Knowing-what and Knowing what-it’s-like

In this paper I briefly summarize a previously-developed account of knowledge-what (that is, of knowledge ascriptions with a what complement clause, like (1) “Ana knows what we’re having for dinner.”) and knowledge-how (that is, of knowledge ascriptions with a how complement clause, like (2) “Bernard knows how to make chicken parmesan.”), and apply this account to a puzzle in the philosophy of mind—namely the question of qualia and of what it is to know what-it’s-like (to be a bat, for example) and know how-it-feels (to be a bat, for example). In the second, applied part, of my talk I will consider specifically the “ability reply” of the sort offered by David Lewis (1988) to defend Physicalism from the Frank Jackson (1982) / Thomas Nagel (1974) type qualia arguments ostensibly against Physicalism. I argue that the account of knowing how (and of knowledge ascriptions with interrogative complements, in general) that I’ve developed undermines the ability reply as defended by Lewis and others. In particular, I claim that even if knowing what-it’s-like always involves attaining some new ability, and even if knowing what-it’s-like importantly involves or just is knowing-how, my account entails that knowing-how ascriptions with interrogative complements deserve the same treatment as other attitudes with interrogative complements and so will not get the Physicalist out of trouble in the way suggested by Lewis and others.

In an earlier paper I developed and defended an account of knowledge-wh ascriptions, in particular knowledge ascriptions with an indirect question as a complement: like (1) or like (3) “Dave knows where you left your homework” or (4) “Eliza knows when this conference began.” On my account, what we do when we utter sentences of this form (that contain an indirect interrogative) is we ascribe a relation between an individual (the purported knower) and a question. On my view of knowledge ascriptions with interrogative complements, to say that “S
knows wh-Q” is to say that S stands in the knowledge relation to the question, Q; the logical form of some knowledge-wh ascription, then, is $KsQ$. Further, I argue that what it is for the subject to stand in that knowledge relation to the question is for the subject to know what the answer to the question is—that is, to be able to identify the, or a, correct answer to the question.

Important to my view of knowledge ascriptions with interrogative complements, is my view about what questions are. In particular, following Hamblin (1958, 1973), I hold that interrogative sentences like “When did the conference begin?” express (and interrogative wh-complement clauses like “when the conference began” in (4) denote) a set of alternatives; the alternatives in the set are the possible answers to the question. Questions, then, on this account, are partitions on logical space; the cells of the partition are the question’s possible answers and these are determined by the speaker’s context. So I am a contextualist about questions. I hold that exactly what question is expressed when one utters an interrogative sentence or, which question is denoted in the wh-complement clause of a knowledge-wh ascription, depends on the context. Now which question one is said to know the answer to can, of course, influence whether the knowledge-ascription is true. For example, suppose one’s standing in the Chicago airport and suppose, for simplicity’s sake, that there are two stores in the airport: a Hudson News and BookMarket. When Gisella utters (5) “Where can one buy an Italian newspaper?” in this context, she expresses a question with two possible answers. Thus the possibilities generated in this context are as follows: {one can buy an Italian newspaper at Hudson News, one can buy an Italian newspaper at BookMarket}. Thus if Gisella were to ask Hans, “Where can I buy an Italian newspaper?” and Hans replies, “In Rome,” Hans has literally, on my account, not answered Gisella’s question. However in a different context, one with different relevant alternatives as answers, the question expressed by the interrogative sentence (5) “Where can one buy an Italian
newspaper?” would be different. Consider for example, Issa, a school teacher who is testing her class on the names of European capitals, and asks, (5) “Where can one buy an Italian newspaper?” According to the contextualist, the question expressed by Issa’s utterance in this context is a different one than that expressed by Gisella’s utterance in the former context. Here the possible answers are: {Berlin, Lisbon, Rome, Budapest, Oslo, etc.} Suppose Issa’s student, Juan, were to reply, (6) “One can buy an Italian newspaper in Rome.” In this case, we would judge that the student’s response did answer the question that the teacher posed. So, although Hans (in the airport context) and Juan (in the classroom context) have the same information and utter the very same sentence (6), the proposition expressed answers the question that Issa (the teacher) asked in the classroom setting, but does not answer the question that Gisella (the tourist) asked in the Chicago Airport setting. In the Chicago airport context we will judge that Hans does not know where one can buy an Italian newspaper. But in the classroom context we will judge that the student does know where one can buy an Italian newspaper. In this way, the contextualist seems to get things right in attributing knowledge to the student, Juan, but in failing to attribute knowledge to the airport traveler Hans.

