



THE USE OF PHILOSOPHY: THE “IS-UGHT” TEST

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Part 1 of 2

KNOWLEDGE IS USEFUL. What is known may not always actually be put to use in the management or conduct of human affairs or in the control of man's environment, but it always can be. If it is not, its latent usefulness remains to be exploited in the future. Intrinsicly useless knowledge is a contradiction in terms. We often speak of knowledge in use as “applied knowledge.” The Greek philosophers laid down a basic division in the use or application of knowledge, which is worth recalling. They distinguished between production and action—between the sphere of man's efforts to make things or to control the forces of nature in order to achieve certain results, and the sphere of human conduct, both individual and social. They also distinguished between knowledge itself, as capable of being used or applied, and a special type of knowledge which must be added in order to put knowledge to use.

The latter—the special knowledge that is operative when knowledge is put to use—the Greeks called *techné*. The English equivalent of that word is, of course, “technique,” but I prefer the more colloquial rendering of it by “know-how.”¹ In contradistinction to

“know-how,” let us call the knowledge that can be applied (for example, the knowledge to be found in what we call “pure science”) “know-that.” Pure science is turned into applied science through the addition of know-how to know-that.

Distinguishing between the spheres of application or use, we can speak of productive know-how and practical know-how—that is, the know-how which is involved in applying know-that to the business of making things or achieving desired effects or results and the know-how which is involved in applying know-that to the affairs of action, the problems of individual conduct and the conduct of society.²

Practical know-how, particularly that form of it which is involved in applying scientific knowledge, concerns the means for achieving whatever ends of individual or social action we set up for ourselves. It does not, and cannot, tell us what ends we ought to pursue, but it may tell us what ends are, or are not, practicable to pursue because adequate means are, or are not, available; it often gives us knowledge of the diverse means which are available for achieving a particular goal of action; and, with respect to alternative means, it often enables us to make a judgment about their relative efficiency or effectiveness.

¹ The English words “skill” and “art” are other names for technique or know-how. The distinction which we make between the artisan and the artist (between the practitioner of the useful arts and the practitioner of the fine arts) has removed the word “art” from its basic and general use as the name for each and every form of skill or technical competence, every type of know-how.

² Since the English word “practical” is derived from the Greek word for action (“praxis”), it seems the most appropriate word to use for this second type of know-how.

Productive know-how, again especially that form of it which is involved in applying scientific knowledge, concerns the steps to be taken in making useful tools, in improving their efficiency, and in shaping or controlling nature to our purposes. It does not, and cannot, tell us what our purposes ought to be; it merely helps us to realize whatever purposes we may have, so far as their realization depends upon instrumentalities that we can devise or controls that we can exercise over natural processes. Currently, such productive know-how, based on science, is called “technology.”³

One other type of know-how must be mentioned. There is skill in inquiring or knowing as well as skill in making things and in controlling nature. In other words, there is skill in achieving knowledge itself; and for each of the major branches of knowledge that has a distinctive method or procedure of its own, there is a particu-

lar type of skill which is often called the “methodology” of that science, but which I would prefer to call the “heuristic know-how” of the discipline. Thus, the mathematician has a heuristic know-how for achieving the kind of know-that which constitutes mathematical knowledge; so, too, the scientist and the historian; so, too, the philosopher, if philosophy satisfies the conditions stipulated in this book.

I have introduced all these distinctions, and indicated the language I shall use in employing them, by way of preface to the discussion of the problems with which this chapter is concerned. I turn to those now.

³ The word “technology,” which, according to its Greek roots, should mean know-that about know-how, is thus currently used as if it had the same meaning as “technique” (that is, skill or know-how).

(1)

It would be reasonable to expect each different branch of knowledge to have, in addition to its own heuristic know-how, a kind of usefulness or application distinctively and characteristically its own. The heuristic know-how of mathematics differs from that of science; that is, the latter involves skills of investigation and experimentation which have no place in mathematical inquiry. Whereas science is directly useful through its technological applications in the sphere of production, mathematics is, for the most part, indirectly useful. Its application usually requires the mediation of science; applied mathematics usually involves one or another of the natural or social sciences.

What is the usefulness of philosophical knowledge? Science, as I have already pointed out, has two main types of usefulness or application—one in the sphere of production, the other in the sphere of action. Does philosophy, in addition to having its own heuristic know-how, also give rise to productive know-how and practical know-how?

With regard to productive know-how, it is generally recognized that philosophy is totally useless; it has no technological applications whatsoever. As William James said, it “bakes no bread”; it builds no bridges, makes no bombs, invents no instruments, concocts no poisons, harnesses no power, and so forth. Francis Bacon’s famous remark that knowledge is power (that is, that knowledge gives man a mastery over nature and an ability to produce or control effects according to his wishes) is as false in the case of philosophical knowledge as it is true in the case of scien-

tific knowledge.

