

## Philosophical behaviourism: two objections<sup>1</sup>

Philosophical behaviourism is a family of theories that claim that we *can* analyse mental concepts in terms of concepts that relate to the body, and in particular, the concept of ‘behaviour’. While other theories in philosophy of mind often focus on questions of metaphysics, e.g. whether mental properties ‘exist’ independently of physical properties, philosophical behaviourism focuses on questions of philosophy of language, and what it means to talk about mental properties in the first place. Once we get clear on this, philosophical behaviourism claims, we will see that some of the metaphysical debates about the mind can be avoided. Before we try to do the *metaphysics* of mind, we need to do some *conceptual analysis*.

The term ‘behaviourism’ (without the adjective ‘philosophical’) refers to a theory of how psychology should conduct itself to achieve the status of a science. Science, behaviourism claimed, can only investigate what is publicly accessible. Hence psychology can and must aim only at the explanation and prediction of bodily behaviour, as any talk of or appeal to ‘inner’, inaccessible mental states cannot be scientific. There is no scientific way to establish their existence or nature. This theory, of how psychology should proceed, is *methodological* behaviourism. It makes claims about the methods of science and about *how we can know* about mental states.

By contrast, philosophical behaviourism claims that *what we are talking about* when we are talking about the mind and mental states is behaviour - what people do and how they react. On this view, the mind is not a ‘thing’. Rather, we can talk about organisms ‘having minds’, or better, having mental states, on the basis of how they behave.

For more on philosophical behaviourism, see the handouts ‘Hempel’s philosophical behaviourism’ and ‘Ryle’s philosophical behaviourism’. This handout discusses two objections to the theory.

### IS MIND WITHOUT BODY CONCEIVABLE?

If philosophical behaviourism provides the correct analysis of mental concepts, then it is inconceivable for there to be a mind without a body. A mind is not a thing, it does not ‘exist’ in the same way as bodies exist only with different properties. To think of the mind as a thing (and hence something that could exist in its own right) is a category mistake, and category mistakes are misconceptions. Whether we use Ryle’s ordinary concept of behaviour or Hempel’s physical one, to behave requires a body. As dispositions to behave, mental states can only be had by creatures that can behave in certain ways. Or again, as statements about

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<sup>1</sup> This handout is based on material from Lacewing, M. (2017) *Philosophy for A Level: Metaphysics of God and Metaphysics of Mind* (London: Routledge), Ch. 3, pp. 249-57

behaviour, psychological statements can only be true of creatures that can behave in certain ways.

Given this, if we can succeed in showing that it is conceivable for the mind to exist without the body, then it seems that logical behaviourism must be false. Now, many people have thought that mind without body is conceivable - belief in God and the existence of one's soul in the afterlife demonstrate this. Shouldn't the analysis of our mental concepts make such common thoughts coherent rather than incoherent? Aren't our concepts defined by how we use them?

In *The Concept of Mind*, Ryle argues that such beliefs don't actually reflect how we use our concepts in everyday life. The 'official doctrine' conflicts 'with the whole body of what we know about minds when we are not speculating about them'. The belief in mind without body is not part of everyday use, but the result of theological and philosophical theorising. We cannot have a clear and distinct idea of ourselves as 'minds' only, and we are mistaken if we think that we can. 'Many people can talk sense with concepts but cannot talk sense about them'.

Hempel would agree. For our mental concepts to have genuine meaning, we must be able to provide the conditions of verification for statements that use such concepts. These conditions of verification must refer to behaviour, since the only information we can have about other people's mental states is from their behaviour.

## **ISSUES DEFINING MENTAL STATES SATISFACTORILY**

Philosophical behaviourism claims that we can understand our concepts of what mental states are in terms of behaviour and dispositions to behave. But to provide such an understanding, we need to successfully identify the behaviour that provides the conditions of verification for saying that someone has a particular mental state (Hempel), or say just what behaviour the mental state disposes us toward (Ryle). Or more precisely, even if we don't need to be able to actually do this, we need to think that, in principle, such an analysis is possible. But is it? There are two reasons to think that it is not.

### The multiple realisability of mental states in behaviour

The first is the 'multiple realisability' of mental states in behaviour. A mental state might be expressed in quite different behaviours not only in different situations, but even in very similar situations by different people. In fear, faced with a lion, I might freeze, you might run. But then again, in fear, faced with a snake, I might run, you might freeze. Or again, on one occasion, I run, and on another, I don't. 'Multiple realisability', in this context, just means that there are many ways in which the disposition (the mental state) can be actualised (expressed in behaviour).

