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Is Practical Knowledge in Any Sense Based on Observation?

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ABSTRACT

Knowledge of our own intentional actions is normally conceived of as knowledge that is not acquired by observing those actions. However, since actions are part of the observable world, it has been suggested that observation still has to play some kind of genuine epistemic role. In this paper I try to reject this claim. I try to block the suggestion that observation must be, at least in some cases, a necessary, even if not sufficient, component of an agent's knowledge of what she is intentionally doing. Any rejection of the theory that this species of knowledge is non-observational has to include the assumption that some ingredient of it is perceptually acquired. Thus, if my argument is right, it must follow that practical knowledge must indeed be non-observational.

KEYWORDS: *Intention; Intentional Action; Practical Knowledge; Non-Observational Knowledge.*

RESUMEN

Suele asumirse que el conocimiento de nuestras acciones intencionales no se adquiere observándolas. Sin embargo, dado que las acciones pertenecen al mundo observable, se ha sugerido que la observación aún tiene que desempeñar algún tipo de función epistémica genuina. En este artículo trato de rechazar esta afirmación. Trato de bloquear la propuesta de que la observación debe ser, al menos en algunos casos, un componente necesario, aunque no sea suficiente, del conocimiento de lo que hacemos intencionalmente. Un requisito mínimo para defender que el conocimiento práctico es observacional es asumir que alguno de sus constituyentes es observacional. Por lo tanto, se sigue de mi argumento que el conocimiento práctico no puede ser observacional.

PALABRAS CLAVE: *intención; acción intencional; conocimiento práctico; conocimiento no observacional.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Imagine a person who is driving to a convention. How does she know that she is doing so? An external observer may try to get a grasp of the agent's action by taking her movements, the surrounding conditions, and so on, as observational cues. But it is senseless to suppose, or so it seems, that the agent herself can be estranged in this way from her inten-

tional action. It seems absurd to suppose that the agent, too, has to resort to observation. If she had to, then we would seemingly conclude that it is an accident that she is going to the convention. Consequently, if she is indeed doing so intentionally, then it seems to be a feature of her intentional action that it is known in a special, first-personal way.

This suggestion we can originally find in *Intention* (2000), by G. E. M. Anscombe. Drawing the words from Aquinas, Anscombe derives the principle that practical knowledge is non-observational from the more general idea that it is “the cause of what it understands” [Anscombe (1957), p. 87]. Here, she understands “cause” in a formal sense.¹ She means to uphold that practical knowledge is necessitated by the *mere* existence of its object, and hence not “derived” from what this knowledge represents². In other words, the idea is that practical knowledge is a *constitutive* aspect of what is known; if an agent is supposed to be estranged from a certain action she is performing, then she cannot be performing such an action intentionally, Anscombe contends. If she is right, the conclusion must indeed be that practical knowledge is non-perceptual, as observation presupposes an object of knowledge whose existence is independent of the success of the epistemic access in question.

However, some philosophers have questioned whether it is indeed a conceptual impossibility that one performs an intentional action she does not know she is performing [see Davidson (1978); Bratman (1982); O’Brien (2008); Setiya (2011)].³ For instance, imagine that the person driving to the convention is not confident whether she is doing so. Unlike knowledge of our own intentions, it seems entirely possible to imagine that — we, sometimes, act with a certain intention, without being in a position to say that we are actually fulfilling it. In a case like that, the common opinion is that the agent’s lack of confidence is not at odds with her action being intentional⁴. If that is the case, and from now on this is what I will assume in order not to beg any important issue, then agents who are acting intentionally might fail to know what others can see; and, moreover, they can fail to know what they themselves can seemingly observe, and, perhaps, come to ultimately know in this way.

The mere possibility of such cases does not imply by itself that practical knowledge might take observational information as a ground — especially, not in those mundane cases where the agent is not unconfident at all. However, it does surely have a relevant implication. For cases involving unconfident agents can be built by simply subtracting a certain relevant piece of worldly knowledge from the condition of a confident agent. In other words, normal, mundane cases, in which agents do have

confidence, presuppose observational information, whose lacking would in fact make those agents unconfident about her intentional goings on. For instance, I could not continue to believe that I am going to the convention if I, suddenly, forgot that I'm on the road I believe is the only one leading there [see Moran (2004), pp. 56-57]. That seems to entail that having practical knowledge requires that there is already in place the sort of observational information that unconfident agents lack.

The following principle captures the idea that, without observational information, agents cannot have practical knowledge:

MINIMAL WORLD DEPENDENCE: Practical knowledge requires agents to know things which other people might get to know by observation.

Now, for all that has been said, MINIMAL WORLD DEPENDENCE does not entail that agents do not have a special first-person authority over what they are intentionally doing. Nothing in the claim that an agent cannot be blind to all forms of observational information involves the further idea that agents don't have privileged access to their intentional actions.

To see this, imagine an observer who watches me as I'm driving to the convention. For the sake of the argument, suppose that she sees all that I can see, that is, my movements, my surroundings, and so on. If I was a mere observer of my intentional actions, then either both me and the observer would know what I'm doing, or neither would. But nothing should prevent us from thinking that only I believe, and let's assume, know, that I'm going to the convention. It is true that in this situation the observer would still know many of the actions that I would be performing. Yet, that doesn't alter the fact that it is conceivable that it is only me who knows I'm going to the convention. It is also true that at some point the observer might get this knowledge. But the very fact that I do not need to wait until I have the surplus of evidence she requires seems to indicate that it is not trivial that I am the one performing the action that is known.