So that’s a very brief sketch of my account of knowledge ascriptions with interrogative complements and of my preferred account of the nature and metaphysics of questions. And for the most part I want to simply claim that knowledge-how ascriptions are just an instance of knowledge ascriptions with indirect questions as complements and simply apply my view to them to see what shakes out. But it’s not exactly that simple. In fact, I have argued in an unpublished manuscript that “knows how” is ambiguous (or polysemous). Specifically, I think that there is a kind of know-how that is non-propositional (or not essentially propositional): I think of this as, and call this, the “pure ability” sense of know-how. But I think that there is
another type of know-how that *is* propositional in that it involves straightforwardly the knowledge of facts. I think that know-how in the ability sense and knowledge-*how* in the propositional sense are importantly different. Consider, for example, a skating instructor who can give detailed instructions for performing a triple Lutz even though she, herself, is unable to perform one. To my mind, there is a sense in which she knows how to perform a triple Lutz and a sense in which she does not know how to perform a triple Lutz. I take this data seriously and argue that this is because “knows how” is ambiguous. Thus sentences of the form ‘S knows how to F’ can be used to express at least two different propositions. We can utter sentences of this form to attribute a (mere) ability to the subject or we can utter such sentences to attribute knowledge of a propositional sort to the subject.

Now, I do not deny (or at least I don’t have to deny) that there is (at least sometimes) some non-propositional (mere) ability gained when we learn a new fact, nor do I deny that there is some propositional knowledge gained when we gain a new ability. Neither do I deny, as I’ll discuss in a minute, that we often (maybe even always) gain an ability when we have a new experience. But, as I spell out in detail soon, I hold that even if this is the case, it also seems that we often gain some propositional know-how too—that we learn some new facts. So the move to claim that knowing-what-it’s-like is *really* know-how or always involves the acquisition of new abilities, doesn’t alone entail that the knowledge gained is non-propositional.

So I think that knows-how is ambiguous. I think some knowledge-how ascriptions simply assert that a person has an ability. My semantics of knowledge ascriptions with interrogative complements would apply to those because disambiguated it becomes clear that they don’t actually have interrogative complements—that there’s no question in the logical form. But I suggest that many knowledge-*how* ascriptions—namely those with a truly interrogative
complement—do ascribe propositional-type knowledge to a subject. And I think that my semantics of knowledge ascriptions with interrogative complements does apply to those because, disambiguated, it becomes clear that they do have interrogative complements—that there’s a question in the logical form. Like all knowledge ascriptions with interrogative complements, knows-how attribution of this sort, express a relation between a knower and a question. On this view, the logical form of many know-how ascriptions (those attributing propositional knowledge) is $KsQ$. And to stand in this knowledge relation to a question is just to know what the answer to the question is. On the preferred view, then, in some contexts, when Maxine utters “Nate knows how to make chocolate chip muffins,” she claims that Nate stands in the knowledge relation to the question of how one makes chocolate muffins. For Nate to stand in the knowledge relation to this question is for Nate to know an answer to the question: How does one make chocolate chip muffins?

Putting this together, what does it mean for the debate in the philosophy of mind surrounding knowledge of what it’s like and knows-what-it’s-like ascriptions? It means a couple of things that strike me as particularly interesting. Here I want to expand on a number of details so that we can use this view of knowledge ascriptions with interrogative complements to help shed light on that long-standing puzzle about qualia. Philosophers of mind have long debated about the phenomenon of knowing what it’s like to have a particular qualitative experience, with Thomas Nagel famously arguing (in 1974) that we humans can never know what it’s like to be a bat and Frank Jackson (1982) famously arguing that Mary the brilliant neuroscientist locked in her black and white room with a complete physical description of the world would still not know what it’s like to see red until she was released from the room. Many take this type of limitation on our knowledge to be a problem for Physicalism—very roughly (probably too roughly), if
Physicalism is the view that all facts are physical facts and all physical facts are at least in principle knowable via the physical sciences, but there is some fact (e.g. that this is what is like to be a bat, or that that is what it's like to see red) that is not knowable, even in principle via the sciences, then Physicalism is false.

