

Gilbert Ryle (1900–1976)

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Gilbert Ryle and his junior colleague, J. L. Austin, were the leading figures of post-World War II Oxford philosophy. Though their aims and methods were different (see below), both are correctly characterized as “ordinary language philosophers.” Unlike Austin, who published only seven papers in his lifetime, Ryle was a prolific writer. Much of what we know about his personal life derives from self-references in his numerous biographical sketches and reviews, and especially from his autobiography. In these various essays he describes his interactions with, and assessments of, the foremost philosophers of the time, among them Wittgenstein, Moore, Collingwood, Carnap, Prichard, H. H. Price, and Austin. His autobiography is to be found in *Ryle*, edited by O. P. Wood and G. Pitcher (1970). Although it is only fifteen pages long, it is wittily self-deprecating, devastating in its depiction of the state of philosophy in Oxford in the 1920s and 1930s, packed with information, and instructive with respect to his philosophical development. About Oxford philosophy he says:

During my time as an undergraduate and during my first years as a teacher, the philosophical kettle in Oxford was barely lukewarm. I think that it would have been stone cold but for Prichard, who did bring into his chosen and rather narrow arenas vehemence, tenacity, unceremoniousness, and a perverse consistency that made our hackles rise as nothing else at that time did. The Bradleians were not yet extinct, but they did not come out into the open. I cannot recollect hearing one referring mention of the Absolute. The Cook Wilsonians were hankering to gainsay the Bradleians and the Croceans, but were given few openings. Pragmatism was still represented by F. C. S. Schiller, but as his tasteless jocosities beat vainly against the snubbing primnesses of his colleagues, even this puny spark was effectually quenched . . . Soon Oxford’s hermetically conserved atmosphere began to smell stuffy even to ourselves.

About himself he states that in his mid-twenties he decided that philosophy essentially involves argumentation, and therefore that “the theory and technology” of reasoning needed to be studied by any would-be philosopher. Since nothing of that sort was available in Oxford he “went all Cambridge,” and seriously began to study Russell; but, as he frankly admits, with marginal qualifications:

Having no mathematical ability, equipment or interest, I did not make myself even competent in the algebra of logic; nor did the problem of the foundations of mathematics

become a question that burned in my belly. My interest was in the theory of Meanings – horrid substantive! – and quite soon, I am glad to say in the theory of its senior partner, Nonsense. I laboured upon the doublets – Sense and Reference, Intension and Extension, Concept and Object, Propositions and Constituents, Objectives and Objects, Facts and Things, Formal Concepts and Real Concepts, Proper Names and Descriptions, and Subjects and Predicates. It was in Russell's *Principles of Mathematics* and not in his *Principia Mathematica*, in his Meinong articles and his "On Denoting," that I found the pack-ice of logical theory cracking. It was up these cracks that Wittgenstein steered his *Tractatus*.

His interests in the theories of meaning and reference were to dominate the remainder of his career, and differentiate his version of ordinary language philosophy from Austin's. Austin's main concerns were in the utterances that constitute promises, warnings, recommendations, admonishments, counsels, and commands, – i.e. in so-called "speech acts" (see AUSTIN) – whereas Ryle saw his task as that of distinguishing locutions that make sense from those that do not. In a succinct passage Ryle explains the difference between his task and Austin's.

An examiner might pose two questions:

- (1) Why cannot a traveller reach London gradually?
- (2) Why is "I warn you ..." the beginning of a warning, but "I insult you" not the beginning of an insult?

On six days out of seven Question 1 would be Ryle's favourite; Question 2, Austin's. Each of us would think – wrongly – that there is not much real meat in the unfavoured question. But their meats are of such entirely disparate kinds that the epithet "linguistic" would apply in totally different ways (1) to the answer-sketch, "Adverbs like 'gradually' won't go with verbs like 'reach' for the following reason ..."; (2) to the answer-sketch "To insult is to say to someone else pejorative things with such and such an intention, while to warn is to say ..." Anti-nonsense rules govern impartially sayings of all types. "Reach gradually" will not do in questions, commands, counsels, requests, warnings, complaints, promises, insults, or apologies, any more than it will do in statements. Epimenides can tease us in any grammatical mood. To an enquiry into categorial requirements, references to differences of saying-type are irrelevant; to an enquiry into differences between saying-types, references to category-requirements are irrelevant. Infelicities and absurdities are not even congeners.