For all I have said, the idea that I may be in a position to know what an observer cannot is still compatible with MINIMAL WORLD DEPENDENCE. In turn, this principle might seem to be compatible with the suggestion that this dependency is just a requirement of perceptual grounds for practical knowledge. But it should be common ground that those putative grounds couldn't be the only thing required, given that an

observer could not know what I know on the basis of the putative evidence I may need. The idea that seems to follow from my example is that I still have some form of special authority over my intentional action. Apparently, I'm in a special cognitive position with regards to it because only I know what I intend, on top of any observational input anyone can access.⁵ However, it does not matter at this point what produces this cognitive asymmetry. It does not matter what the difference between the agent and the observer is grounded upon. What does matter is that, given that the agent and the observer are not in the same epistemic position, the agent's position must involve something additional to her own condition as an observer. Call this principle ASYMMETRY:

ASYMMETRY: An agent's knowledge of her own intentional actions is not *just* based on the evidence which is accessible to the third-person perspective.

We might now combine the principles that I have called MINIMAL WORLD DEPENDENCE and ASYMMETRY — namely, the suggestion that my practical knowledge requires information no observer can possess, and the idea that some observer might possess information that my practical knowledge requires. These ideas seem to coexist as facts concerning practical knowledge:

- (1) The fact that I might fail to know what I'm doing in virtue of not knowing something an observer might know.
- (2) The fact that an observer that sees all I see might not know what I'm doing in virtue of not knowing something that, by definition, I do not know by observation.

It seems that these two facts impose a strict requirement for practical knowledge — namely, that the agent must possess both observational and non-observational pieces of knowledge. Both elements seem to be necessary if the agent has to keep her practical knowledge [Donnellan (1963); Moran (2004)]. Hence, as by intuitive implication, it might be argued that, just as empirical knowledge is based on evidence, and knowledge of sensations is not, practical knowledge is built upon both observational and non-observational grounds.

Facts (1) and (2) surely hold. ASYMMETRY and MINIMAL WORLD DEPENDENCE are both true. However, I will reject the natural suggestion that we could conclude from those facts that practical knowledge is

constituted both by observational and non-observational bases. I will specifically argue that observation can't stand as an epistemic ground for practical knowledge. My purpose, then, is not to explain the source of practical knowledge, or to account for its putatively special character. Instead, it is to dispel the image that practical knowledge, which concerns fully observable events, cannot be fully non-observational in the same way as knowledge of intention.

In section II, I will characterize in the most comprehensive way the thesis that practical knowledge is (at least partially) constituted by observational knowledge. In sections III and IV I am going to examine two different types of potential observational contributions to practical knowledge. Having rejected both, a summary of my argument will be connected to my initial considerations.

II. THE TWO-FACTOR ACCOUNT

Intentional action is part of the repertoire of the material world. It is something we can see, as it happens with any other kind of material, publicly available event. Yet, as I have stated, intentional actions are not known just by seeing them. In some way, they seem to be accessed from the inside, in a manner that is totally foreign to external observers. It is in this sense that practical knowledge seems to be concerned both with the mind and the world. Correspondingly, it is an intuitive picture, and indeed an appealing one too, to represent practical knowledge as being provided by the distinct mechanisms by which those two radically different species of things are known: by both a derivative access to the external, observable world, and an immediate access to one's own mind.

In the light of facts (1) and (2), then, a suggestion might be that practical knowledge requires both observational and non-observational grounds; that an agent, so to speak, possesses a combined "internal" and "external" perspective over her intentional actions, which constitutes her practical knowledge. I will call this thesis the "two-factor account". This will be the target of my argument.

Nevertheless, before moving on to it, we should first explain what exactly will count as an instance of such an account. First, it need not coincide in all details to any particular version of what has been already called the "two-factor account." Different ideas have been attached to this label.⁶ My purpose is not to stick to any of them in particular. Instead, I will try to just offer a neutral version of the suggestion that prac-

tical knowledge involves observational and non-observational grounds. Its sole objective would be to capture the minimal expression of the thesis that practical knowledge cannot be fully non-observational.

Henceforth, I will consider the two-factor account as just involving the core suggestion that practical knowledge needs both observational and non-observational inputs, which are necessary by themselves, and sufficient in combination. For any input of this kind, it will be taken to be necessary, in the proper sense, only if it serves a true epistemic function, by working as a ground, basis or justification for practical knowledge.⁷ So, according to this stipulative definition of the two-factor account, it holds if, and only if, practical knowledge requires both observational and non-observational epistemic grounds.

According to this definition, Donnellan's (1963) classical account of practical knowledge does constitute an example of what I have called "the two-factor account" — perhaps even the clearest expression of the idea that practical knowledge is two-factored:

[K]nowledge of our own intentional actions (...) divides up, so to speak, into an element of "direct awareness," to be assimilated to the examples of pain and anger, and other elements to which observation is relevant. (...) The absurdity of supposing that we come to have knowledge by observing ourselves stems from the fact that one element of an intentional action is the intention and this is not known to us through observation, just as our pains are not so known to us. The possibility of mistake and the need for revision arise from a quite different source. If I say that I am turning on the news, the radio may be, unknown to me, in a state of disrepair. But this is something I might have checked up upon by looking and probing.⁸ [Donnellan (1963) p. 407].

