

GILBERT RYLE'S *THE CONCEPT OF MIND* (1949)

BACKGROUND

- **Empiricism and Science:** Ryle is a typical empiricist philosopher. He wants to explain things such as minds in terms of things we can actually experience (and possibly actually measure).
- **Traditional psychology:** Psychologists traditionally analysed the mind by *introspection*. Descartes described the structure of the mind by examining his own consciousnesses, and even Hume's 'bundle' account of personal identity is based on introspection. But this is not public evidence, and cannot be directly verified by others. Freud's speculative interpretation of the subconscious didn't seem very scientific either.
- **Behaviourism:** Early in this century J.B. Watson proposed behaviourism, as a method of study and an analysis of mind. The **method** is to only study measurable public data (behaviour); the **analysis** will (it is claimed) show that all consciousness can be analysed down into behaviour (an extreme *reductivist* approach to the mind). The most extreme proposal is the possibility that thought could be analysed into movements of the vocal chords.
- **Logical Positivism:** Ryle followed A.J. Ayer in developing the Verification Principle in the 1930s. Meaningful sentences must be tautologies, or empirically verifiable. Ryle proposed that verification might be by **any** observer, and not merely by the speaker, which made the principle less strict, while still making it strictly empirical.
- **Dualism:** Descartes and others had championed the dualist account of the mind. Descartes' arguments are that the mind is unextended, necessary when thinking, private, unified, and thinking.
- **Other Minds:** The view that the mind is essentially private leads to the *Other Minds* problem, which is that there is therefore no way of being sure that other minds exist. I may be surrounded by a bunch of unconscious robots, so any attempt to say anything meaningful (let alone scientific!) about other people's minds is doomed.
- **Solipsism:** Dualism seems to point to the logical possibility of *solipsism*. If the mind is essentially private, it may be completely cut off from reality in a world of illusion and fantasy (possibly created by a Demon, but possibly even self-created, leaving the mind totally alone).

ATTACK ON CARTESIAN DUALISM

- **Ghost in the machine:** Ryle simply accused Descartes of having misconceived the facts. Descartes has imagined that there is a 'ghost' inside us which works a merely mechanical body. He has not grasped that words like 'mind' and 'consciousness' label groups of behaviour, not actual things.
- **Category Mistakes:** - He labels Descartes' error as a 'category mistake', which is a failure of reasoning when a predicate is applied to something logically inappropriate. His three examples are thinking that a **university** is a thing other than its colleges, or an **army division** is not just a group of soldiers, or **team spirit** is something more than just the behaviour of a sports team.
- **Double Causation:** Ryle points out that if we have a mind and a body, then every human action will have **two** causes, one the result of the physical laws of the brain, the other the product of purely mental laws. (This point leads to the later theory of 'Anomalous Monism').

KNOWLEDGE AND BELIEF

- **Episodes:** Current consciousness might be analysed into what Ryle calls 'episodes' of behaviour, which are events which actually occurred, and so can be empirically observed. However, a lot of what we think is in consciousness (such as beliefs and knowledge) never actually leads to any observable behaviour, so the theory must be extended.
- **Dispositions:** We describe people in terms of dispositions to behave in certain ways, meaning that they will do certain things **if** a certain situation arises. So their 'mental' state of belief, knowledge etc. can be analysed as potential behaviour, which would be observable if it occurred, and is potentially predictable.
- **Cigarette smoker:** Ryle's example of a disposition is cigarette-smoking. To actually smoke a cigarette is an 'episode'. But when we say that someone is a cigarette smoker, we don't mean anything about their consciousness, but merely that they have a disposition to buy cigarettes, or accept them when offered.
- **Knowledge:** A person 'knows' something if they have a disposition to be right about it when the situation arises.
- **Belief:** A person 'believes' something if they have a disposition to behave in a certain way when the situation arises.

THE SELF AND SELF-AWARENESS

- **Self:** the concept of a self is a delusion created by the use of the *index word* 'I', which is falsely presumed to have a reference.
- **Self-knowledge:** this consists of 'levels' of higher and lower order behaviour. Higher levels are studied utterances about oneself.

ADVANTAGES

- Consciousness is now held to be totally public; I know my **own** mind through my public behaviour, as well as other people's
- The problems of other minds and solipsism, which arose from the belief in mental privacy, disappear.
- We can also give a better account of how our ordinary language works.
- Free will turns out to be an illusion, caused by the logical impossibility of examining the source of my own 'mental' events.

OBJECTION DEALT WITH

The fact that people can *pretend* to think or feel certain things when they don't is not a problem, he says, because such acting or fraud is detectable through details of behaviour, and it is parasitic on normal situations where mental life *is* behaviour.

PROBLEMS

- **Behaviour without consciousness:** 'super-acting' and lying (though Ryle thinks he can answer that), twitches, Freudian slips, blind sight
- **Consciousness without behaviour:** 'superspartans', physical paralysis, transient impressions, intermediate steps in reasoning, pure qualia
- **Intentionality:** in addition to the deep privacy of the mind, pure intentionality seems to be a mental feature which lacks behaviour
- **Qualia:** nothing about a pattern of behaviour gives even a glimmering of an explanation of what it is like to experience things
- **Correlation failure:** one mental state may have many behaviours, and one behaviour might be a sign of many mental states
- **Description:** it seems impossible to explain behaviour without referring to mental states (is your hand up, in a school lesson?).

LATER DEVELOPMENTS

Functionalism proposes that consciousness is not the behaviour of the person, but the behaviour of the brain. Thoughts are not actually physical, but are a group of causally related physical events. The new theory enters the 'black box' at the centre of behaviour, which may not be directly observable at the moment. Functionalism retains the behaviourist view that the mind is an **abstract** concept, not a physical object.