

## Philosophical behaviourism and consciousness<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 that arise from reflecting on the subjective, first-personal nature of consciousness.

### THE ASYMMETRY BETWEEN SELF-KNOWLEDGE AND KNOWLEDGE OF OTHER PEOPLE’S MENTAL STATES

In *The Concept of Mind*, Gilbert Ryle observes that it is part of the ‘official doctrine’ of substance dualism that the ways in which we gain knowledge of our own and others’ mental states are very different. We are directly aware of our own mental states, but we can only infer those of others. Our self-knowledge comes from our consciousness of our mental states and our introspection of that consciousness. We cannot be conscious of anyone else’s mental states in the same

---

<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. 257-65

way. Furthermore, we are aware of our mental states in such a way that we cannot make mistakes, but this is not true of our beliefs about other people's minds.

Now if mental states were dispositions to behaviour, or again if what it means to say that someone has a particular mental state is given by conditions of verification, all this wouldn't be true. Given that what I am saying when I say 'I am in pain', or 'I believe that Paris is the capital of France', is that I behave or am disposed to behave in certain ways, then it seems that I would have to infer what mental states I have from how I behave, or how I think I am disposed to behave.

But, we can object, this isn't right. I can know what I believe, what I want or fear or hope, directly, without inference and without thinking about how other people would verify whether I have these mental states. Furthermore, if I am thinking to myself, I know what I am thinking in a way that no one else can.

- P1. The analysis of mental states in terms of behavioural dispositions (or conditions of verification) rules out an asymmetry between self-knowledge and knowledge of other people's mental states.
- P2. Yet it seems obvious from experience that there is such an asymmetry.
- C1. Therefore, philosophical behaviourism is false.

## **RYLE ON CONSCIOUSNESS**

Self-knowledge is not an issue that Carl Hempel addresses in his explanation of behaviourism in 'The logical analysis of psychology'. However, one response he could make is that he is only interested in discussing the meaning of statements in psychology, which as a science, deals only with knowledge of other people's mental states. But this response is unsatisfactory, since we obviously do use mental concepts when talking about our own mental states. The challenge remains how Hempel's behaviourism can understand and explain self-knowledge.

Ryle's response is to argue that consciousness, understood in as giving special self-knowledge through introspection, is a myth. He argues that self-knowledge and our knowledge of other minds is on a par, gained in the same way in each case - by paying attention. This enables us to make reliable dispositional claims about our own or other people's behaviour, whether this is overt or silent. The main difference is simply that we have more evidence available to ourselves.

Central to Ryle's argument is that being conscious of something is to pay attention to it (to 'heed' it, he says). We can pay attention to what we are doing and to what we have just felt or said silently to ourselves. But we can also pay attention to what someone else is doing and what they say out loud to us. To know what we are thinking or feeling is not to stand in some special, inner private relation to certain mental 'objects' ('thoughts', 'feelings'), but for us to be ready to say what we think or feel and be unsurprised by the occurrence of the thought or feeling.

Compare not knowing a process in one's mind: you make a joke spontaneously or come up with a solution to a problem. How did you do it? You can't say - the joke

or solution comes as a 'surprise' to you. Knowing what you are thinking or doing is just to be continuously prepared for what comes next in that process.

Hence consciousness provides the same kind of knowledge in cases of knowing our own mental states and knowing the mental states of others. The main difference is that in our own case, we have more to go on, because we are the audience of our silent, inner speech - our thinking - and others are not.

Knowing what you are thinking is not different in kind from knowing what someone else is thinking, since we can know just as directly what someone else thinks when they speak, at least when they speak in an unguarded, unembarrassed and uncalculated way, which is the most natural way to speak. When we talk like this - whether to others, or silently to ourselves - we are directly expressing our mental states. So when we pay attention to what we say, we gain knowledge of the mind of whoever is talking. Introspection is not a form of perception of special mental objects. It is just to pay this kind of attention to ourselves.

### Objections to Ryle's theory of consciousness

We can make two objections to Ryle's analysis of consciousness and self-knowledge. First, can thinking be adequately understood in terms of inner speech, and can internalised speech form the model for mental processes generally? What about non-linguistic mental processes or changes in feeling and mood? Here we aren't saying anything to ourselves.

Second, Ryle seems to miss out the subjective, experiential aspect of mental states and processes. The distinctive quality of certain experiences, e.g. how a sensation or emotion feels to the person experiencing it, is central to our mental lives. I have an awareness of this aspect of mental states and processes for my own mental states, but not for anyone else's. How does philosophical behaviourism account for this aspect of self-knowledge and the asymmetry between self-knowledge and knowledge of other people's mental states?