When I declare that I am turning on the news, there seem to be two things I am telling you: what I mean to be doing, my intention, which will exist whatever I am in fact doing; and what is getting done by me. What I cannot discover by observation is the former, and that is a conceptual impossibility. [Ibid., p. 408].

However, not all the instances of what I have labeled the "two-factor account" are like Donnellan's. Different, incompatible accounts can fit the idea that, minimally, observational grounds are needed. For instance, Roessler (1998) says that "perceptual experience in action can be a source of ordinary factual knowledge of what one is doing". This idea, he points out, should be compatible with Anscombe's suggestion that "agents' direct knowledge of what they are doing is 'practical' — based

on the subject's practical reasoning rather than on any kind of evidence." [Roessler (1998)]. (Note that otherwise it would be difficult to accommodate the intuitive role that ASYMMETRY plays). Paul (2009), on the other hand, opposes the idea that agents do require perceptual access to "the results of [their] actions", which she associates with the "two-factor thesis"; and yet she still considers that practical knowledge has background observational information as a "partial ground" [Paul (2009)]. Grünbaum (2011) departs from the suggestion that "it is often partly by perception that an agent knows what she is doing". And Schwenkler (2015) argues that in some special cases of intentional action the agent requires observational inputs in order to know what she is "presently doing".

Whatever their differences might be, all those claims involve the idea that practical knowledge may require a genuine observational epistemic contribution. It is in virtue of this that they are instances of what I have labeled the "two-factor account". These suggestions will be targeted, then, for their minimal commitment that observational grounds are necessary, which they acquire to the same degree.

Now, it is worth insisting that it is no coincidence that these suggestions share this common feature. Indeed, the thesis I have labeled the "two-factor account" is especially designed to capture the minimal, less compromised expression of the idea that practical knowledge involves observation, which is that observational grounds are at least necessary. In other words, rejecting the idea that practical knowledge is non-observational entails, minimally, that this kind of knowledge is at least partially constituted by observation. Hence, if it is possible to conclude that the two-factor account is not coherent, then there cannot seem to be any conceptual space for rejecting non-observational practical knowledge.

The second issue is determining the types of intentional actions to which the two-factor account applies. There are, I think, two major intuitions that should be explored.

The intuition that is proper to the two-factor accounts normally concerns all actions (at least if we exclude mental actions, which are not sensitive to worldly knowledge⁹). Knowledge of intentional action is different from knowledge of intentions and sensations. Intentional actions can be observationally known, as opposed to intentions. Furthermore, agents are fallible in regard to their intentional actions; observation may show them wrong; and they surely require information about the world to be sure they are acting as intended. The suspicion, given all this, is that a form of knowledge that is world-sensitive in this way cannot be non-observational. It is not possible, it might be argued, that a form of

knowledge that is plainly non-observational might be about a phenomenon that is so radically distinct from sensations, which we might know irrespectively of how the world is.¹⁰

But I want to leave some room for a second intuition that is perhaps less radical. Suppose that we accept that, normally, our practical knowledge is not based on observation. In a sense, we might concede, Anscombe seems to be clearly right; normally, when we act, there is no moment in which we do so, without having yet to grasp our intentional goings on. However, that might not apply to all ranges of actions. Consider again unconfident agents. For instance, if I'm not immediately confident that I'm driving to the convention, and then, after a while, I get to believe that I'm surely doing so, there must apparently be an added ingredient that accounts for my increase in confidence. Indeed, that cannot be my intention; I knew all along what I intended to do. The most plausible alternative candidate might seem to be some perceptual input. To the extent that this perceptual input may make practical knowledge available, perhaps it might be argued that it must act as an epistemic ground.¹¹

I have mentioned those different intuitions because I want to insist that my argument does not depend on ignoring their apparent differential strength. I am aware that they seem to ground distinct insights about the scope of practical non-observational knowledge. Be that as it may, I will not beg any issue against them, as I will separately examine what we may call “ideal” and “non-ideal” cases. As I will try to demonstrate, observation cannot play any relevant epistemic role in any of them. Thus, if this is the case, those intuitions must be both unjustified, whatever their shared commitments and differences. If I'm right about the fact that they are unjustified, then it should be safe to argue that practical knowledge is indeed, necessarily, non-observational, for it would be proven for all cases that perceptual grounds are not required.

IV. KNOWLEDGE OF WHAT IS GETTING DONE

Donnellan (1963) offers a general characterization of the two-factor account in the pieces that I have just quoted. However, it might be easily overlooked that they are *prima facie* completely different accounts, with completely different requirements. Compare the objects of observational knowledge in these two different passages. In the first one, Donnellan says that I may have checked whether “the radio is not in a state of disrepair”. In the second one, he talks about observing “what is being done

by me”, which he contrasts with non-observational knowledge of intention. But which one is it? If the object of what I might observationally know is what “is getting done by me”, then this is at odds with the idea that the observational contribution to my practical knowledge can just amount to information such as that “the radio is not in a state of disrepair.” Presumably, any information of this kind I might acquire without really knowing what I’m doing, observationally or otherwise. Thus, either it is true that I have to observationally know what is getting done, and knowing that the radio is not in a state of disrepair is therefore not sufficient; or else it is sufficient, and observationally knowing what is getting done by me is therefore not necessary.

We should keep in mind this difference, then, if we are supposed to identify the relevant sense in which there is a possible observational contribution to practical knowledge. Let’s consider, first, the putative knowledge of “what is getting done by me”.