As Ryle points out these different approaches were not in competition, but rather represented two parallel paths that "informal philosophy" could legitimately take in dealing with philosophical problems. Among those who emphasized the sense/nonsense distinction were Wittgenstein, Moore, J. T. Wisdom, O. K. Bouwsma, and Norman Malcolm. Austin's focus on speech acts was later to influence the work of Paul Grice, Zeno Vendler, John Searle, and A. P. Martinich. And, of course, there are many philosophers, including Ryle and Austin and some of those just mentioned, in which both approaches play concurrent roles.

In the twenty years between 1927 and 1947, Ryle had published more than thirty articles, reviews, and critical notices, but no books. His first venture into this larger format was *The Concept of Mind* (1949). Apart from collections of his essays he was to publish only two other books in his lifetime, *Dilemmas* in 1954, and *Plato's Progress* in 1966. In the former book, Ryle discusses six tensions (dilemmas) that are not counter-

vailing formal *theories* but rather opposing “platitudes.” Each is an analogue of a classical philosophical perplexity, such as the free will problem. Thus, “In card games and at the roulette-table it is easy to subside into the frame of mind of fancying that our fortunes are in some way prearranged, well though we know that it is silly to fancy this.” Ryle shows by a subtle, piecemeal analysis of the linguistic idioms in which the opposing platitudes are framed how the apparent dilemma is factitious and can be dissolved. *Plato’s Progress* is an entirely different kind of book. It is a historical analysis in which Ryle tries to give a different portrayal of Plato’s career. It is a provocative treatise that questions the common view that Aristotle was Plato’s pupil, and that gives new datings to the Platonic dialogues.

Though these monographs are exciting pieces, and well worth serious study, they do not match the power and depth of the *Concept of Mind*. It has two aspects: a negative, deflationary one and a positive, constructive one. The two approaches are tied together by an attack on a certain picture of the human mind and its relationship to the human body. Ryle gives different names to this picture: He calls it the “Official Doctrine,” the “Cartesian Model,” “Descartes’ Myth,” the “Ghost in the Machine,” and the “Para-Mechanical Hypothesis.” The negative attack is to show that this picture is incoherent; the positive contribution is to give an accurate account (not a picture) of the relationship between mind and body. The positive account is detailed. It deals with the entire range of the mental: the will, knowing, emotions, dispositions and occurrences, self-knowledge, sensation, observation, imagination, and the intellect. The book is thus a treasure-house of detailed descriptions of all the major features of mentation.

What is the Official Doctrine he is out to destroy? This doctrine, he contends, is given its canonical formulation by Descartes, but its antecedents are much older. It is widely accepted by philosophers, psychologists, religious teachers, and many ordinary persons. It holds that every human being is both a mind and a body that are ordinarily harnessed together, but that after the death of the body the mind may continue to exist and function. Human bodies are in space and are subject to the mechanical laws of physics, chemistry, and biology. The body is a public object and can be inspected by external observers. But minds are immaterial, and are not in space, nor are their operations subject to mechanical laws. The mind is an entity, to be sure, but an immaterial and invisible one that inhabits a mechanical body. This is why Ryle calls it the “ghost in the machine.” It is *res cogitans* in Descartes’ parlance. It is the thing that thinks, deliberates, decides, wills, and opines. Each mind is private, i.e. only each person can take direct cognizance of the states and processes of his or her own mind.

A person thus lives through two collateral histories; one consisting of what happens to his body, the other to what happens within his mind. The first is public, the second private. The Cartesian picture thus depends on the internal/external distinction. This leads to the problem of how the mind influences bodily action. Since the mind is construed as nonphysical and nonspatial how does one’s act of will, say, lead to a movement of one’s legs, i.e. to the sort of thing called walking, for instance? Moreover, how are we to account for the knowledge we presume we have of the minds of others? If the Cartesian model is correct, observers cannot know what is taking place in the mind of another, since they are in principle cut off from any sort of direct cognitive awareness of that person’s mental states or processes. The only direct knowledge any human has is of his or her own mental functions.