With regard to practical know-how, philosophy is just as deficient, though this is not as generally recognized as its deficiency with regard to productive know-how. Philosophical knowledge (insofar as it is know-that in the same sense in which scientific knowledge is know-that) does not instruct us concerning the means available for achieving whatever results we desire, or whatever goals or objectives we may set ourselves. By itself (without the addition of scientific knowledge), it does not tell us whether our practical purposes are or are not practicable, because there are or are not adequate means for achieving them. Nor does it enable us to judge the relative efficiency or effectiveness of competing means for achieving the same ends.

Is philosophy, then, totally useless? The answer must be in the affirmative if the usefulness of knowledge is exhaustively represented by the kinds of productive and of practical know-how that have their basis in scientific knowledge. But that is not the whole story.

As I pointed out earlier, science does not and cannot tell us what ends we *ought* to pursue; it does not and cannot tell us what our purposes *ought* to be. However useful it is productively, it does not tell us whether we *ought* or *ought not* to produce certain things (such as thermonuclear bombs or supersonic transport planes); it does not tell us whether we *ought* or *ought not* to exercise certain controls over natural processes (such as human procreation or changes in weather). However useful it is practically, it does not tell us whether we *ought* or *ought not* to employ certain means to achieve our ends, on any basis other than their relative efficiency; it does not tell us whether one goal *ought* or *ought not* to be preferred to another. It does not tell us, in short, what we *ought* or *ought not* to do and what we *ought* or *ought not* to seek.

For brevity, I shall refer to knowledge of all these *oughts* and *ought-nots* as "*ought-knowledge*." I have referred to such knowledge in earlier chapters (though not by that name) when I distinguished between two types of first-order questions with which the philosopher should deal: questions about that which is and happens in the world and questions about what men should do and seek. Tenable and defensible answers to the second type of question constitute what I am here calling "*ought-knowledge*." Answers to the first type of question might, in contradistinction, be called "*is-knowledge*."

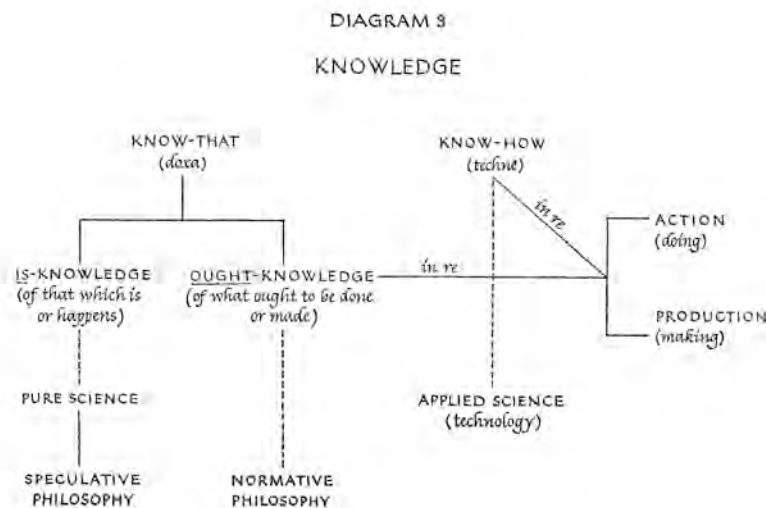
Philosophy, properly constituted, consists of both types of knowledge. This is recognized by all who conceive of philosophy, on the

plane of first-order inquiry, as divided into two main branches, which are traditionally called “speculative” and “practical” (the speculative branch consisting of *is*-knowledge; the practical branch consisting of *ought*-knowledge). The word “speculative” is appropriate for *is*-knowledge in view of its Latin root, which has the connotation of *seeing* or *beholding*⁴ But the word “practical,” derived from the Greek *praxis*, which means action, has too narrow a connotation for *ought*-knowledge, since that is as applicable in the sphere of production as it is in the sphere of action. Hence, I will refer to the branch of philosophy which consists of *ought*-knowledge as normative rather than practical.

For reasons that will become clear presently, science is as deficient with respect to *ought*-knowledge as philosophy is deficient with respect to know-how. We will also see presently that the relation of applied science, technology, and practical know-how to pure science (the know-that which is identical with scientific *is*-knowledge) is in a way comparable to the relation of normative philosophy (*ought*-knowledge) to speculative philosophy (the know-that which is identical with philosophical *is*-knowledge). In advance of these things’ becoming clear, the essential point about the usefulness of philosophy can be made. In the spheres of action and of production, we need *ought*-knowledge as well as know-how. Philosophy, through its normative branch, supplies the one; science, through technology and other applications, supplies the other. Each, in short, is useful, though in quite different ways.

Diagram 3, sets forth all these distinctions and relationships.

⁴ The same can be said for the word “theoretical,” the Greek root of which has the same connotation.



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