

JASON STANLEY AND THE RECOVERY OF ARTISANAL KNOWLEDGE IN PLATO

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John Protevi
Phyllis M Taylor Professor of French Studies
Professor of Philosophy
Louisiana State University
Baton Rouge LA 70803 USA
protevi@lsu.edu
<http://www.protevi.com/john>

FORECAST

The talk has two parts, epistemological and political. I will proceed in the “sympathetic hypothetical” mode. Rather than delve into the linguistics-oriented critical literature on Stanley’s intellectualist thesis on know-how (e.g., Poston 2015), I will instead strive for a charitable exposition of the neuroscientific elements of latest version of that thesis (as presented in his 2013 *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience* piece with John Krakauer) in order to elucidate the stakes of his work: if we assume his position withstands criticism, what then follows for both our epistemology and our politics?

First I show how Stanley critiques the mental knowledge / manual skill distinction by means of his deflationary sense of (not necessarily verbally articulable) propositional knowledge. Stanley and Krakauer claim non-conceptual “motor acuity” (reduction of variance in movement) is only one part of “motor skill.” Not necessarily verbally articulable propositional knowledge provides a scaffold for the exercise of such acuity, and it’s the combination of knowledge and non-conceptual acuity that constitutes motor skill. Conversely, non-conceptual forms of perceptual ability inhabit manifestations of perceptual knowledge, and it is even the case that prototypical intellectual work such as mathematics involves “neural computations equivalent to those underlying both perceptual and motor acuity.” There is thus a sort of “non-conceptual intellectual acuity” just as there is “factual knowledge in motor skill.” This criss-cross allows us rethink the distinction of mental knowledge and (merely) physical skill or knack. With Stanley’s help we can now see the distinction presupposes an underlying form with elements of both sides; we can call this “artisanal knowledge.”

Now the mental / manual distinction is not just an epistemological point, but also a political one: “Our society is divided into castes based upon a supposed division between theoretical knowledge and practical skill” (Stanley 2012). The philosophical justification of this political structure can be seen in Plato, to whose

foundational status Stanley often refers: “Plato’s *Republic* is the wellspring from which all subsequent Western philosophy flows, and political philosophy is no exception” (Stanley and Weaver 2014).

So in the second part of the talk I show how the concept of “artisanal knowledge” illuminates a seemingly minor, though in fact key, passage in Plato’s *Laws* about how the childcare provided by slave nurses provides the emotional basis of moral and political education. Plato denigrates the choice by the slave nurses of the proper lullaby (and by extension other forms of morality-influencing childcare) as mere “guesswork.” So, there are political stakes to Stanley’s epistemological work: although denigrated by philosophers as mere knack, the entire moral / political system of Plato’s *Laws* rests upon the “artisanal knowledge” of these slave nurses, just as, we could argue, using developmental psychology, the emotional bases of our moral-political system rests upon contemporary childcare.

I will conclude the talk with some reflections on the role of political emotion in Stanley’s recent book, *How Propaganda Works*.

CRITIQUING THE OPPOSITION OF MENTAL KNOWLEDGE AND MANUAL SKILL

Stanley critiques the mental knowledge / manual skill distinction via his deflationary notion of propositional knowledge. There is indeed non-conceptual motor acuity that plays a role in motor skill, but it is only a part. Not necessarily verbally articulable knowledge serves to scaffold motor acuity and hence to guide actions displaying motor skill; hence we have knowledge on the side of the “manual,” which was thought to achieve only the status of “knack.” However, a slightly underplayed but I think still present implication of Stanley’s work is that there is also a sort of intuitive insight or “feel for the game” on the side of the supposedly purely mental. This overturns the opposition of the mental over the manual by showing that each supposedly pure side is constituted by properties of the other side. To account for such interchange we must then develop a notion of “artisanal knowledge” with elements of each side of the opposition.

