thesis

If this moderate version of intellectualism is feasible, how shall we evaluate the validity of the regress argument? In Small's work (2017), Ryle is not an outright anti-intellectualist. Now that Ryle need not be seen as criticising all intellectualists, the existence of moderate intellectualism does not mean that his regress argument is invalid. It reconciles the contradiction between 'radical intellectualism' and 'radical anti-intellectualism', and further clarifies the limit of the validity of regress argument.

One may ask in what sense this moderate intellectualism can be called intellectualism. It sticks to the universal connection between knowledge-that and knowledge-how and requires a judgment on whether an actor 'would' 'be able' to do something in judging whether an action is intellectual. Can it then be regarded as a 'special case' of Ryle's thesis?

It does make sense at first glance to treat it as a special case of Ryle's thesis especially when using concrete examples to show whether an action is intellectual. For example, to

⁴ See Pavese (2021); this particular argument is adapted from Pavese's original but keeps the core idea.

access whether a soldier hitting a bull's eye is due to luck or skill, Ryle suggests to consider various specific facts including the soldier's explanations or excuses (Ryle 1949: 33).

However, these are not what an actor 'would' and 'can' do, rather the objects Ryle directly observes. Furthermore, what Ryle is even more concerned with is whether an actor under other similar conditions 'will' achieve the same success. The bullets gradually approaching the bull's eye, an actor's advice to his neighbour, the subsequent excuses, and so forth, all provide evidence for the actor's next success (ibid). On the contrary, what the advocates of a moderate intellectualism are concerned with is whether an actor 'will' explain his success. The objects that they observe can be exactly the same as Ryle's, that is, the bullets, the advice, the excuses, etc., but all these are intended in the end to prove that an actor 'can' properly explain his actions. Therefore, they have totally different aims, and neither of them can be viewed as a subset or special case of the other.

We hold that the moderate intellectualism is a development of Ryle's thesis rather than a special case of the latter: the former puts forward the necessary conditions for intellectual performance, that is, if an actor cannot explain his performance properly, it will be impossible for this action to be considered an intellectual one.

Thus, although this intellectualism is not greatly different from Ryle's thesis in explaining what an intellectual performance 'is', it gives a more convenient and effective criterion in what an intellectual performance is 'not'. Because this criterion undoubtedly emphasises the necessity of knowledge-that, it seems reasonable to say that it is a 'moderate' intellectualism in a 'broad' sense, rather than a 'radical' one in a 'narrow' sense.

Intellectual Explanation in Compliance with 'Intentional Limit'

IE is compatible not only with Ryle's thesis, but also with the 'intentional limit' of Stanley-Williamson upon AP. The following thesis may be seen as a direct motive for the 'intentional limit' on AP:

Intellectual-Intentional Action Thesis (IIA): For a performance Φ , if one Φ s intelligently, one Φ s intentionally.

At the same time, many scholars today believe that the following proposition is true:⁵

Knowledge That-Intentional Action Thesis (KTIA): For a performance Φ , if one Φ s intentionally, one has the knowledge-that of Φ .

Putting these two propositions together, we get the following:

Knowledge That-Intellectual Action Thesis: For a performance Φ , if one Φ s intelligently, one has the knowledge-that of Φ .

And the following idea is thus reasonable:

Knowledge That-Explanation Thesis (KTE): For a performance Φ , if one has the knowledge-that of Φ , one can explain Φ by some proposition p .

The Intellectual Explanation Thesis (IE) can be derived from two theses above.

⁵ For example, Andrew Gibbons (2001); also see Carlotta Pavese (2021) etc.

One will naturally agree with IE if he approves both IIA and KTIA.⁶ Because IE and Ryle's explanation for intellectual performance have similar destinations in spite of their differences, one can see that although Stanley–Williamson 'intentional limit' may not be necessarily derived from Ryle's 'limit to intellectual performance', the intentionality that it emphasises is a necessary characteristic for intellectual performance.

However, some scholars have also questioned IIA, i.e. the rationality in the 'motive' of AP. The following are the criticisms and our responses.

One criticism comes from Weatherson, who states that IIA is questionable because even an unintentional action can be judged to be intellectual or unintellectual. For example, 'forgetting a friend's birthday' is unintentional, and at the same time, it is unintellectual (Weatherson 2016; Smith 2005).