As a preliminary observation, we should contemplate the possibility that Donnellan does not actually commit himself to any form of *observational* knowledge of “what is getting done”. Suppose that he just means instead that one’s knowledge of “what is getting done” *includes*, but does not equate to, a fully observational component. Under this reading, knowledge of “what is getting done” would not be one of the factors of practical knowledge. Rather, it would identify a whole, two-factored piece of practical knowledge. What Donnellan would be saying is that there is, on the one hand, knowledge of intention, and, on the other, knowledge of “what is getting done”, which would *incorporate* some piece of observational knowledge, plus non-observational knowledge of intention.

This might well be a fitting interpretation. However, just to avoid begging any issue, this is not what I will be assuming. The reason is that, under this reading, the relevant kind of knowledge of “what is getting done” would be observational just in the sense that it would be constituted by observational knowledge. By definition, this observational knowledge could not be itself of what is getting done. What could this knowledge be, then? We could perhaps see it as knowledge of things such as the fact that “the radio is not in a state of disrepair”, using Donnellan’s own example. Thus, under this more nuanced interpretation, there would be no tension between the two fragments. Asking about the possibility of observational knowledge about what is getting done would simply be asking whether my knowledge of, say, that the radio properly works, can (partially) ground my practical belief. Since I will evaluate the possibility of this contribution in the next section, I will now explore the less nuanced reading.

So, knowledge of “what is getting done by me” I take to be, quite straightforwardly, knowledge of my action — for instance, of the event or process of my turning on the news. Hence, if this knowledge is observational, it is observational knowledge about my doing so. By itself, this need not mean that it must necessarily be a form of knowledge based on seeing one’s action [Paul (2009)]. By knowledge of “what is getting done” I just mean, by stipulation, knowledge of any phenomenon that is a sufficient warrant for my doing such and such. Thus, any knowledge involving sufficient evidence for the fact that I am performing a certain action is knowledge of “what is getting done”, quite independently of whether this evidence is just that I am seeing what I am doing. I understand knowledge of “what is getting done” as just knowledge of those things I could use as a proper reason for the claim that some other person has turned on the news; or, conversely, that would justify the belief of this other person about my doing so.

Now, would it be possible that practical knowledge was at least partially grounded on this kind of observational evidence, in the sense above expressed? That does not seem to be the case. For, by definition, this evidence is not partial, given that a piece of evidence would not be knowledge of “what is getting done” if it were not a full ground for one’s practical knowledge. That would not be a problem if we could see practical knowledge as being dependent on having full evidence for it, and therefore if first-person knowledge of intention could be made redundant. But, if that were the case, we would then be accepting the position we initially deemed implausible, as we would be accepting that an agent might be a mere observer of her intentional actions. In other words, we would be denying ASYMMETRY. This is an undesirable conclusion, given that the two-factor account seemed to be acceptable precisely because it made the need for observation compatible with the fact that observation cannot be sufficient.

This consideration is extendable to those cases I have called “non-ideal”. In them, too, practical knowledge cannot factor in observation as its only constituent. To see it, consider again the example in which the person is not confident about whether she is driving to the convention. If her practical knowledge did factor in exhaustive observational knowledge, then the agent would require the same epistemic grounds as a well-informed observer. However, this is implausible. For instance, the agent might know that she is going there after seeing a sign that indicates that she is on the right track. But nothing should prevent us from thinking that an observer could not know in any way that the agent is going

there in seeing the sign, or in acquiring any other piece of observational evidence the agent might have access to, for that matter. Thus, even in non-ideal circumstances, it seems that what the agent requires cannot be limited to full-fledged observational evidence, because there is something she has to know that is not accessible to any observer.

Be that as it may, note that it is an utterly different issue whether seeing the sign may count as evidence for what the agent is intentionally doing. This different issue is something that I will tackle in a moment. What I'm now saying is just that it seems obvious that the agent's practical knowledge cannot be constituted only by evidence of this kind.

As a last observation, note that it would be also incoherent to claim that observation should not be directed at something like turning on the news, but to something more basic than this, which, added to other information, may provide the agent with knowledge that she is turning on the news. If the agent does something more basic in the hopes of turning on the news, then this more basic action has to be intentional. But then the same problem arises, because *ASYMMETRY* should also apply to this other intentional act. Whatever the example, the agent cannot require the same kind of evidence as an external observer if she does indeed perform such action intentionally. If it was ill-founded to assume that she requires full evidence for her knowledge that she was intentionally turning on the news, then the same must go for what she intentionally does in order to do so.

IV. KNOWLEDGE OF AN ACTION'S FACTUAL CONDITIONS

One way to synthesize the previous conclusion is that practical knowledge cannot be made up of any element that is, so to speak, "active", while being itself observational. That is to say, our practical knowledge cannot be constituted by observational knowledge that is itself knowledge of an intentional action. This observational component must instead be "passive", in the sense that it must be about an aspect of the world that is independent of intentional action. In hindsight, this seems evident. Otherwise *ASYMMETRY* could not be met, and it just seems clear that the very idea of practical two-factor knowledge excludes this possibility. Yet, the importance of this lies in the fact that, as it should be now clear, claims such as "practical knowledge involves observation", or "practical knowledge cannot be non-observational", are only intelligible in the light of the possibility that observational beliefs

that are *not* about intentional action, are nevertheless a ground for beliefs that do concern our intentional actions.