As plausible as this view may seem, it is absurd according to Ryle. It is one big mistake and a mistake of a special kind that he calls a “category mistake.” To illustrate what he means by a “category mistake,” Ryle offers three examples. Here is an abbreviated version of the first of these:

A foreigner visiting Oxford or Cambridge for the first time is shown a number of colleges, libraries, playing fields, museums, scientific departments and administrative offices. He then asks “But where is the University? I have seen where the members of the Colleges live, where the Registrar works, where the scientists experiment and the rest. But I have not yet seen the University in which reside and work the members of your University.” . . . His mistake lay in his innocent 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 other units are members. He was mistakenly allocating the University to the same category as that to which the other institutions belong. (1949: 16)

Ryle’s point is that this sort of mistake is made by people who do not know how to employ the concept of a university. That is, their puzzle arises from an inability correctly to use certain items in the English vocabulary. According to Ryle, the Official Doctrine arises from a category mistake analogous to the preceding. It assumes that minds belong to the same category as bodies in the sense that both are rigidly governed by deterministic laws. The human body works according to mechanical principles: the heart is a pump, the veins are pipes, and the flow of blood is determined by the pressures that are described in fluid mechanics. The system is thus an assemblage of interacting parts that consist of fluids, solids, and electrical forces, all of which operate according to the laws of mechanics. All these forces usually work to some desired end, such as moving blood from one part of the body to another.

Minds also work in analogous ways. When I am hungry, a mental state, a desire, acts on my body and initiates those movements of hands and fingers that allow me to pick up and transfer food to my mouth. Accordingly minds must be governed by deterministic laws. But minds are nonmaterial. They are not composed of solids, fluids, and electrical forces. So their laws, though deterministic, are non-mechanical. These Ryle calls “para-mechanical.” The Official Doctrine invokes them as the analogues of the mechanical laws that govern the behavior of physical entities. But the concept of a para-mechanical law is absurd. There are no such things as immaterial levers, valves, and pumps. Valves, levers, and pumps are solid entities that operate to effect physical movements. To invoke the immaterial analogues of such entities to explain mental activity is thus to make a category mistake, i.e. to apply the concepts of mechanical forces and laws to a domain where they have no grip. The mistake arises because philosophers do not know how to employ the ordinary epithets we use for describing mental activity. Philosophers are thus like the person who does not know how to employ the concept of a university. It is this para-mechanical model that Ryle attacks in his book. Its existence indicates that these theorists do not know how to wield the set of concepts that characterize our mental functions.

The alternative he offers to the Official Doctrine is a detailed description of how mental concepts are used in everyday life. As he says: “The philosophical arguments

which constitute this book are intended not to increase what we know about minds but to rectify the logical geography of the knowledge which we already possess." Ryle is thus reminding us of what we have always known, and also reminding us how philosophical conceits can blind us to the familiar. His description of the "logical geography" of mental concepts is thus a reminder of how we employ these concepts when we are not doing philosophy. Since any such employment is enormously complex, its "logical geography" will be lengthy, detailed, and specific. Here, by way of illustration, is a segment of a much longer specimen of logical geography:

It is true that the cobbler cannot witness the tweaks that I feel when the shoe pinches. But it is false that I witness them. The reason why my tweaks cannot be witnessed by him is not that some Iron Curtain prevents them from being witnessed by anyone save myself, but that they are not the sorts of things of which it makes sense to say that they are witnessed or unwitnessed at all, even by me. I feel or have the tweaks, but I do not discover or peer at them; they are not things that I find out about by watching them, listening to them, or savouring them. In the sense in which a person may be said to have had a robin under observation, it would be nonsense to say that he has had a twinge under observation. There may be one or several witnesses of a road-accident; there cannot be several witnesses, or even one witness, of a qualm. (1949: 205)

