

'Our' Practical Knowledge

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1 Is there Practical Knowledge about Our Action?

As G. E. M. Anscombe pointed out, when we are asked “What are you doing?”, we can answer immediately. In the case of some actions, when we are asked “Why are you doing so?” we can answer immediately. Such actions are what we call “intentional actions”. Anscombe thinks of this criteria as a way to define the intentional action without using the word “intention”. When I am asked “What are you doing?”, I answer e.g. “I am making coffee”. Anscombe called knowledge this kind of answer involves “practical knowledge”. According to her, practical knowledge is not based on observation. Additionally, it is also not based on inference.¹ What Anscombe described was an intentional action of an individual and knowledge of it.

How should we think, when we apply this argument to the collective action of many persons? If, when I am with others, a third person comes here and asks me “What are you all doing here?”, then what will I or we answer?

(1) Imagine that there are many students in a classroom at lunch time and someone is eating his lunch and someone is doing his homework and someone is reading a book. If a teacher comes in and asks “What are you all doing?”, then it is difficult for them to answer “We are doing ... “.

(2) Imagine that your teacher said you to study by yourselves for a while and went out of the class room. If another teacher came in after that and asked them “What are you doing?”, then they could answer “We are studying by ourselves”.

(3) Imagine that we are playing soccer. If someone comes along and asks “What are you doing now?”, then we can answer immediately “We are playing soccer”.

In the case (2), each person is studying by herself and we are not doing any one action together. If I am asked “What are you doing?” in such a situation, then I answer “I am studying by myself”. This answer is practical knowledge which doesn't involve observation. If the answer “I am studying by myself” is practical knowledge, then the answer “We are studying by ourselves” seems also to be practical knowledge. In case (3), to play soccer is an action which is able to be conducted only by a group. If I am asked “What are you doing?” in this situation, I can answer “I am playing soccer”. This answer is practical knowledge. The answer “We are playing soccer” in this situation is also practical knowledge.

In what follows I would like to claim that the above answer “We are playing soccer” is ‘our’ knowledge of ‘our’ intentional action and the subject of this intention is ‘we’ and there is a collective intention and the subject of knowledge of this intentional action is also ‘we’ and this is collective knowledge, i.e. common knowledge. We anticipate the following objection against this claim. Who utters “We are playing soccer” is an individual and who answers is not “we” but an individual person and she is describing “our” action. I want to reply to this objection as follows.

2 The Use of ‘We’ as Subject

If there is practical knowledge, then it is not a description of “us”. If on the one hand the answer “I am playing chess” is not a description and on the other hand the answer “We are playing chess” is a description, then there is distinct qualitative difference between them. But I cannot feel such a distinct difference. In order to hint at a proof, I ask you here to remember the distinction between the “use as subject” and the “use as object” which Wittgenstein introduced concerning the use of the first person pronoun “I”.

“There are two different cases in the use of the word “I” (or “my”) which I might call “the use as object” and “the use as subject” Examples of the first kind of use are these: “My arm is broken”, “I have grown six inches”, “I have a bump on my forehead”, “The wind blows my hair about”. Examples of the second kind are: “I see so-and-so”, “I hear so-and-so”, “I try to lift my arm”, “I think it will rain”, “I have toothache”. One can point to the difference between these two categories by saying: The cases of the first category involve the recognition of a particular person, and there is in these cases the possibility of an error, or as I should rather put it: The possibility of an error has been provided for. [...] On the other hand, there is no question of recognizing a person when I say I have toothache. To ask “are you sure that it’s you who have pain?” would be nonsensical. Now, when in this case no error is possible, it is because the move which we might be inclined to think of as an error, a “bad move”, is no move of the game at all.”²

The use of “I” as object is a use in the case where a speaker describes himself objectively by observation, and in contrast a speaker doesn't describe himself in the use of “I” as subject. The

practical knowledge Anscombe referred to is not included in the above examples of the use of “I” as subject.³ But we can think that practical knowledge also belongs to the use as subject category. “Are you sure that it’s you who is making coffee?” would be as nonsensical as to ask “are you sure that it’s you who have pain?” Because the identification of a person doesn’t come into question in these cases.

By the way, we can divide the use of “we” into two categories, as Wittgenstein divided the use of “I”. The use as object is e.g. “we got new uniforms”, “we are a strong team”. The identification of persons or a group of persons is entailed in these examples. Therefore it is possible for these utterances to be false. Examples of the use of “we” as subject are “we are playing soccer”, “we are listening to an announcement in a railway station”, “we think it will rain soon”, “we are in trouble”. In the use of “we” as subject, e.g., to ask “are you sure that it is you who are playing soccer?” seems nonsensical, that is, it seems that the identification of a group of persons doesn’t come into question, because the “we” doesn’t refer to a group of persons and describe them, but “we” is constructed by this utterance. When “we are playing soccer” involves the use of “we” as subject, it is not description of “us”

If the knowledge “we are playing soccer” is “our practical knowledge” and not a description about “us”, then this knowledge is not individual knowledge but “our” common knowledge. Given that A and B are asked “what are you doing?” and A answers “we are playing soccer”, this answer is practical knowledge and common knowledge. A and B share knowledge “we are playing soccer” and A answers the question, representing “us”. “We” are constructed by being represented. As we can understand the use of “we” in this case in such a way, we can say also understand in the case of individual practical knowledge whose subject is “I” that a speaker

represents a person and so becomes a person “I” by being represented in the utterance. A person who is represented by “I” didn’t exist before the utterance and came to exist by being represented. We can understand the existence of “I” and “we” in this same manner.

3 The Background of “Our Practical Knowledge”

By the way, practical knowledge holds good in a web with other knowledge in a similar way to other knowledge. When we pay attention to practical knowledge, we can view the other knowledge involved as constructing a web which together we can call the “background knowledge of practical knowledge”. E.g. “I am making coffee” has much background knowledge like “These are coffee granules” “Here is hot water” “I can make coffee” “I exist” etc. By the fact that “our practical knowledge” is common knowledge, this background knowledge is also common knowledge. Then, if I am asked “What are you using?”, then I can answer without observation “This is powder of coffee” or “This is hot water” etc.

The same as individual practical knowledge, ‘our’ practical knowledge has background knowledge. Given for example that when I am asked “What are you all doing?”, I answer “We are playing baseball” to the question and when I am asked “What are you doing?”, I answer “I am playing left field” and when I’m asked “What is he doing?”, I answer “He is playing center field”. In this case “We are playing baseball” is “our practical knowledge” and “I am playing left field” is my practical knowledge. When these utterances are taken as examples of practical knowledge and not based on observation, “He is playing center field” is also not based on observation. Furthermore, if “we are playing baseball” is “our” practical knowledge, then “I am playing left field and he is playing center field” is also “our” practical knowledge. That is, “I am

playing left field” and “He is playing center field” are “our” practical knowledge. Here is a possibility to extend the concept of “practical knowledge”.

Notes

¹ Cf. G. E. M. Anscombe, *Intention*, Harvard U. P., 2000, p. 50.

² Ludwig Wittgenstein; *The blue and Brown Books*, Blackwell, Second Ed. 1969, p. 67

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