I will utilize the labels “knowledge of factual conditions”, or “background knowledge”, to refer to those elements I have called “passive”. Using Donnellan’s previous example about a person who is to turn on the radio, I will consider things such as the agent’s belief that “the radio is not in a state of disrepair”. Yet, those labels are supposed to encompass any observational contribution that is not “active” — that is, any factor that is not complete evidence to warrant an attribution of intentional action.¹² Those elements are compatible with ASYMMETRY; and, furthermore, they are certainly required, in one sense or other, because otherwise MINIMAL WORLD DEPENDENCE would not be fulfilled.

A factual condition of an action is a state of affairs that is relevant for its occurrence, in the sense that the action in question cannot happen without the obtaining of the condition, or at least that the action cannot occur if the condition does not obtain and there is no alternative, supplementary factual condition that does. Knowledge of the factual conditions of an action is knowledge of those states of affairs that are needed, or that would be needed in the absence of other conditions, for the occurrence of the action. For instance, consider this point by Sarah K. Paul:

A second factor operant in the background of the belief formation will be the agent’s background knowledge of his circumstances as being conducive to his φ -ing — or at least, the absence of reasons to believe his φ -ing will be obstructed. He will not be justified in believing he is shooting the bulls-eye if he has reason to doubt that his gun is in working order, or that he has an unobstructed shot, and so forth [Paul (2009), p. 15].

And also:

[T]he experience and observation on which the agent’s belief is partly based is not experience or observation of the particular action in question. He has background knowledge from experience that he can hit the target at will, but his belief does not depend on waiting to see where the bullet goes on this occasion [Paul (2009), p. 16].

Using my terminology, any contribution that is incompatible with ASYMMETRY, Paul says, should be ruled out. Agents don’t need to observe their own intentional actions. However, she still argues that practical knowledge is “partly based” on knowledge of background conditions.

But note that it is one thing to assert that knowledge of those background conditions serves as a partial ground; and it is an utterly different thing to say that the agent “will not be justified in believing that he is shooting the bulls-eye” if she lacks background information. I agree with the latter, easily acceptable thesis. But the one that I am putting into question is the former — namely, whether it is true that the observational information that practical knowledge requires acts as a partial epistemic ground.

That background observational knowledge is required is indeed an undeniable truth. There are two senses in which this is the case. First of all, an agent’s practical beliefs would not be justified if she lacked such information or was completely wrong about it. This is what Paul seems to have in mind. But, even more importantly, we can’t even suppose that an agent holds a practical belief without in turn assuming that she has all the background information which would be necessary for her belief that there is at least a chance to act as intended.¹³ That is, if an agent thinks, for instance, that she will surely not make it to the convention without gas, then her acting with such an intention necessitates a positive belief about this condition. Otherwise, it would be possible to intend to advance goals which we are sure are unattainable.¹⁴

So, an agent, or at least, an agent who might know what she is intentionally doing, must have knowledge about the state of the world, in the two senses I have just mentioned. Nevertheless, the relevant question is still whether, on top of being a necessary condition, this observational element can be coherently conceived of as a ground for our practical knowledge. In what follows I will try to argue otherwise.

It is true that if one acts with an intention, one must possess certain beliefs about the background conditions; it is true that if one has knowledge of her doing what she intends, then one has acted with an intention; and, thus, it must hold that, if one has practical knowledge, one must possess certain beliefs about the background conditions. But this is not to say that knowledge of the background conditions serves as a ground for practical knowledge. Rather, without an additional argument for such a conclusion, all we seem legitimized to claim is that there exists the chain of requirements that I have just mentioned. The existence of practical knowledge does necessitate the existence of an intention in action. The existence of an intention in action necessitates in turn the existence of certain beliefs about the surrounding conditions. It follows that the existence of practical knowledge necessitates the existence of certain beliefs about the factual conditions of the known action. But it does not

directly follow from the fact that intention entails observational knowledge, and that practical knowledge entails intention, that observational knowledge is a ground, base, or justification for practical knowledge.

In other words, the issue cannot be whether practical knowledge requires a certain kind of background observational knowledge —indeed, the kind of background knowledge that acting with an intention presupposes in the first place. I surely accept this requirement, but, in the end, this is completely irrelevant if we want to decide whether this background knowledge is a partial ground for practical knowledge. Do note that it is also true about knowledge of intention that we cannot have it without having knowledge about certain factual conditions. Knowledge of intention obviously presupposes the existence of the intention in question, and the very existence of an intention requires certain empirical knowledge about how the world is. But it would be absurd to claim that this should entail that knowledge of intention involves observational grounds.

So, if practical knowledge is supposed to be different in this regard, what we should examine is which kind of distinctive, relevantly epistemic relationship it may present with the observational information that it requires. But, once we accept that this relationship cannot be determined by the bare requirement for factual information, what else do we have at our disposal that could determine it? The point is that it is difficult to detect an *additional* aspect of my belief that my car works in virtue of which it could (partly) justify my practical belief that I'm driving to the convention. After all, by knowing this background condition, one does not seem to be in an epistemic position such that it is easier to rule out that the agent has instead *not* acted. Justifying the belief that the butler did not commit the murder demands an accommodative explanation of the alleged partial evidence that her fingerprints are all over the place, but justifying the belief that the agent has not gone to the convention does not require us to accommodate in an analogous way the fact that her car works.

