

Ryle's philosophical behaviourism¹

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.

There are different kinds of philosophical behaviourism. Although they both agree that we can analyse mental concepts in terms of behaviour, their arguments for philosophical behaviourism, and indeed what they mean by 'behaviour', are very different. In this handout, we look at the form of the theory defended by Gilbert Ryle.

SUBSTANCE DUALISM MAKES A 'CATEGORY MISTAKE'

In *The Concept of Mind*, Ryle argues that the traditional metaphysical framework for discussing the mind rests on a mistake. Cartesian dualism understands the mind in terms of substances and properties. It claims that mind and body are different substances, and that just as there are physical properties and processes, so there are mental properties and processes. Ryle argues that this way of understanding the mind is mistaken.

¹ 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. 237, 243-9

Ryle calls substance dualism 'the dogma of the Ghost in the Machine'. The mistake that it makes, he argues, is a 'category mistake'. What does that mean? Suppose someone is shown around Oxford University - they see the colleges, the buildings with the different faculties and departments, the administrative buildings. But then they ask, 'I've seen the colleges, the faculties, the administration. But where is the university?' They have misunderstood the concept of 'university', thinking that the university is another thing, alongside the colleges, faculties and administration. The person has made a category mistake. The university is not like this; it is how everything that the person has seen is organised.

Or again, suppose someone is having a game of cricket explained to them. The bowler, batters, wicketkeeper and fielders are all pointed out and their tasks explained. But then the person says, 'I've heard a lot about the importance of team spirit. Who does that?' They have misunderstood the concept and made a category mistake. The exercise of team spirit is not another task like bowling or fielding, nor is someone who is bowling and exercising team spirit doing two separate things. Team spirit is about how the players play the game together.

Concepts belong to different logical categories - different ways in which it makes sense to use a concept. A category mistake is to treat a concept as belonging to a different logical category from the one it actually belongs to.

According to Ryle, substance dualism makes the category mistake of thinking that the mind is like the body - another 'thing', a distinct, complex, organised unit subject to distinct relations of cause and effect. The mistake is to think that physical and mental concepts operate in the same way, in the same logical framework of 'things' and 'causes', 'substances' and 'properties'. But to 'have' a mind is not to be in possession of a thing, so that if you have a mind and a body, you have two things. (And 'losing your mind' isn't like losing your keys!) Similarly, talk of mental states and processes understands 'states' and 'processes' along the lines of physical states and processes. But believing something is not a state in the same sense as the physical state of being solid, and doing mental arithmetic is not a process in the same sense as the physical process of a log burning.

Around the time of Descartes, science reached the stage of plausibly claiming that all physical processes could be explained in non-rational, mechanical terms. So the question arose, what is the place of the mind? Ryle argues that people mistakenly inferred that mental concepts, if they don't characterise physical processes, must refer to non-physical, non-mechanical processes which occur in non-physical substance. He calls this the 'para-mechanical hypothesis'. But just as 'Oxford University' doesn't refer to another thing alongside along the buildings and faculties, and 'team spirit' don't refer to another activity alongside bowling, batting and catching, mental concepts aren't like physical concepts, only applied to a separate thing called 'the mind'. Instead, we need to think again about the logical analysis of mental concepts - what do they mean, how do we use them?

DISPOSITIONS

If philosophical behaviourism analysed mental concepts just in terms of actual behaviour, it would be open to an objection. First, we can, to some extent, control our behaviour, e.g. I might stop myself from showing that I am in pain. Second, many mental states, such as knowledge, are dispositions, rather than occurrences. They don't occur at a time, like actual behaviour does. For example, someone who knows French knows French even when they are talking or reading in English.

So we need to understand 'behaviour' not just in terms of actual behaviour, but behaviour that someone would display under different conditions. I want to say that someone *now* understands French (even when *now* they don't meet Hempel's conditions of verification), because, e.g. if I *did* ask them whether they speak French, they would answer 'yes', or if they *were* in France, they would converse with people there in their own language, and so on. Ryle argues that to talk of mental states and processes is to talk not only of actual behaviour, but also of 'dispositions' to behave in certain ways.

