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## Ryle and the Para-mechanical

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The thesis of this paper is the unconventional claim that Gilbert Ryle is not a logical behaviorist. The popular account of Ryle clearly places his work in *The Concept of Mind* (1949) in the camp of logical behaviorist.<sup>1</sup> The object of this paper, however, will be to illustrate how the conventional interpretation of Ryle is misleading. My argument is not an exhaustive account of Ryle, but serves as a starting point for understanding Ryle outside of the behaviorist label that is usually attached to his work.

The argument is straightforward. First, it is apparent on any reasonable construal that logical behaviorism is a reductionist project about the mind. The basic claim of logical behaviorism is that statements containing mental vocabulary can be analyzed into statements containing only the vocabulary of physical behavior. Second, any reasonable account of Ryle will show that he is not a reductionist about the mental, in fact he was adamantly anti-reductionist about the mind. Once these two claims are established it follows quite readily that Ryle was not a logical behaviorist.

The first premise is uncontroversial. Anyone familiar with logical behaviorism understands that its aim is to show that mental terminology doesn't refer to unobserved phenomena, supposedly in the head of the person described, but rather to the observed physical behaviors or dispositions to behave (Hempel 1999). In fact, in its strict formulation, logical behaviorism claims that mental terminology signifies *only* these observed behaviors or dispositions to behave. Thus, I will take it as a reasonably established claim that logical behaviorism is reductionist about the mind.

On the other hand, the claim that Ryle was anti-reductionist about the mind requires a bit more discussion, so I will focus my efforts here for the remainder of the paper. In short, my argument will be that if we interpret Ryle as a reductionist, this would go against everything that Ryle had been objecting to in *The Concept of Mind*. In effect, it would be to charge him with committing the same error, the same category mistake, as he accuses his opponent or opponents of making. This hardly seems charitable. Of course, Ryle could have been inconsistent in his own argumentation, but I think the simpler explanation is that the conventional interpretation misinterprets Ryle and his project in *The Concept of Mind*.

Ryle's basic argument in *The Concept of Mind* is thought to be directed against Cartesian dualism, the so-called "dogma of the ghost in the machine." In short, the argument is that Cartesianism commits a category mistake. It treats the mind as if it belongs to one logical category when it actually belongs to another. Ryle's famous example of a category mistake is the confusions exhibited by a visitor to a university. The mistake is displayed when the visitor confuses the university with the buildings, fields, libraries, etc. he had seen while touring the campus, when in fact the university is not another building among buildings, but something else: the way in which the activities that occur in these buildings, fields, and libraries are administrated, organized, and legally structured. That is to say, the concept of a university does not belong to the

same category as the concept of a building, the concept of a field, or a library. The concepts are of different logical types.

According to the orthodox interpretation, Ryle is at pains to show that Cartesianism commits an error of just this kind with regard to our concept of the mental. However, this is only part of the story. Ryle's arguments against dualism are meant to be equally applicable to materialism—and this includes behaviorism. According to Ryle's analysis both of these positions commit the same basic category mistake when conceiving of the mental. They each are committed to a conceptually confused description of the mind, which Ryle calls "the para-mechanical hypothesis."

The "para-mechanical hypothesis" is shorthand for what Ryle identifies as the underlying conceptual framework that shaped the Cartesian picture of our mental life. It is the view that in order for a person to qualify as having a mind—as being intelligent, stupid, having beliefs, desires, and so forth—it requires a certain kind of inner causal organization of the person or organism under question. The mind is some causal mechanism which operates behind a person's public and purposeful actions. To put it another way, it is the view that we need to appeal to some hidden, inner and causal mental occurrences of the person (such as beliefs, desires, intentions, etc.) in order to understand or make intelligible the actions of that person, especially those actions we classify as clever, voluntary, purposeful, or in a word, intelligent.

Understood this way the para-mechanical hypothesis seems to be a very commonsensical view of the mind, one widely held by dualists and non-dualists alike. When I want to explain the intelligent actions of a person I appeal to the beliefs, desires, and any other relevant mental states of the individual to make sense of what the person is doing. This works so often and with such a high rate of success that it seems obviously true. So it should strike us as odd to think that Ryle wants to argue that this conception of the mind is fundamentally in error. But I do not propose to defend Ryle's position, rather I want to show that he has been fundamentally misunderstood. To see this, we should examine why he is at odds with the para-mechanical hypothesis about the mental.

Throughout *The Concept of Mind* Ryle has recourse to a quasi-historical account of the possible motivations for accepting the para-mechanical hypothesis.<sup>2</sup> According to this story Descartes was caught between two conflicting motives. The science of Galileo showed that his methods were competent to provide a mechanical theory which covers every occupant of space. As a man of science Descartes could not but endorse the claims of Galileo's mechanics. On the other hand, as a religious and moral man Descartes could not accept the consequences of these mechanics for human nature, and more importantly human freedom; the nature of humanity could not simply be a matter of the complexity of certain mechanical workings.

