

Topic 3

Philosophical Behaviourism

Introduction

What is mind? What are mental states or mental events? How should we even approach a question such as this? One might approach the task by asking what we mean when we use mental terms.

Philosophical behaviourists argue that mental terms are not comparable to physical terms. That is to say, when we use mental terms we are not talking about mental entities in space, in the way we talk about physical entities in space. To think this way about our mental concepts is to misunderstand how they work (in Ryle's terminology, it is to make a category mistake).

Mental terms, according to Ryle, refer to dispositions to behave in certain ways. Ryle's theory of mind can be called 'behaviourism' (or 'philosophical behaviourism') 'since it holds that mental language can be analysed in terms of dispositions to behave in various ways' (Cottingham, 2008, p.251).

Gilbert Ryle's *The Concept of Mind* (1949)

'The Ghost in the Machine'

According to the 'official doctrine' (Cartesian Dualism),

‘Human bodies are in space and are subject to the mechanical laws which govern all other bodies in space. Bodily processes can be inspected by external observers... But minds are not in space, nor are their operations subject to mechanical laws. The workings of one’s mind are not witnessable by other observers... 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 first is public, the second private.... It is customary to express.... his two lives and his two worlds by saying that the things and events which belong to the physical world... are external, while the workings of his own mind are internal. This antithesis of outer and inner is of course meant to be construed as a metaphor, since minds, not being in space could not be described as being spatially inside anything else...’ (Ryle, 2000, pp.13-14).

This metaphor of the ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ gives rise to the assumption that there are two kinds of existence. Physical existence has the necessary feature of being in space and time, and is composed of matter. Mental existence has the necessary feature of being in time, but not in space, and is composed of consciousness (ibid., pp.14-15).

Mind becomes a disembodied, mysterious thing or ‘the Ghost in the Machine’: ‘I shall speak of it [the official doctrine] with

deliberate abusiveness, as ‘the dogma of the Ghost in the Machine” (ibid., p.17)

The ‘Category-Mistake’

Talking of mind as a separate entity existing alongside the body is a confusion; more specifically, it is a category mistake, says Ryle.

He explains category mistake by an analogy of a University:

‘A foreigner visiting Oxford or Cambridge for the first time is shown a number of colleges, libraries, playing fields, scientific departments and administration offices. He then asks, ‘But where is the University?...His mistake lay in the... assumption that it was correct to speak of Christ Church, the Bodleian Library, the Ashmolean Museum *and* the University, to speak, that is, as if ‘the University’ stood for an extra member of the class of which these units are members’ (ibid., pp.17-18).

But the University is not a separate item existing alongside the libraries, laboratories, students, administration, colleges, etc, that make it up, any more that mental events are separate events over and above bodily events.

In describing the workings of a mind, he says, ‘In opposition to this entire dogma, I am arguing that in describing the working of a person’s mind we are not describing a second set of shadowy operations. We are describing certain phases of his one career;

namely, we are describing the ways in which parts of his conduct are managed' (ibid., p.49).

Behaviourism

A person's mind, according to Ryle, is not an entity, but rather is the manner and way in which he behaves. It is a matter of a person's *tendencies* and abilities to do certain things. He claims that mental properties are ascribed not according to the possession of some private processes that cannot be observed. Rather, to talk of someone having a certain mental state is to talk about how she is disposed to behave in certain circumstances (Cottingham, 2008, p.251):

‘One of the central... motives of this book is to show that ‘mental’ does not denote a status, such that a person can sensibly ask of a given thing or event whether it is mental or physical, ‘in the mind’ or ‘in the outside world’. To talk of a person's mind is not to talk of a repository which is permitted to house objects that something called ‘the physical world’ is forbidden to house; it is to talk of the person's abilities, liabilities and inclinations to do and undergo certain sort of things, and of the doing and undergoing of these things in the ordinary world’ (Ryle, 2000, p.191).

According to Ryle, a category mistake is evident in supposing that in addition to overt public performances of human beings, the intelligent actions they carry out, and the activities they engage in, there is something else – some immaterial, hidden entity which is

the ‘repository’ of a person’s intellect. As he says, ‘Overt intelligent performances are not clues to the workings of the mind; they *are* those workings’ (Ryle, 2000, p.57).

What might the problems be with this picture of the mind?

1. Mental events have causal powers. This is not adequately explained by behaviorism, according to which a mental event *is* the disposition to behave in a particular way or another.
2. In reducing mental states to patterns of outward behaviour, or dispositions to engage in such behaviour, behaviourism denies the existence of the ‘inner’ aspects of mental states, their qualia. (There is more to being in pain than, for example, groaning, crying, and so on, or being disposed to behave in such ways. There is something it feels like to have a pain, an itch, an ache, etc. These all involve consciousness: there is something it is like to undergo such experiences.)
3. How do we account for seeing something ‘in the mind’s eye’ so to speak? Relatedly, it is not clear that this approach can cope successfully with what is happening when, for example, someone sits at a desk for an hour, just thinking intensely about a problem.
4. Consider that we seem to know our minds better than others do. What are the implications of this in relation to behaviourism?

References

- Ryle, *The Concept of Mind*, with an introduction by Daniel C. Dennett (London: Penguin, 2000).
- Cottingham's introduction to 'The Myth of the 'Ghost in the Machine': Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind*' (extracts from Ryle's *The Concept of Mind*), p.251, in Cottingham (ed.), *Western Philosophy: an anthology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008).