Central to Ryle's argument is his observation that we often speak of mental states in action, in their expression in behaviour. To know how to play chess is something demonstrated in actually playing chess, and we attribute this knowledge to someone on the basis of what they do. Or again, to do something intelligently or thoughtfully - playing, reading, cooking, arguing, etc. - is to be able to regulate what you do. So some of our mental concepts identify skills. A skill isn't an act - you can't tell from one piece of behaviour whether it is skilful or just lucky or something else again. But a skill isn't some invisible, non-spatial thing either (nor, we may add, a physical property of the brain). It is a disposition or complex of dispositions.

What is a disposition? A disposition, in its simplest form, is simply how something will or is likely to behave under certain circumstances. For instance, sugar is soluble. Solubility is the disposition to dissolve when placed in water. Having a disposition is not the same as behaving in a certain way *now*. Sugar is soluble even when it isn't actually in water. We can express dispositions using 'if...then...' statements - hypothetical conditionals. To say that sugar is soluble is to say that *if* sugar is placed in water, *then* it will dissolve.

Solubility is a 'single-track' disposition - it is 'actualised' or 'manifest' in just one way, namely dissolving in water. Other dispositions, such as being hard, have many different ways in which they are actualised. We can infer many different facts from knowing that something is hard; e.g. about whether we can pass other things through it, what sound it will make when hit, whether we can change its shape easily, and so on. We need a series of hypothetical (if...then...) statements to express the disposition of being hard.

Many mental concepts are also concepts of dispositions, so that when we talk of someone having a certain mental state, like being proud or believing that the earth is round, we are talking of what they would do, could do, or are liable to do, in particular situations or under particular conditions, including conditions that

they are not in at the moment. Mental concepts can refer to very complex dispositions, dispositions which are 'indefinitely heterogenous'. For example, in saying that someone is proud, consider the many different and subtle ways in which people can manifest pride (Ryle refers to Jane Austen's novel *Pride and Prejudice*).

Whether someone has a particular disposition is a matter of whether certain statements about what they could or would do are true or not. These are hypothetical statements, conditional statements of the form 'if circumstances *c* occur, the person will do *x*'. They are not 'categorical' statements that say how things actually are; e.g. many of those circumstances may never arise. They don't describe actual states of some mental substance. So 'the mind is not the topic of sets of untestable categorical propositions [as substance dualism must hold], but the topic of sets of testable hypothetical and semi-hypothetical propositions'.

By contrast with Carl Hempel's 'hard' behaviourism, Ryle does not think that statements using a mental concept, such as 'he is proud' or 'he knows French', can be 'reduced' in meaning to a series of hypothetical statements about what the person will do in different situations (or what his physical state is). The mental concept can be analysed in terms of such statements - this is what it means - but we can never give a complete translation, so that we can replace the mental concept by physical ones. Dispositional statements are 'open'. They support and justify certain inferences, explanations and predictions. To say that someone is proud enables us to draw inferences about how he will behave in certain situations. But we cannot draw all possible inferences and replace the concept 'proud' with this set of inferences.

A note on other minds

According to philosophical behaviourists, talking about mental states is just talking about actual behaviour and dispositions to behave in certain ways. From how someone behaves, we can infer what behavioural dispositions they have. But from this, we don't then *infer* that they have a mind. The link between behaviour and minds isn't based on evidence, it is logical (conceptual). To say someone behaves in certain ways and has certain behavioural dispositions *just is* to say that they have certain mental states. To understand what others say and do is to understand that they have minds. We can know that other people have minds, because we can know directly that they behave in particular ways. Thus, philosophical behaviourism solves the problem of other minds.

THINKING AND OTHER MENTAL PROCESSES

Philosophical behaviourism is on its strongest ground when talking about the mind in action. But what, we may object, about *just* thinking, without acting (which is where Descartes started)?

