

Ryle's behaviorist view of the mind

Jeff Speaks

August 31, 2006

1	The dogma of the ghost in the machine	1
1.1	The problem of mental causation	1
1.2	The problem of other minds	2
2	The Cartesian view as a category mistake	2
3	Ryle's positive view	3

1 The dogma of the ghost in the machine

Ryle calls the kind of dualist view that we found in Descartes 'the official doctrine', and summarizes it like this:

"The official doctrine, which hails chiefly from Descartes, is something like this. With the doubtful exceptions of idiots and infants in arms every human being has both a body and a mind. His body and mind are ordinarily harnessed together, but after the death of his body his mind may continue to exist and function.

Human bodies are in space and are subject to the mechanical laws which govern all other bodies in space . . . But minds are not in space, nor are their operations subject to mechanical laws. . . . A person therefore lives through two collateral histories, one consisting of what happens in and to his body, the other consisting of what happens in and to his mind. . . . The events in the first history are events in the physical world, those in the second are events in the mental world."

Now, it is clear that Ryle thinks that this view is not the right one; he says that he will refer to it, 'with deliberate abusiveness', as the dogma of the ghost in the machine. What we have to get clear on is why he thinks the Cartesian view is so clearly false.

1.1 *The problem of mental causation*

One reason for Ryle's attitude is familiar from our discussion of dualism: the problem of how mental and physical could interact, if they are such fundamentally different sorts of things. Ryle says:

“Even when ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ are construed as metaphors, the problem how a person's mind and body influence one another is notoriously charged with theoretical difficulties . . . the actual transactions between the episodes of the private history and those of the public history remain mysterious, since by definition they can belong to neither series. . . . They can be inspected neither by introspection nor by laboratory experiment. They are theoretical shuttlecocks which are forever being bandied from the physiologist to the psychologist and from the psychologist back to the physiologist.”

1.2 *The problem of other minds*

In addition to the problem of mental-physical causation, Ryle also brings up another standard worry about dualism: the problem of how we can know about the existence of other minds. For example, he says:

“It is an historical curiosity that it was not noticed that the entire argument was broken-backed. Theorists correctly assumed that any sane man could already recognise the differences between, say, . . . rational and non-rational utterances . . . Yet the explanation given presupposed that one person could in principle never recognise the difference between the rational and irrational utterances issuing from other bodies, since he could never get access to the immaterial causes of their utterances. Save for the doubtful exception of himself, he could never tell the difference between a man and a Robot. . . . According to the [Cartesian] theory, external observers could never know how the overt behaviour of others is correlated with their mental powers and processes and so they could never know or even plausibly conjecture whether their applications of mental conduct concepts to these other people were correct or incorrect.”

Two readings of this epistemological problem for the Cartesian view: (1) it opens the door to a kind of skepticism about other minds which cannot be answered, and (2) it makes it impossible even to have evidence about the mental states of others. For to use their behavior as evidence we would need to observe some correlation between their behavior and their mental states; and that is what we do not have.

2 **The Cartesian view as a category mistake**

So let's suppose that Ryle is right, and dualism is a mistake: minds are not immaterial substances. So one might expect his next step to be to tell us what minds are: if they are not immaterial substances, what are they?

Ryle does not do this. The reason is that he thinks that dualism is a special kind of mistake, which he calls a ‘category mistake.’ It is hard to give a clear definition of what a category mistake is, but easy to give examples. The examples of the colleges and the university; the example of John Doe and the average taxpayer.

One thing that these examples have in common is that they involve comparing some kind of thing with something else which is a ‘construction’ out of that kind of thing. So, for example, the university is (let’s say) just a collection of colleges; and the average taxpayer is just another way of talking about the individuals who pay taxes in a given country.

How would this apply to the case of the mind? The connection of the view that dualism is a category mistake to the distinction between substance and property dualism.