In Stanley and Krakauer 2013 the authors begin by rehearsing the distinction Plato has Socrates make at *Gorgias* 465a: the possessor of *technê* or art requires the ability to give an account [*logon*] of the nature [*phusis*] or causes [*aitian*] of the events it brings about. Those who cannot give such an account, even if their performance of a task is successful, are said to possess merely a habit or knack (*empeirian*).

They then sketch modern anti-intellectualism, citing Merleau-Ponty, Bourdieu, and Dreyfus, who go beyond Ryle and deny that skilled behavior includes cognitive states with propositional content; they in fact would say that skilled behavior *must* be without propositional content, as conscious focus on rules inhibits expert skillful

behavior. This is the standard explanation of what in sports terms is called “choking.” As Yogi Berra said, “you can’t hit and think at the same time.” (This standard view is now being criticized, as in Christensen, Sutton, and McIlwain 2015.)

Speaking in their own voice, Stanley and Krakauer affirm that motor skill requires both motor acuity and propositional knowledge. Via philosophical analysis, and via analysis of a case that is well known to the neuroscience field (the “HM” case), the authors undermine the folk distinction between practical and theoretical activity. The paper emphasizes that despite common belief, cognitive neuroscience findings do not support that distinction.

The authors note that cognitive neuroscience distinguishes between declarative and procedural knowledge. However, while declarative knowledge is verbally articulable knowledge, “procedural knowledge” is a misnomer; it is not really knowledge, but is better termed “motor acuity” (= decrease in variability and increase in smoothness of movements).

Many problems happen when equating these cognitive neuroscience terms with philosophical terms. First, it is very misleading to equate “declarative knowledge” with the philosophical term “propositional knowledge.” The authors affirm that propositional knowledge is knowledge of facts, but in a deflationary move building on Stanley 2011, they further contend that propositional knowledge need not be verbally articulable.

This is a key move, and one that I must say I had some trouble accepting for quite some time. The version of the argument from Stanley and Krakauer 2013 is as follows.

First, there’s the argument from confused criterion of declarative knowledge. Declarative knowledge, a neuroscience category, is that which is susceptible of verbal declaration. But that doesn’t line up with the philosophical category of propositional knowledge, because it’s unclear what “articulable” means. If one excludes “this / that” statements from counting as verbal articulation – “this is how you make a baby laugh” where “this” refers to making a goofy face, then not all propositional knowledge can be verbally articulated. The person knows how to make a baby laugh (or at least those babies who are susceptible to laughing at goofy faces when approached at the right time) but can’t verbally articulate that knowledge without a “this” statement accompanied by a physical demonstration. But if you allow “this / that” statements, then stock examples of supposedly non-verbally-articulable know-how (e.g., making babies laugh) are in fact articulable. So it’s unclear what notion of articulable underlies declarative knowledge

Secondly, there’s the argument from lack of bite on the phenomenon: declarative knowledge doesn’t coincide with factual knowledge. Human language lets us access some concepts non-linguistic creatures can’t access. But concept possession in

general does NOT require linguistic articulation of content of concept, so “there is no reason to deny that some non-linguistic animals have the same concepts as we do.”

(Digression: I wonder how far down the line Stanley is willing to go here. Saying that primates have concepts seems fine with me, but the enactivists hold to a continuity thesis for their mind-in-life position, and while I can understand what they mean by the “sense-making” of single-celled organisms, I would hesitate to say they possess concepts.)

Third, there’s the argument from over-generalizing. Stanley and Krakauer shift to diagnosis here: Why have so many philosophers and scientists thought knowledge of facts requires verbal articulation? Well, *some* knowledge examples are characteristically shown by verbalizing, they respond, but that needn't be generalized to all knowledge. In general, they conclude, propositional knowledge *guides* action and verbal assertion is only a case of showing knowledge, not the defining characteristic for the possession of propositional knowledge.