To delve more into this, let's compare practical knowledge to the example Donnellan (1963) offers as a paradigm example of two-factor knowledge. This example matters, I think, precisely because it succeeds at offering a pristine, uncontroversial picture about what two-factor knowledge would be, and about how partial grounds for this kind of knowledge could be understood. Yet, as I will now argue, this image does not in fact offer a good analogy with regards to practical knowledge.

Donnellan's example involves the knowledge that one is in pain due to sciatica. This knowledge, he claims, is a compound of one's direct, non-observational awareness of the pain she is suffering, and of her evidential knowledge of the underlying medical condition causing it. Following Donnellan, then, my knowledge that I'm suffering from sciatica could be thought of as the product of these separable pieces of information:

- (a) My knowledge that I'm suffering a certain kind of pain.
- (b) My knowledge that I'm afflicted with the physical condition called "sciatica", which, let's assume, normally causes the relevant kind of pain.

We might either choose to speak of the sum of (a) and (b) as full evidence for the belief that I'm suffering from sciatica, or of those two ingredients as being its constituents. Either way, we can make sense of the idea of partial justification because both (a) and (b) can be added to one another to non-trivially produce full justification for the belief that I am suffering from sciatica. Put another way, each element offers partial access to this knowledge to the extent that (a) grants the relevant justification *only* if it is added to (b), and (b) grants the relevant justification *only* if it is added to (a). The resulting knowledge is two-factored, according to my stipulation, because each one of those partial accesses is either fully observational or non-observational.

Nevertheless, practical knowledge does not work like this. The difference is that, when it comes to practical knowledge, there cannot exist any identifiable observational piece of information that makes a non-trivial justificatory contribution. To see this, consider for instance my belief that my car works. In which sense could this piece of information represent a true partial epistemic access to the fact that I am driving to the convention? Alternatively, the question is which belief should be attached to my belief that my car works in order for it to serve my practical belief in the same way as (a) can be added to (b) in order for it to serve my belief that I'm suffering from sciatica. There is in fact no fitting candidate; and the crucial problem is that I'm in no position to derive the belief that I'm driving to the convention from the different belief that my car works, plus some other belief, *B*, unless *B* is, or itself already involves, the belief that I'm driving there, which already entails my belief that my car works. Hence, *pace* Donnellan, no background belief, no mat-

ter its complexity, can fit his schema as a true partial ground of a piece of practical knowledge.

It may be objected that this conclusion only follows if we consider a limited number of candidate beliefs. Why should it not be possible to add perceptual inputs to my knowledge of intention, and get knowledge that I am, in fact, doing what I intend? This is implausible, for this schema would necessitate that practical knowledge were itself a part of practical knowledge. To explore this, notice first that knowledge of intention is not really a suitable candidate to accompany background knowledge. For instance, knowledge that I'm driving cannot be produced by taking, as a constituent of it, my intention to drive *tomorrow*. Hence, if I am to know that I'm driving to the convention, what I have to know is not only that I have a certain intention, but that I'm acting on it. Making this amendment, practical knowledge should be produced by my knowledge both that I'm acting with a certain intention, and that certain conditions obtain. Nevertheless, note that this schema presupposes that I know that I'm doing something. Knowing that one is acting with an intention means being in a position to describe something one is doing in service of this intention. But how does the agent know such a thing? This is practical knowledge, and so it should be constituted by the elements already described.¹⁵ But, then, a different piece of practical knowledge should be invoked, which should be in turn divided into knowledge of something one is doing, and background knowledge. This process would be carried out *ad infinitum* — unless, against the hypothesis, some piece of practical knowledge was assumed not to be the result of this arithmetic.

What would this non-inferred piece of practical knowledge be, then, in our example? It could be tempting to say that it must be basic knowledge about one's bodily movements. The point would be that one could take this knowledge, and supplement it with extra inputs; this is how one would get practical knowledge that extends beyond the limits of one's body. But the issue is how to understand this idea of supplementation. If the person is immediately confident about the fact that she is driving to the convention, and now we may assume she is, then it seems unjustified to say that there is a sense in which this knowledge is derived from, among other things, a more basic piece of practical knowledge. For, when she begins to act, she is assumed to be right away as sure of the fact that she is driving to the convention as she is of the fact that she is performing any more basic action. The conclusion should be then that those pieces of knowledge do not relate in such a way that the former

could be (partially) inferred from the latter. As Setiya (2011) adds, there might in fact exist the *opposite* priority; it is in knowing that I'm driving to the convention, he would defend, that I may have access to certain more basic knowledge that should allegedly be a basis for the inference.

If this is true, then it is not coherent to say that perception may be used as a ground in some sort of inference that would grant complex practical knowledge. The point is that there may be no such inference. Therefore, we have not yet detected a new, genuinely epistemic role that background knowledge may have.¹⁶ What we have is just what both sides of the discussion should accept, which is simply that we cannot have practical knowledge without having knowledge about how the world is.

Thus, observation is indeed needed, as MINIMAL WORLD DEPENDENCE demands; but we should accept that it cannot play any epistemic role analogous to that of (a) and (b). Instead, it seems that this knowledge just fulfills the common function of information which is implied without being a ground for the knowledge from which it follows. Plenty of beliefs of this kind can be identified with regards to my knowledge that I'm suffering from sciatica. For instance, I must know that I can feel pain; that the laws of physics are compatible with me having sciatica; that I'm alive; and so on. I must certainly have those beliefs if I really believe I'm suffering from sciatica. But none of them play the role of (a) and (b). Analogously, just as those beliefs are not even a partial indication that I'm suffering from sciatica, my knowledge that my car does work is not even a partial indication that I'm driving to the convention.