How can we possibly give a list of the conditions of verification for all the ways in which people might behave when afraid? The list will be infinitely long, especially if we have to specify all the different conditions under which people show fear. There is no way we can complete the sentence 'A person is afraid = if they are in

situation x, they will do action A, or if they are in situation y, they will do action B, or if they are in situation z, they will do action C, or...'

The objection from multiple realisability can be understood in two ways. First, it shows that the analysis of mental states in terms of behaviour is not possible. There is no finite set of statements about behaviour which provides an account of the meaning of a mental concept. So philosophical behaviourism does not give an adequate account of what our mental concepts mean.

- P1. People with the same mental state behave differently, both in different circumstances and even in the same circumstance.
- P2. It is not possible to draw up a finite list of hypothetical conditionals or statements of the conditions of verification that describe all the ways someone with that mental state may behave.
- C1. Therefore, the claim that mental states can be analysed in terms of behaviour is false.
- C2. Therefore, philosophical behaviourism is false.

Second, if different people with the same mental state have dispositions to do different things in similar situations, how can we say that these different dispositions are actually the same mental state? What is it that makes it the same mental state, given that the dispositions are different? The objection shows that what makes any mental state the mental state that it is - what makes a pain pain, what makes the fear of snakes a fear of snakes, what makes the belief that Paris is the capital of France the belief that Paris is the capital of France - cannot be simply how someone behaves or is disposed to behave. The conditions of verification and/or behavioural dispositions don't express the identity conditions for mental states.

- P1. People with the same mental state behave differently, both in different circumstances and even in the same circumstance.
- C1. Therefore, what makes it true that two people have the same mental state is not that they have the same behavioural dispositions.
- C2. Therefore, philosophical behaviourism is false.

### Circularity

The second difficulty in analysing mental states in terms of behaviour and behavioural dispositions is that how someone behaves in a particular situation depends not on just one mental state, such as being afraid, but on how this interacts with other mental states. Suppose I am afraid of dangerous snakes. Does this dispose me to run when I see one? That depends. Do I believe the snake is dangerous? Do I believe that this type of dangerous snake is one you shouldn't run away from? Am I able to recognise the type of snake? Do I want to avoid being bitten? And so on.

We can't specify the conditions of verification for fear, or again, what set of dispositions fear is, without mentioning other mental states. That's a problem for the claim that we can analyse mental states in terms of behaviour. Suppose I want to define the concept 'furniture'. I say 'furniture is tables, chairs, bookcases, and other pieces of furniture'. This is an awful definition, because the term 'furniture'

appears in my definition of what 'furniture' means. The definition is circular, because the term we want to define appears in the definition.

The same challenge faces philosophical behaviourism. If we try to say what fear of snakes is by including sentences like 'if someone recognises a snake and believes that the snake is dangerous, then they will run', while this doesn't mention 'fear', it mentions other mental states. If we then provide a further analysis of these mental states, such as the belief that the snake is dangerous in terms of dispositions as well, we will have to mention other mental states again. What behaviour my belief that the snake is dangerous disposes me towards will depend on other mental states. In fact, it will depend on whether or not I am also afraid of snakes!

The objection is that there is no way of analysing a mental state in terms of behaviour (either in terms of conditions of verification or in terms of dispositions) without mentioning other mental states. And so the analysis will be circular. A circular analysis, like a circular definition, is unsatisfactory. Philosophical behaviourism aims to tell us what mental states are, but can't do so without talking about mental states in the analysis! So it doesn't provide an analysis of what mental states are after all.

### **HEMPEL'S RESPONSE TO MULTIPLE REALISABILITY AND CIRCULARITY**

The objections from multiple realisability and circularity are particularly forceful against Hempel's hard behaviourism, since he claims that the conditions of verification give a complete translation of statements using mental concepts in terms statements about behaviour. For the translation to be complete, then we need a finite list of the conditions of verification. But multiple realisability suggests that there can be no such list. And for it to be a translation, then we must avoid using mental concepts in stating the conditions of verification. But circularity suggests that we cannot eliminate mental concepts in this way.

One response Hempel could make is to emphasise the importance of statements about physiology and brain processes. While people may behave in many different ways in different situations, their physiology and brain processes will be the same, he could argue. And it is these, not the many varied statements about how people might act, which are central to identifying what mental concepts really mean.