Some physicalists (like David Lewis, 1988) respond that to know what-it’s-like (to be a bat, see the color red, taste Vegemite, etc.) is not to know a fact but is instead to have an ability (in particular, according to Lewis, an ability to imagine, recognize, predict one’s own behavior etc.). Speaking about Jackson’s black and white Mary and others with a complete physical description of the world but who have never had various qualitative experiences like seeing the color red, and thus seem to learn something new when they finally do have those experiences, David Lewis says: “We dare not grant that there is a sort of information we overlook; or, in other words, that there are possibilities exactly alike in the respects we know of, yet different in some other way. That would be defeat. Neither can we credibly claim that lessons in physics or physiology could teach the inexperienced what it is like to taste Vegemite. Our proper answer, I think, is that knowing what it’s like is not the possession of information at all. It isn’t the elimination of any hitherto open possibilities. Rather, knowing what it’s like is the possession of abilities: abilities to recognize, abilities to imagine, abilities to predict one’s behavior by means of imaginative experiments.” In "What Experience Teaches Us," Lewis says: “The Ability Hypothesis says that knowing what an experience is like just is the possession of these abilities to remember, imagine, and recognize. ... It isn't knowing-that. It's knowing-how.” (1988, p. 516) And Lawrence Nemirow argues similarly, that “Knowing what an experience is like is the same as knowing how to imagine having the experience” (1990, p. 495).
My account of knowledge ascriptions with interrogative complements and my view about the ambiguity of the phrase “knows-how” have implications for this debate. In particular, on my account, knowing *what-it’s-like-to-F* ascriptions or knowing *how-it-feels-to-F* ascriptions, like other ascriptions with interrogative complements, assert that the subject knows the answer to a question. In this case the relevant question is “What is it like to F?” or “How does it feel to F?” Further, I claim that answering this question involves identifying the right answer to the question from among the possible answers to the question in the context. Importantly here, this understanding of knowing-what-it’s-like ascriptions undermines the ability reply of the sort offered by Lewis and Nemirow insofar as the Lewis/Nemirow reply is intended to save Physicalism from the Jackson/Nagel type arguments.

For, on my account of knowing-how, even if what one learns when one comes to know what-it’s-like, is, or at least importantly involves, know-how, as Lewis and Nemirow claim, it seems fairly clear to me that the proposed know-how ascriptions that Lewis and Nemirow claim are newly true of Mary are know-how ascriptions with genuinely interrogative complements. And thus the relevant knowing-how ascriptions should be understood in the same way as other attitudes with interrogative complements and so will not get the physicalist out of trouble in the way suggested by Lewis, Nemirow, and others.

For the debate, at least between Lewis and Jackson is not a debate about whether Mary learns anything new when she’s released—both parties agree that she does; the debate is about whether what Mary learns is propositional—about whether she learns a new fact. Lewis claims Mary learns something but that what Mary learns is non-propositional know-how—so Lewis takes it that what Mary learns *does not rule out any relevant propositions that were not ruled out before*. But we have reason now to disagree because Mary has an answer to a question she
previously lacked. Mary learns something and it is propositional. The proposed account of questions combined with my account of knowledge ascriptions with interrogative complements appropriately makes sense of how this is so. I think there’s a question about what it’s like to see red that before the release, Mary lacked an answer to and post release Mary has an answer to. The question is expressed with the words “What is it like to see red?” and in the context of most philosophy of mind debates, the possible answers to the question are various phenomenal experiences. In fact, it seems that learning the answer to this question is precisely the learning that Jackson and sympathizers are pointing to when they claim that Mary learns something new upon release from here black and white room. But if so, then, contra Lewis, learning what-it’s-like does eliminate hitherto open possibilities (for example, it eliminates the possibility that seeing red feels like that or that rather than like this).

To reiterate, on my view, knowing-what-it’s-like ascriptions and knowing-how-it-feels ascriptions are just instances of knowledge ascriptions with interrogative complements. To assert that Mary knows who won the U.S. presidential election in 2008 is to assert that Mary can answer the question, “Who won the U.S. presidential election in 2008?” To assert that Mary knows what it’s like to see red is to assert that Mary can (appropriately, given the context) answer the question, “What is it like to see red?”. To assert that Mary knows how-it-feels to be a bat is to assert that Mary can (appropriately, given the context) answer the question, “How does it feel to be a bat?”. To assert that Mary knows how to imagine tasting Vegemite is (perhaps—depending on how we disambiguate knows-how-to here) to assert that Mary can (appropriately, given the context) answer the question, “How does one imagine tasting Vegemite?”

To sum up, I think that know-how ascriptions are semantically ambiguous. Sometimes in uttering a knows-how ascription we express that a subject has an ability while sometimes in
uttering a knows-how ascription we express that a subject stands in the knowledge relation to a question. But remember, too that we need not deny that there is some mere, non-propositional ability gained when we learn a new fact or we’re able to answer a question we were previously unable to answer. And this is important in thinking through the Lewis. I agree with Lewis that in coming to know what it’s like Mary does gain an ability to imagine, remember, etc. But the key here is that this is not what we say or express when we utter the sentence Jackson is concerned with: “Mary learns what it’s like to see red” or “Mary now knows what it’s like to see red.” In other words, it may be true, indeed I think it is true, as Lewis claims, that Mary gains an ability to imagine what it’s like to see red when Mary comes to know what it’s like to see red, but Mary’s gaining an ability to imagine what it’s like to see red is not what makes it true that Mary knows what it’s like to see red. What makes it true that Mary now knows what it’s like to see red is that Mary now knows that this phenomenal experience is what it’s like to see red and this fact that she comes to know answers the question (that Jackson is interested in), “What is it like to see red?”

1 [Acknowledgements withheld]
References
(Self-reference excluded for anonymity)