Ryle does not give an account of what the mind is; he thinks that the mind is, like the university and the average taxpayer, a construction out of some more basic kind of thing. This more basic kind of thing seems to be particular mental states (mental events, mental properties). So just as explaining what colleges are is enough to explain what the university is, so explaining what mental properties are is enough to explain what the mind is. The idea that there is some further story to be told is an illusion, according to Ryle.

3 Ryle’s positive view

In the selection we read for class, Ryle does not say much about his positive view of mental states. We know that he does not think that mental properties are things of the same ‘logical type’ as physical properties, and that treating them as such involves a category mistake. But then what can we say about what they are?

Ryle thought of mental states as falling into two categories: dispositional and occurrent states. About dispositional states Ryle had this to say:

“I have already had occasion to argue that a number of words which we commonly use to describe and explain people’s behavior signify dispositions and not episodes. To say that a person knows something, or aspires to be something, is not to say that he is at a particular moment in a process of doing or undergoing anything, but that he is prone to do certain things, when the need arises, or that he is prone to do and feel certain things in situations of certain sorts.

This is, in itself, hardly more than a dull fact (almost) of ordinary grammar. The verbs ‘know’, ‘possess’ and ‘aspire’ do not behave like the verbs ‘run’, ‘wake up’, or ‘tingle’; we cannot say ‘he knew so and so for two minutes, then stopped and started again after a breather’, ‘he gradually aspired to be a bishop’, or ‘he is now engaged in possessing a bicycle.’” (*Concept of Mind*, 116)

This tells us a few things about Ryle’s positive view:

- We can use ordinary language as at least a rough guide for distinguishing dispositional states from ‘episodes’, or occurrent states. Roughly, if describing the duration of a mental state sounds odd in most cases, then the state is dispositional.
- To be in a dispositional mental state is to be disposed, or prone, to do and feel certain things in certain circumstances. Since beliefs are dispositional states, we should be able to analyze belief in terms of dispositions to do and feel things. This appears to be an analysis of a large class of mental properties.

It is fair to complain that it does not tell us as much as we should want to know. One wants more detail than ‘prone to do and feel certain things in certain circumstances.’ To be fair, Ryle does go into more detail when he’s focusing in on specific mental phenomena. But a common complaint about behaviorists like Ryle is that they never provide full analyses of mental states, but rather just gesture in the direction of such analyses.

A second worry about the above remarks is that it analyzes dispositional mental states partly in terms of occurrent mental states; dispositional states are a matter of being prone to do *and feel* certain things, and feelings are a paradigm case of occurrent mental states.

So what does Ryle have to say about occurrent mental states, like feelings and sensations? His most sustained discussion of this topic is in Ch. 7, ‘Sensation and Observation’, of *The Concept of Mind* (which we did not read for this class). But, while he says a number of sensible things about sensations in that chapter, he never gives an account of what it is for a subject to have a sensation – to feel a pain, or an itch, or whatever. This is how the chapter ends:

“... ‘hurt’, ‘itch’, and ‘qualm’, when used literally, are not the names of moods. We locate hurts and itches where we locate the grit, or straw, that we feel, or fancy we feel. Yet ‘hurt’ and ‘itch’ are not nouns of perception either. ... I do not know what more is to be said about the logical grammar of such words, save that there is much more to be said.” (244)

Here Ryle recognizes sensations as a kind of mental event distinct from not only from dispositional states like beliefs, but also from perceptions and moods. But he does not offer an account of these mental properties. Why this can be seen — if the two options are dualism and behaviorism — as support for the dualist.

Why this also calls into question Ryle’s account of dispositional states.

What should Ryle say about sensations? In other places, Ryle seems concerned to give an account of the nature of mental phenomena in terms of the facts that we use to recognize those phenomena. When he asks what intelligent behavior is, for example, he asks how we can recognize behavior as intelligent. So maybe we should ask: how do we tell that someone is in pain? The answer seems pretty clear: we can tell that someone is in pain when they exhibit pain behavior: wincing, screaming, etc. So maybe someone who adopts Ryle’s view of dispositional mental states should identify pains with some (presumably complex) combination of pain behavior.