However, this response would move his theory closer to a form of type identity theory, since 'behaviour' turns out not to be as important as physical properties of the body. As a form of type identity theory, it doesn't avoid the problem of multiple realisability, since type identity theory faces its own version of this problem! The physiology and brain processes of different people (or certainly, of different species) could well be very different, even though they have the same mental state.

In fact, Hempel eventually abandoned his theory. He gave up the claim that we can define mental concepts in terms of behavioural conditions of verification; indeed, he gave up verificationism. Instead, he accepted that scientific statements as a whole, including psychological ones, may introduce 'hypothetical entities',

e.g. beliefs, genes, atoms, and so on. Claims about such entities cannot be understood just in terms of how we verify them; the relationship between talk of such things and testing the truth of claims about them is more complicated than that.

### **RYLE'S RESPONSE TO MULTIPLE REALISABILITY AND CIRCULARITY**

While Hempel's theory must answer the objections, Ryle's theory may escape them, because they misunderstand what he is claiming. In essence, he accepts both points, and builds them into his theory.

First, in accordance with circularity, Ryle argues that disposition statements are 'open', and cannot be replaced by a complete set of hypothetical statements linking particular matters of fact (such as a situation and a behaviour). Therefore, Ryle accepts that it is impossible to specify mental states in terms of dispositions, replacing mental concepts with behavioural ones alone in our thought and language. Second, in accordance with multiple realisability, Ryle argues that mental concepts are concepts of 'indefinitely heterogenous' sets of dispositions. Nothing that is 'indefinite' can be exhaustively characterised - no finite list is possible. The objections are correct, but they are not objections, since his philosophical behaviourism doesn't aim to offer finite translations of psychological claims.

However, this response doesn't address the second interpretation of the objection from multiple realisability. If mental states are so 'heterogenous', what makes a mental state the mental state that it is? Is there any stable correlation (let alone identity) between a mental state and behavioural dispositions? It seems that, given circularity, a particular mental state could be (compatible with having) a disposition to just about any behaviour, depending on a person's other mental states at the time. My fear of dangerous snakes could dispose me to say 'Well, hello there, Mr Muggins!' if I also believe that this phrase effectively prevents snake attacks!

If mental states are behavioural dispositions, then mental state  $x$  = behavioural disposition  $x$  and mental state  $y$  = behavioural disposition  $y$ . A different behavioural disposition is a different mental state, and the same mental state must give us the same behavioural disposition. But according to multiple realisability, you and I could have mental state  $x$ , but I have behavioural disposition  $x$  while you have behavioural disposition  $y$ , given our other mental states - we are both afraid of the snake, but I am disposed to say 'hello there, Mr Muggins' and you are disposed to run! Leibniz's law of the indiscernibility of identicals says that if two things are identical (i.e. are just one thing), then they must share all the same properties. So if we have the same mental state but different behavioural dispositions, by Leibniz's law, mental states can't be behavioural dispositions.

Ryle can reply that we shouldn't focus on individual 'pieces' of behaviour that may differ, as this again misunderstands the theory. Ryle's analysis allows that we can't tell what disposition, if any, is being expressed in a single piece of behaviour. What makes the behaviour the expression of the disposition that it

does, in fact, express, depends on whether certain hypothetical statements about other situations are true or not. So whether or not I feel afraid of the snake isn't fixed only by what I actually say or do, but by a whole host of dispositions to other behaviour in other circumstances, e.g. what I would do if the snake comes swiftly towards me after I said 'hello there, Mr Muggins', and so on.

Once we recognise this, we can say that while mental states involve 'indefinitely heterogenous' dispositions, we shouldn't overstate the case. On the whole, people in the same mental state have very similar dispositions. Many of these similarities hold even when there are some things they do differently. For example, for fear, there are similarities in how they answer 'are you scared?', their facial expressions, etc. There is sufficient overlap for us to say that they are in the same mental state.

Furthermore, Leibniz's law is about identity in metaphysics, and so it doesn't obviously apply to Ryle's theory. His claim that mental states are behavioural dispositions isn't a claim of identity between two 'entities', but a logical analysis of what we mean when we are talking about mental states. Despite not being able to reduce mental concepts to statements about behaviour, Ryle argues that a concept of a mental state is a concept of a set of behavioural dispositions. Ryle's philosophical behaviourism provides an analysis of the meaning of mental concepts, but it does not justify the claim that we could replace talk of mental concepts with talk of specific behavioural dispositions. Mental concepts work at a higher level of generality that can't be reduced to sets of individual hypothetical statements about behaviour.