However, this example is not necessarily reasonable. At least, Weatherson should explain what differences there are between the forgetting of a friend's birthday and the forgetting of other things that people have been 'accustomed' to, and why the former is considered unintellectual but the latter often a 'natural phenomenon' that does not have to be intellectual or unintellectual. We hold that the difference between these two cases is merely that 'forgetting a friend's birthday' sets up a scenario for moral judgment. We usually think that forgetting a friend's birthday is inappropriate or improper, but do not believe that the action of forgetting itself should be judged as good or bad. In fact, all the examples given above are concerned only with the acts or skills themselves, but not with their moral worth. Therefore, the counterargument from Weatherson has confused the evaluation of intellectuality with moral judgement.

The other major criticism is voiced by scholars including Alva Noë. They state that IIA is misleading, and that it is more about why knowledge-how can 'attribute to' a certain person. However, the question raised by Ryle is how knowledge-how is 'constituted' (Noë 2005).

We hold a point precisely opposite to that of Noë: IIA misleads merely in reconstructing the regress argument, and is positive in discussing the constitution of intelligence. Indeed, in the reconstruction of the regress argument, the limit given by many scholars including Stanley and Williamson (and also Noë) is not a direct reflection of Ryle's intention, but more of their own interpretation of intellectual actions, which points out the necessary conditions that should be contained in intellectual performance. In this sense, the position held by Stanley and Williamson, and others does seem to be 'misleading'.

But it absolutely does not mean that in the case of discussing the constitution of knowledge-how, the Stanley–Williamson limit does not deserve any consideration. In fact, IIA has imposed its requirement upon the criteria for the explanation and judgment of intellectual performance: it should be able to reflect the sense in which an intellectual action can be attributed to an actor. Such a requirement is natural and reasonable. Ryle's question about the said constitution still needs to be construed as concerning the difference between intellectual and non-intellectual, and intentional and non-intentional, actions. And if there is no reason to attribute knowledge-how to some people, it is strange to say that some people 'have' 'knowledge-how'. IE meets the requirement put forward by IIA since it can be naturally derived from the latter.

⁶ Because the Knowledge That-Explanation Thesis (KTE) seems to be obvious, it is skipped over here.

CONCLUSIONS

In this article, we have inquired into the limitations of Ryle's objection to intellectualism through his regress argument. Stanley and Williamson reconstruct this argument and point out the problems in it, but the Stanley–Williamson's work commits a strawman fallacy. In order to escape infinite regress, Weatherston put forward two forms of weak intellectualism different from SI. However, they fail to explain the necessary connection between knowledge-that and intellectual actions, and therefore cannot be included within the sphere of intellectualism. Pavese reconstructs the necessary connection between knowledge-how and knowledge-that, but does not point out the difference between this view and SI, and it is difficult to use this view to judge whether a specific action is intellectual.

Based on Pavese's view, we construct a moderate intellectualism, using the Intellectual Explanation Thesis to further explain the relationship between knowledge-how and knowledge-that. While escaping infinite regress, this moderate version of intellectualism depicts the necessary connection between knowledge-how and knowledge-that and emphasises the necessity of knowledge-that for intellectual performance. Providing a specific scheme for the judgment of whether an action is intellectual, it can explain how an intellectual action can be attributed to an actor, and does not rely on or lead to the 'Official Doctrine' of mind–body dichotomy. It makes clear the limits of the regress argument, reconciles the contradiction between 'radical intellectualism' and 'radical anti-intellectualism,' and clarifies the relationship between intellectualism and the Official Doctrine. By doing so, the Intellectual Explanation Thesis provides a fuller explanation for the inherent relationship between knowing how and knowing that.

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Intelektualaus veiksmo ir regreso argumento paaiškinimas

Santrauka

Šiame straipsnyje atkreipiame dėmesį į problemą, susijusią su J. Stanley'io ir T. Williamsono Ryle'o regreso argumento rekonstrukcija, kad paneigtume jų kritiką Ryle'o argumento atžvilgiu. Ryle'o kritikos objektą nustatome analizuodami kai kuriuos intelektualizmus, kurie bando išspręsti regreso argumentą. Norėdami suderinti intelektualizmo ir antiintelektualizmo prieštarą, siūlome nuosaičiau intelektualizmo versiją – intelektualinio paaiškinimo tezę, kuri nesukelia begalinio regreso ir išlaiko būtiną ryšį tarp „žinių kaip“ ir „žinių ko“. Šia alternatyvia teze įvedamas kriterijus, pagal kurį galima spręsti, veiksmas yra intelektualus ar ne, todėl siūlomas naujas požiūris į sudėtingą intelektualinio veiksmo ir žinių santykį.

Raktažodžiai: Ryle, intelektualizmas, regreso argumentas, „žinios kaip“, „žinios ko“, intelektualaus paaiškinimo veiksmas