We have seen that declarative knowledge should not be equated with propositional knowledge. On the other hand, “procedural knowledge” should not be equated with “motor skill,” for that leaves out the contribution of propositional knowledge to motor skill. In fact, not necessarily verbally articulable propositional knowledge provides a scaffold for development of motor skills in three areas: 1) acuity of selected action components; 2) new actions (e.g., new techniques of running, jumping, etc.); 3) ability to select the right action from a repertoire.

In his 2015 book *How Propaganda Works* Stanley will develop an explicit critique of the mental / manual distinction.

Schema of Stanley’s critique: (1). Identify what is presented as an opposition as a hierarchy (diagnosis of false neutrality). (2a). Show that the terms of the opposition are found on both sides (recognition of failure of purity), and in particular, (2b) that the terms of the denigrated are essential to the privileged (overturning of the hierarchy). (3). Show that the hierarchy depends on a third, underlying, term in which the subsidiary terms circulate freely (re-inscription in a “general economy”).

So, in *Propaganda*, propositional knowledge, which had formerly been thought to be exclusively “mental labor,” is to be found in what had been seen as the mere skillful side of “manual labor.” Stanley aligns this with Gramsci saying that there is never any purely mechanical or physical labor, there is always some skill or even “creative intellectual labor” involved (cited at Stanley 2015, 271).

On the other hand there is also the intuitive, the knack, in mental labor. Stanley and Krakauer 2013 refer to van Gaal et al 2012 for the neuroscientific claim about unconscious mechanisms underlying “cognitive control and decision-making”: “intellectual abilities likely ride on many implicit abilities that are not considered along with more obvious explicit processes” and further that “neural computations

equivalent to those underlying both perceptual and motor acuity are no doubt implicated in many theoretical pursuits." There is also first-person description here: you just see or feel that an argument has something going for it, even before its conclusions can also be, later "proven": here I'm thinking of Lee Braver's work in *Groundless Grounds* (Braver 2012) on Heidegger and Wittgenstein.

In *Propaganda* this "intuitive" aspect of intellectual work would have to be teased out of Stanley's work on ideology's blocking or inserting certain concepts into one's conceptual scheme as well as the cognitive penetration of the perceptual.

If we can find then the intuitive or even "perceptual" in the intellectual (not just what you see when you look at the world -- do you see exploitation at McDonald's? do you see racism in mass incarceration? -- but what you "see" when you say "I see what you're saying" that is, the feeling of being convinced by an argument), then not only are the properties of the privileged also found in the denigrated ("manual" labor includes propositional knowledge, formerly seen as the exclusive property of "intellectual" labor), but vice versa ("skill" or "knack" inhabits the "intellectual"). That latter bit is the key to the overturning phase of his critique: the properties of the denigrated are to be found – indeed to be essential to – the privileged.

But we shouldn't stop with simply overturning the opposition and privileging the formerly denigrated (as does Alva Noë, when he suggests, "propositional knowledge may be grounded on practical knowledge" [Noë 2005, 290]). The final step is the important one: the distinction is only possible on the basis of a "general economy" in which both sides are embedded. I will propose "artisanal knowledge" as the foundational term that allows both properties of "knack" and "knowledge" to freely circulate.

ARTISANAL KNOWLEDGE IN PLATO'S *LAWS*

Let me shift now to recover "artisanal knowledge" in what Plato says in the *Laws* about the "guesswork" of slave women acting as nurses for citizen children in choosing the right song to soothe agitated children or energize slothful children.

But why bother to go back to Plato? And why to an obscure little passage about lullabies? First, I'll anchor this choice in Stanley's work. In his 2012 *New York Times* column, "The Theoretical and the Practical," Stanley alludes to the ancient lineage of the mental / manual distinction, as well as explicitly uses "how to make a child laugh" as an example of know how.