This passage is a good example of Ryle's way of exorcizing the ghost in the machine. The Official Doctrine presupposes that one has privileged access to a private realm consisting of one's own sensations, thoughts, and mental states; and that such an access consists in the observation of one's sensations and states. But to say that one is observing something implies that one is using one's eyes, or certain kinds of observational aids such as telescopes, stethoscopes, and torches. One's eyes, and these instruments, can be used for the observation of planets, heart-beats, and moths. But we do not know what it would be like to apply them to felt sensations or to assert seriously that we "observe our pains." Since the Official Doctrine presupposes there is such a para-mechanical analogue as observing, it can be shown to be a species of nonsense by comparing its requirements with our actual use of such mental concepts as "tweaks" and "qualms." What the comparison reveals is a category mistake. The concept of observation applies to the physical domain in a way it *logically cannot* apply to the mental. Just as one logically cannot reach London gradually, so one cannot "observe" one's aches and pains. Ryle's line of reasoning throughout the work is thus to show that theorists have incorrectly wielded the ordinary concepts that describe human mental life.

The Concept of Mind created a sensation when it appeared in 1949. For at least a decade after its publication it was the single most discussed book in Anglo-American philosophy. Nearly every periodical carried long articles about it. It was translated into a host of foreign languages, was taught in virtually every major western university, and within a short time seemingly had achieved the status of a philosophical classic. Yet a decade later it had fallen into obscurity, and subsequently it has hardly been referred to at all. What happened to occasion such a collapse? It is especially puzzling given that the book was of superb philosophical quality, was elegantly written, introduced many original and powerful distinctions, and was the first study to show in detail how the

philosophy of language and the philosophy of mind are tied together. In this last respect, it was a bellwether for work that was to be developed thirty years later.

There are several possibilities to explain what happened. One factor is that four years later Wittgenstein's posthumous *Philosophical Investigations* appeared (see WITTGENSTEIN). It covered much the same territory as Ryle's study and in greater depth. As brilliant as Ryle's book was it paled in comparison to the power and insight of Wittgenstein's. So philosophers turned from Ryle to Wittgenstein. It was the latter and not the former who was now read: Ryle had simply gone out of fashion.

There is a second factor. Ryle claimed that in this work he was "charting the logical geography" of the many concepts used in speaking about the human mind. And though this was clearly an apt description it was also patent that his work had a strong verificationist thrust. Ryle frequently and in crucial passages speaks about the testability of propositions about mental concepts. For example, he states: "For, roughly, the mind is not the topic of sets of untestable categorical propositions, but the topic of sets of testable hypothetical and semi-hypothetical propositions" (p. 46). Some critics have thus emphasized that Ryle's aim is to correct what other philosophers have said about the methods of *verifying* statements involving mental concepts, rather than trying to explicate these concepts themselves. The positivists, of course, identified the meaning of a statement with the method of its verification, and in many places in the *Concept of Mind* Ryle seems to presuppose that in describing how certain propositions involving mental concepts are to be tested he is explicating the meaning of those concepts. The book was thus eventually assessed as a sophisticated form of logical positivism, a view which had lost its influence by the 1950s. Ryle's work was swept away with the rest of this movement.

Its behaviorism was a third factor. Ryle states that to give reasons for accepting or rejecting statements containing mental concepts will always involve hypothetical statements about overt behavior. In responding to the question, "What knowledge can one person get of the workings of another mind?" Ryle answers that it is "how we establish, and how we apply, certain sorts of law-like propositions about the overt and the silent behavior of persons. I come to appreciate the skill and tactics of a chess player by watching him and others playing chess" (p. 169). Although Ryle always denied that he was reducing mind to behavior, and asserted instead that charting the "logical geography" of mental concepts was a philosophically neutral endeavor, his detailed analyses seemed to many philosophers to leave out one fundamental characteristic of the mind, the inward, felt quality of mental experience. For these philosophers such mental activities as deliberating or conjecturing, or such states as being in pain, were distinct from behavior. One could, for example, be in pain without evincing it in any mode of behavior. And even if one were to evince it, the pain itself was not to be identified with the behavior in question. A pain is not a grimace. So even if Ryle were correct in arguing that mental activity was exercised in various intersubjective situations it did not follow that the behavior so exhibited was identical with the mental events in question. Unlike Ryle, who minimized internal experience, Wittgenstein emphasized and acknowledged the existence of such phenomena. His point was that one should not identify them with such features as meaning, expecting, thinking, and so forth. And this position was seen to be more compelling than Ryle's. In the end this may have been the decisive factor in the eclipse of Ryle's reputation.

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