V. PRACTICAL KNOWLEDGE IN NON-IDEAL SCENARIOS

Nevertheless, it could be claimed that this solution only works for cases of a certain kind — cases in which the agent is not unconfident, which is what I have been taking for granted. But let's now consider the following classical example, envisaged by Davidson (1963). Imagine that I'm acting with the intention of doing ten carbon copies, but that I'm not sure of doing them — let's say that I'm not sure whether the carbon is going to work well enough. Then, suppose that, at some point, while acting, I learn that the carbon is sufficiently strong. Consequently, I form the belief that I am making the copies, which, as we might assume, constitutes practical knowledge.

This is a scenario of the kind that I have called “non-ideal.” Its mark is that I perform an intentional action that, at some point, I'm not

confident I'm performing. What we are supposing is that, eventually, I get the belief that I'm doing what I intend, right after making an observation. And, in those conditions, it may be argued that this must mean that practical knowledge has to be (partially) based on this observation. The argument would go as follows. It is generally true that one cannot get practical knowledge by adding background knowledge to knowledge of intention. However, in some cases, I'm in a condition to know the intention with which I'm acting, while lacking relevant background information. When I get this information, practical knowledge is made available. So, how could we avoid the conclusion that in those cases, even if uncommon, practical knowledge is indeed derived from adding observational inputs to knowledge of intention? Apparently, no other element can account for the way my confidence increases.

Nevertheless, I do believe that this would be a wrong inference, whose source would be a misunderstanding of what is really going on in those kinds of cases. It is true that the agent would not know whether she is acting as intended without having knowledge about the factual conditions. But, for all that has been said, this is also true in ideal cases. In addition, it might be assumed that observation, apart from being necessary, has to have a different, epistemically relevant role, which we cannot detect in ideal scenarios. As I will try to show, this cannot be so.

Let's consider what happens when the agent knows that the carbon is good enough. This might well be a straightaway justification for the belief that she could be doing ten carbon copies. In other words, by knowing that this condition obtains, the agent is passively put in a position, so to speak, to infer that she could be making ten carbon copies. However, this is not a practical belief. This is not the belief she will be endorsing by acting in this way, from that point onwards. Taking this into account, what seems odd to me is the idea that, after seeing that the carbon is good enough, the agent could be in a position to immediately know that she *is* doing the copies, just as she would be in a position to immediately know that she *could* be doing them. Indeed, this parallelism should be accepted if we endorse the image that background knowledge can serve as a partial ground. Saying that observation may serve as a partial ground is saying that practical knowledge must be available to me if all the other grounds are already at my disposal. But this seems wrong. Rather, it is another image that seems to capture what is going on in our situation. Knowing that the relevant conditions obtain can show to the agent that she is making the copies only in the sense that she can then

make a decision on what to do, and consequently know, *in making this decision*, that she is making the copies.

Put another way, a piece of information could work as a partial ground only if there could be other grounds such that, all of them combined, I would be put in a position in which I *should* infer that I am doing the copies. But nothing in the evidence I would acquire in this situation can alter by itself my epistemic condition in such a manner. The reason is that, right after perceiving that the carbon is good enough, I could immediately decide not to use it — for example, I could decide to put this very good piece of carbon to a better use. Likewise, the same thing occurs if what I observe is what Moran (2004) calls the “result” of my action; for example, if I perceive that the ink is indeed reaching all the copies. This cannot show me, absent a practical decision, that I am presently making the copies. I could surely conclude that I *have been* doing so, but not that I *am making* the copies now, as holding the additional belief that I will not keep acting is not contradictory with the putative evidence that I would have.¹⁷ All this, again, does not entail that observation is not needed. It entails that it cannot be required as an epistemic ground, for that would have the unsound implication that observation might in the first instance force the practical decision that brings about the object of knowledge.

VI. CONCLUDING REMARKS

It is time to take stock. What I have called the “two-factor account” is the thesis that practical knowledge is constituted by observational and non-observational grounds. I have presented this thesis as a plausible extension of two seemingly true facts about our knowledge of our own intentional actions:

1. The fact that I might fail to know what I’m doing in virtue of not knowing something an observer might know.
2. The fact that an observer that sees all I see might not know what I’m doing in virtue of not knowing something that, by definition, I do not know by observation.

However, the two-factor account, as I have defined it, is not necessitated by these two facts: even if observational knowledge is required, it is not required in any truly epistemic sense. No observation can play the role of

an epistemic ground for a piece of practical knowledge. And, crucially, it is part of my argument that this must be true for any intentional action, whether “ideal” or “non-ideal”.

My strategy has been to consider two possible candidates to serve as observational grounds in a piece of two-factored practical knowledge. I have identified the first one with what Donnellan calls “my knowledge of what is getting done”. My argument has been that this kind of knowledge cannot be a fitting observational contribution to practical knowledge, simply because it would in itself be practical observational knowledge.