Second, the reason that a Stanley-inspired recovering of the artisanal knowledge of the slave nurses is important is that Plato insists on the emotional core of character development and on the shared emotional dispositions of people raised under one political regime or another. Recall his notorious remarks on democracy in the *Republic*: in such a regime of political emotion, the slaves no longer defer to citizens and even the horses get infected with egalitarianism. The way to create the proper

character regime is to start early: ethical development entails an emotional reaction prior to any rational justification ("he will rightfully object to what is ugly and hate it while still young before he can grasp the reason": *Republic* 402a).

As we begin our reading, let us recall that for Plato the nurse-artisan must "choose" the right songs. To expand on this, we can see the sort of (deflationary / not necessarily verbally articulable) propositional knowledge Stanley and Krakauer require, even though Plato denigrates that as "happy gift of nature":

Here the harmonized soul is the goal of musical education; the philosopher sets forth the criterion of a harmonized soul, but it is left to the artisanal labour of craftsmen set to work under philosophic direction to choose the exact components of the musical regime that will produce the harmonious soul. [Plato writes:] 'But we must look for those craftsmen who by the happy gift of nature are capable of following the trail of true beauty and grace . . . ' (*Republic* 401 c). (Protevi 2001, 128)

There is a singularity of bodily rapport at work in the *Laws* treatment of the nurse – child relation, but I think that fits into the perceptual / motor acuity side of things: the nurses have to sense how hard the baby is crying (perceptual acuity) and then they have to perform the lullaby in the correct way (motor acuity: not too much force, not too little, etc.). The propositional knowledge components (the scaffolding as Stanley and Krakauer put it) appear not only in the "artisanal knowledge" of the nurses (they know many facts about music, children, and their intersection), but also in the way their teachers guided the apprenticeship of the nurses (pointing to the scaffolding propositional knowledge of teachers may be one of the ways Stanley answers the challenge in Poston 2015 about the difference between testimonial transfer of knowing that and the necessity of apprenticeship for know how).

Book 7 of the *Laws* begins with the Athenian saying that despite its importance the nurture and education of children can only be a matter of advice to heads of household rather than law (788b-c), even though habits of transgression from petty misdeeds can ripple up to bad effect in a polity (790b; 793c; again, it can even infect animals, as he says to comic exaggerating effect in the *Republic* discussion of democracy). So it can be hoped that citizens will take the advice to them on these matters as a law to them and to their households (790b). Political emotion is of the utmost importance to Plato, but he must describe rather than prescribe its genesis.

The reason why Plato must describe, though he cannot prescribe, is two fold. First, in the *Laws* he foregoes the blank slate he gives himself in constructing the ideal city in the *Republic*. So he has to describe child rearing that is realistically constrained by real geography and custom; he can't just prescribe what should happen.

Second, Plato cannot prescribe in detail the motor acuity-based singular inter-corporeal rhythms that lie at the root of soothing and energizing infants and hence setting the basis for emotional moral development. (Remember, Stanley's

intellectualism does not claim that propositional content invades motor acuity; it only scaffolds it.) So Plato can only describe the irreducible singularity of relation between nurse and infant rhythms that blocks full rational description but that nurses can perform and indicate (after saying things like "cradle the baby's head gently with the crook of your arm," eventually they have to settle for something like "this is how you do it").

Why do lullabies work? We should recall that the emphasis on bodily rhythm as key to psychic health is a deep Platonic theme. Once pregnancy occurs, the Athenian recommends that pregnant women take walks so that the external shaking of the fetus help its body grow into robust health (789b-790b). And with regard to the soul we must pay the same sort of attention to imposed movement; analogous to the way dancing prescribed by priestesses will help those afflicted with "Corybantic troubles" (see Dodds 1951, 78-80, for a social and somatic functionalist / cathartic reading of this passage), so too will rocking and singing calm an infant (790d).