It may be that these objections don't themselves re-establish a strong asymmetry between self-knowledge and knowledge of others' mental states. But they attack Ryle's rejection of it.

### **THE DISTINCTNESS OF MENTAL STATES FROM BEHAVIOUR**

It seems that many mental states and processes have an 'inner' aspect that can't be captured by behaviour and behavioural dispositions. We should agree that to be in pain often involves doing certain things, such as wincing, recoiling from the cause of pain, nursing the damaged part of the body, etc. (call all this 'pain behaviour'). But this doesn't capture the 'essence' of pain, which is that it hurts.

More generally, we can argue that statements about behaviour or conditions of verification only tell us about how to know about mental states. They don't give us the 'intrinsic nature' of mental states, what they are 'in themselves', so to speak. Mental states are not the same as these conditions of verification or behavioural dispositions, but are something distinct or something more than them. (For

instance, perhaps they cause this behaviour, and that is why they are correlated with it.)

In his discussion of this objection, Hempel responds that our understanding of people in terms of their mental states, e.g. that they are in pain or that they want chocolate, is tied up with their physical state and their behaviour. We can't understand what it is for them to be in such-and-such a mental state without referring to such physical conditions. What would it be for someone to want chocolate but never seek it or express this in language? What is a 'desire' if not something that motivates behaviour? The behaviour isn't just evidence of their mental state, it gives us the meaning of the concept. Furthermore, our understanding of them is based on the information we have about them - and all the information we get concerns their bodily behaviour. Because meaning is given by conditions of verification, we can only meaningfully talk about things that we can gain information about, and the meaning of a concept is given by the ways in which we can check the truth of claims that use it.

But what, we may object, about perfect actors? Someone can pretend to be in pain, and may do so utterly convincingly, and yet not be in pain. Or again, someone may 'live a lie', pretending to have certain beliefs and desires without actually doing so.

Ryle might respond that mental states aren't just doing certain things, but to have the disposition to do them. The actor doesn't have the same dispositions that someone who really feels pain has. There are 'if...then...' statements that are true of the actor that are not true of the person who is really in pain. And similarly with someone pretending to believe or want what they do not, in fact, believe or want.

This response may be convincing for intentional mental states such as beliefs and desires. But we can object that, at least when it comes to phenomenal properties of consciousness, this analysis misses an important point. Pain isn't just a disposition to shout or wince; there is also how pain feels, 'what it is like' to experience pain. This is what distinguishes the person in pain from the actor. It is highly counter-intuitive to argue that this aspect of experience is constituted entirely by behavioural dispositions.

To make the point, in his article 'Brains and behaviour', Hilary Putnam asks us to imagine a community of 'super-spartans'. (The Spartans were an ancient Greek community who were very tough and discouraged demonstrations of pain.) These are people (or creatures) who so completely disapprove of showing pain that all pain behaviour has been suppressed. They aren't acting; this is how they are in everyday life. They no longer have any disposition to demonstrate pain in their behaviour. Yet, they could still be in pain. Pain is conceivable without any associated pain behaviour. Pain can't be understood just in terms of dispositions to pain behaviour, it is distinct from such behavioural dispositions. So philosophical behaviourism is false.

Hempel argues in response that actors meet only some of the conditions of verification for pain, those based on directly observing their behaviour in the ordinary sense of the word. But his behaviourism claims that 'behaviour' covers

physiological and neurological states and processes as well. And here there will be a difference between actors and people who are genuinely in pain. The physiology and brain activities of actors will be different. He gives the example of mental illness. No one can have all the symptoms of being mentally ill and yet not be mentally ill. If they could, then there would be no difference between being mentally ill and not being mentally ill. There must be something that distinguishes people who are mentally ill from those who are not (including actors).

We can apply his response to Putnam's example of super-spartans. There will be conditions of verification for saying that a super-spartan is in pain. Given that they do not show pain in their overt behaviour, the conditions of verification will have to prioritise statements about their physiology and brain processes (or whatever physical processes underlie their pain response).

Such a response would accept that mental states are distinct from behaviour in the ordinary sense of the word, but not distinct from the physical states of the body. However, if Hempel prioritises the physiological and neurological conditions of verification over overt behaviour, then his theory starts to sound more like a kind of type identity theory (though one that proposes an analytic reduction of mental states to physical states rather than an ontological one).