Ryle's response to this challenge is first to note that there isn't just one kind of 'thinking'. Again, thinking is often done in, with and through action. When we act thoughtfully or intelligently, the thinking isn't a separate process from the doing, so that the thinking takes place in the mind and the doing in the physical world. There is one process - behaving (reading, driving, conversing ...) intelligently - and

what makes it an expression of thinking is that it has a certain manner which can be expressed by dispositional statements about what we can, could and would do in certain situations.

But there is also the matter of thinking quietly ‘to oneself’. Ryle’s central claim here is that this is *internalised speaking*: ‘Much of our ordinary thinking is conducted in internal monologue or silent soliloquy’. Speaking is, of course, an overt behaviour, and we only acquire the ability to think - to speak silently to ourselves - with effort. The silence, and the fact that we are speaking only with ourselves, are *inessential* to the nature of thinking. To think through a maths problem, one can do so either with pen and paper, articulating the steps as one goes, or silently, ‘in one’s head’. Whether a process is public or private is irrelevant to whether it is thinking. ‘The phrase “in the mind” can and should always be dispensed with’. Mental processes only sometimes and only contingently take place ‘in the mind’. Processes that do, as it happens, take place silently don’t define thinking any more than those that take place as publicly observable behaviours.

Dispositions and occurrences

Thinking is something that happens at a time and takes time. It is a process, it ‘occurs’, it is a mental ‘occurrence’. So we can’t say that thinking is *just* a matter of dispositions. The same is true of other mental occurrences and processes, such as being conscious of (paying attention to) what you are doing, feeling or thinking (what Ryle calls ‘heeding’). What’s the relation between occurrences and dispositions?

To understand this, compare ‘it is dissolving’. This states that something is happening, but does so in dispositional terms. From ‘it is dissolving’, we know that it is soluble, and so dissolves in water. So it would do just what it is doing in this situation, given that it has that disposition.

Likewise, to say that someone is paying attention to what they are doing is to attribute dispositions about what they could say if you asked them, but also to add that they are ‘in the mood or frame of mind’ to do just what it is that they are doing. This is what Ryle means by a ‘semi-hypothetical’ statement - it both explains an actual occurrence and enables us to make inferences.

A NOTE ON PHYSICALISM AND THE CATEGORY MISTAKE

In the section ‘Substance dualism makes a ‘category mistake’’, we saw that Ryle argues that dualism misunderstands the logic of mental concepts. It understands the mind as another ‘thing’, like the body in fitting into a metaphysical framework of substances, properties, and causation. We can extend his criticism to some physicalist theories as well.

Some physicalist theories, such as type identity theory and eliminative materialism, reject the idea that the mind is a separate substance, they understand mental properties and physical properties in the same way. Mental properties *are* physical properties, according to type identity theory. According to eliminative materialism, mental properties are part of an empirical theory that

offers causal explanations, just like other scientific theories of the physical world. However, unlike dualism, which infers that mental concepts refer to non-physical, non-mechanical processes, these physicalist theories infer that mental concepts must refer to the same physical, mechanical processes that our physical concepts refer to.

Ryle's philosophical behaviourism rejects both options. An analysis of our mental concepts shows that they don't work like physical concepts. While physical explanations use categorical concepts, mental concepts are dispositional.

So is philosophical behaviourism a form of physicalism? We can say that it is, because, according to philosophical behaviourism, there is no distinct psychological 'reality' - no distinct psychological substances or properties. This isn't because the theory eliminates them, but because questions about the mind aren't questions about what exists. What exists is given by natural science. Categorical facts about substances, their properties and causes belong here, in the descriptions of the world that natural science provides. Dispositions depend on such categorical facts - sugar's disposition to dissolve depends on its physical properties, and our dispositions to behave as we do depend on our physical properties. But dispositions, for Ryle at least, aren't additional 'properties' (at least, of the same kind as physical properties). Dispositions are expressed in hypothetical statements, not categorical ones. And saying 'if this happens, then this will happen' doesn't state anything about what exists.