Continuing the discussion, the Athenian explains, "fright is due to some morbid condition of soul. Hence, when such disorders are treated by rocking movements the external motion thus exhibited dominates [*kratei*] the internal, which is the source of the fright or frenzy" (790e). The lawgivers must rely on custom for the most efficacious selection of these songs and on the caregiver's sensitivity and skill in delivering them at the proper time, with proper intensity, and with proper rhythm. The lawgiver can set the context for their use, but cannot discuss the details of the lullaby or its somatic/psychic effects.

Now why is the Athenian so concerned here? It's because temper (the proper relation to fear) and moral excellence are so closely connected (791b-c). But then comes the admission at 792a that the harmonizing of the soul of the infant with regard to the placidity of its temper must rely on the "guesswork [*tekmairontai*]" of nurses, who are able to discern the proper course of action -- the right rocking motion, the right lullaby -- in placating a screaming child.

Once children are born, there is also supervision of the collective games of children in the public setting of the "local sanctuary" between the ages of three and six (794b-c). But note the difference between recommendations by officials to citizens for the citizens to oversee the lullabies of the nurses of infants at home and the direct supervision by public officials of nurses as they accompany the public games of children. The key point is that in Plato's eyes, in the lullaby there's a singularity of bodily rapport between nurse and infant that is resistant to hyper-intellectualist rational supervision, so that the nurses must resort to "guesswork." But following Stanley we can now see that such guesswork had to be developed and deployed in a scaffolding of (not necessarily verbally articulable) propositional knowledge.

And the total package of knowledge and sensitivity of the slave nurses is of fundamental importance to the corporeal development of the proper emotional balance and hence moral intuition of citizens. Again, political emotion is of the

utmost importance to Plato, and the lynchpin of the system described in the *Laws* is what Plato tried to denigrate as “guesswork” but that Stanley lets us see is factual knowledge guiding perceptual / motor acuity, or “artisanal knowledge.”

CONCLUSION

So Plato is concerned with the emotional basis of morality and politics. What is Stanley’s position here?

The first thing we note is a strong rationalist epistemological angle to *Propaganda*: propaganda produces false beliefs. Propaganda allows partial interest to be presented as public interest. In raising the stakes for people hurt by propaganda-supported policies, propaganda is a form of epistemic harm, for it raises the standards for them to assert knowledge.

Nonetheless, political emotion is mentioned in two main places in *Propaganda*.

First, Stanley reconstructs Klemperer’s classical theory of propaganda, as that which entails the closing off of political debate by appeal to emotion. But emotions are often rational, allowing us to track reasons for political proposals. The problem diagnosed by classical theories is that propaganda bypasses the rational will; it “makes the state move as one, stirred by emotions that far surpass the evidence for their intensity” (48). Thus “propaganda is the manipulation of the rational will to close off debate” (48). Stanley does not think the classical theory – or Chomsky’s updated theory, which relies on the notion of “biased speech,” which “irrationally closes off certain options that should be considered” (48) – will account for the attractions of propaganda or its relation to ideology.

In the other main discussion, at *Propaganda* 108, Stanley juxtaposes Darwall’s notion of guilt as the emotion triggered by our failure to live up to demands of reasonableness – the normative ideal of liberal democracy so that everyone’s viewpoint is accorded proper respect. But rather than guilt, it’s empathy, glossed here as the ability to take another’s viewpoint, that is the key to reasonableness. Stanley here discusses Du Bois and Locke, and their call for rhetoric that would “force a dominant majority to expand respect and empathy and thereby increase reasonableness.” So, empathy rather than guilt is the key.

Now there’s an adult-centeredness to these discussions, so the question would have to be – to bring to bear our discussion of Plato’s insight that the emotional basis of morality and politics is laid down in childcare – what are the child-rearing practices that allow for the develop of empathy so that it might be triggered in rhetoric that aims to increase respect and reasonableness? If we are not to continue to denigrate it as mere guesswork, what is the knowledge aspect of empathy-nurturing “artisanal knowledge” of contemporary childcare workers? How has that knowledge been transmitted in apprenticeship?

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