The second possible kind of observational contribution is the one I have described as “knowledge of the factual conditions of an action”. As I have argued, it is true that practical knowledge *does* require that we have certain information about our surroundings. But this truism is by itself irrelevant. It is common ground that observational information is required in the first place to form the intention to act in a certain way. Hence, observational information must in turn be required by our knowledge that we are intentionally acting in this way. But this does not mean that observation has the role of a ground. It only means that knowledge of intentional action presupposes a decision to act, and that a decision to act presupposes observational knowledge. Thus, the defender of the two-factor account would need to argue that observation still plays a genuine epistemic role, over and above being required in the unqualified sense I have just mentioned. But it is difficult to see in which sense observation could work as a ground, especially when we compare practical knowledge to paradigmatic instances of two-factored knowledge.

Now, the two-factor account, as I have explained, is the minimal commitment that would be required to challenge the thesis that practical knowledge is genuinely non-observational. Indeed, there cannot be any conceptual space for dismissing non-observational practical knowledge if observation is not even required as a partial, necessary ground. Therefore, having rejected the suggestion that practical knowledge requires to be at least partially grounded on observation, we must then endorse the claim that practical knowledge is fully non-observational.

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NOTES

¹ See Setiya (2016), p. 159.

² For developments on this idea, see for instance Falvey (2000), Rödl (2007), O’Shaughnessy (2008), Haddock (2011), and Campbell (2018).

³ Some authors such as Grice (1971), Velleman (1989), and Harman (1997), have posited that intention in action involves the belief that one is doing what she intends. Paul (2009) calls this thesis “strong cognitivism”. Yet, I don’t think the underlying assumption is that there cannot be unconfident agents. We could rather see it as a stipulation concerning the general notion of intention. Thompson (2008) says that what these authors call “intention” could just be conceived of as intention-cum-confidence.

⁴ See Thompson (2011) and Wolfson (2012) for the opposing view.

⁵ Consider Schwenkler (2012), pp. 734-5.

⁶ Moran (2004) considers the two-factor account as the thesis that practical knowledge is knowledge of intention, plus knowledge of one’s action’s physical “results”. Falvey (2008) makes the same interpretation of what he calls the “two-factor thesis”. Donnellan’s (1963) original formulation, however, does not clearly involve the idea that what has to be observed is an action’s result.

⁷ The full reasoning behind this idea will be exposed in section IV.

⁸ Importantly, Donnellan cannot mean that practical knowledge is based on observation in those cases in which we are wrong about what we are doing. There is no practical knowledge in those cases, observational or otherwise. We should rather think about cases in which the agent is wrong and, then, after an exercise of observation, she can start acting again.

⁹ Needless to say that nothing I will argue from now on applies to mental actions. See Peacocke (2021) for an exhaustive treatment of them.

¹⁰ I take Paul’s (2009) inferentialist account to involve this idea. Donnellan’s (1963) account may also, depending on how some of his passages are read.

¹¹ Schwenkler (2015) seems to accept this position [see pp. 25-27]. This is a concern he also attributes to Falvey (2000), which argues that practical knowledge “may stand in need of support from information acquired through observation” in those situations that, as Schwenkler (2015) adds, are “difficult or unfamiliar.”

¹² I also include under this label what has been called knowledge of the “result” of one’s actions [Moran (2004)]. But we should not miss the distinction between an agent who, while using a pen, simply knows that the ink is spreading; and an unconfident agent who checks every now and then whether she is actually writing. As for the former, observation just operates as background knowledge, as I have understood it — the agent simply knows that, if she tries to use it, the pen will work normally. As for the latter, see section V.

¹³ See Anscombe (2000), in §§28-29, when she mentions the kind of instrumental beliefs about “(...) what can happen –say Z– if one does certain things, say ABC.” See also Burge (1998) and Ford (2013). These authors establish a distinc-

tion between knowledge *presupposed* in intentional action and knowledge on which practical knowledge is *based*. But I'm not going to assume they are incompatible. In other words, I am not departing from the idea that the mere fact that a piece of information is required to perform an intentional action implies that such an information cannot ground practical knowledge. If I assumed so, Paul's position which I have described would be directly rendered incoherent.

¹⁴ See Setiya (2008), pp. 391-392.

¹⁵ I am not assuming I have offered an exhaustive record of those elements [see, for example, the list offered in Paul (2008)]. My argument does not depend on making a complete characterization of the ingredients that are putatively required.

¹⁶ Grünbaum (2015) argues that practical knowledge may be "grounded" on perception without being "inferred" from it. But do keep in mind that the notion of an inference is here used just in connection to the minimal requirements for something to count as an epistemic ground. The question is whether observational elements, apart from being required, can make the kind of genuinely epistemic difference with regards to a piece of practical knowledge that the aforementioned elements (a) and (b) can make with regards to my knowledge that I'm suffering from sciatica.

¹⁷ Schwenkler (2015) conceives of a counter-example in which an agent, trying to pump some poison, needs to monitor – continuously, let's assume, in order to present the strongest version of the case – whether the levels of poison are going up. The agent, Schwenkler argues, knows that she is actually delivering poison partially by observation. However, this is wrong, as the kind of oddness I have described cannot depend on whether the observation is, so to say, simultaneous with the relevant action. Every time the agent reads the levels of poison, she receives an observational datum concerning the results of what she was doing just before. Given that she was, a moment ago, pumping, the level of poison went up in the way she is now reading. Yet, what she sees cannot show her that she is now, at the moment of making the reading, still delivering the poison. As I have said, she could decide to stop after any reading, and thus no reading can tell her that she is presently pumping.

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