

## THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING ABLE

**Abstract:** The notion of “knowing-how” or practical knowledge has for a long been the focus of philosophical debates, but has come under sustained philosophical pressure. Here, I am considering the less theory-laden notion of an ability, as used in our common sense attributions to others. This notion picks out something distinct from the mental attitudes we commonly attribute to one another, but something that plays an important explanatory role in the ways we make sense of one another. To establish its importance, it is necessary to defend the indispensability of attributions of abilities in explaining actions and to fit them into the existing accounts of our interpretations of actions and agency. I examine a series of arguments against their inclusion, which by contrast, points to the success of the notion of practical knowledge. According to these arguments, abilities would be relevant only indirectly in so far as they appear in the content of other mental attitudes, or are seen as trivial in our attribution of agency on specific occasions, or don’t differ from sub-personal capacities and conceived as kinds of physical causal powers. Yet the role of our attribution of abilities in explanations shows that neither their exclusion nor their substitution by “knowing how” is fully adequate. The challenge is to see how abilities can be accommodated at the personal level while not fitting in the category of mental attitudes like belief, desire or intention. This can be done if we think of abilities, first, as *enabling* conditions, distinct both from causes and from reasons, and as a means to adjust to *opportunities*, distinct from attitudes and dispositions. I conclude by showing why this is a more adequate way to consider the kind of attributions we make under the “knowing how” label.