It was believed that the physical sciences had established, or were on the way to establishing, that the things and events of the external world are rigidly governed by discoverable laws, laws the formulation of which admit no appraisal-words. It was felt that all external happenings are confined within the iron grooves of mechanical causation. The genesis, the properties and the courses of these happenings were, or

would be, totally explained in terms of measurable and, it was supposed, therefore purposeless forces (Ryle 1949, 75).

One way out of this dilemma for Descartes and subsequent philosophers was to avoid conceiving of our mental life (our intentions, volitions, etc.) as a resident in the mechanically described world. A broad ontological distinction was made between the mental and material. To avoid the results of mechanism for human nature, mind was removed from such a world. However, there was obviously still some causal connection between the mind and the body. Intelligence still directed the body on appropriate occasions. Some causes of human behavior were thought to issue from the movement of particles of matter and others from the workings of minds or souls. That is, while some movements of human limbs and tongues are the effects of mechanical causes, other human actions must be the effects of non-mechanical causes, namely mental causes. The difference between intelligent, purposeful, or voluntary human actions and unintelligent or involuntary actions was thus understood as a difference in their *causation*. Descartes and others hoped to have preserved human dignity by construing mental concepts not as occurrences of mechanical processes, but instead as signifying special non-mechanical processes.<sup>3</sup>

This attempt to preserve human freedom and dignity was, according to Ryle, a misconceived attempt. While trying to avert the problems of mechanism (viz., determinism, the impossibility of freewill, etc.) theorists ended up describing minds in what was little more than a parallel vocabulary to mechanism. Minds are things, but different sorts of things from bodies; mental processes are causes and effects, but different sorts of causes and effects from bodily movements. And so on. Somewhat as the foreigner expected the University to be an extra edifice, rather like a college but also considerably different, so the repudiators of mechanism represented minds as extra centers of causal processes, rather like machines but also considerably different from them. Their theory was a para-mechanical hypothesis (ibid., 19).

On Ryle's interpretation, Descartes and others unwittingly adhered to the grammar and categories of mechanics. The differences between the physical and the mental were represented as differences inside the common framework of the categories of 'thing', 'stuff', 'attribute', 'state', 'process', 'change', and most importantly 'cause' and 'effect'. Instead of removing the mental from the mechanical the conception of the mental became an extension of the mechanical conception of the world. It was unseen, occult, inner, but not physical; yet equally causal in its manifestations. So, according to Ryle, the mental and the physical were understood as being members of the same logical category, namely the mechanical.

According to Ryle this identification of the mental within the same framework as the mechanical is the fundamental category mistake perpetuated by Descartes and others. He was quick to point out that this conception of the mental leads to some unsavory consequences. For instance, it leads to the well known problem of mind-body interaction. If the mind is a causal locus of human action, it seems a difficult task to explain how a para-mechanical mind can interact with a mechanically caused world. But more serious consequences also follow on Ryle's analysis.

If the problem of the freedom of the will was the problem how to reconcile the hypothesis that minds are to be described in terms drawn from the categories of mechanics with the knowledge that higher-grade human conduct is not a piece with the behavior of machines, then, on Ryle's analysis it is apparently a problem that is unresolved. Since bodies are rigidly governed by mechanical laws, and the mental is understood as undergoing regular modifications according to some similar but not-quite-mechanical (*para*-mechanical) processes, it seems to follow that the career of the mind is no less deterministic than the movements of physical bodies. That is to say, insofar as the mind is conceived as a species of the mechanical, then it is reasonable to expect that the mind is *para*-deterministic. In this case, the freedom of the will is not as safe as was originally thought. The para-mechanical hypothesis seems to undermine the very reasons for wanting to conceive of the mind as para-mechanical in the first place.

Yet, the problems of mind-body interaction and the freedom of the will were not the only problems Ryle had with the para-mechanical hypothesis. He was concerned that adopting the para-mechanical hypothesis would make people absolutely mysterious and intractable, when in fact people are fairly easily managed and relatively easy to understand.

According to Ryle, it is an historical curiosity that it was not noticed that the entire para-mechanical hypothesis was broken-backed. Theorists correctly answered that any sane man could already recognize the difference between say, rational and non-rational utterances or purposive and automatic behavior. Else there would have been nothing requiring to be salvaged from mechanism. Yet the explanation given presupposed that one person could in principle never recognize the difference between the rational and the irrational utterances. Save for the doubtful exception of himself, he could never tell the difference between a man and a robot (ibid., 20-21).

Ryle points out that if mental concepts refer only to the hidden, inner causes of human behavior, then external observers could never know whether the overt actions were correlated with certain mental antecedents, so they could never know whether their ascription of mental concepts—such as intelligent, stupid, voluntary, clever, etc.—were correct or incorrect. If an action is, say, intelligent in virtue of an antecedent intelligent cause (as Ryle takes the para-mechanical hypothesis to indicate), we could never know the cause and thus never know the action was intelligent.

The crux of the problem is that according to the para-mechanical description of the mental, the mind is thought of as a special kind of causal antecedent to behavior. However, if this were true our characterizations and explanations of the performances of persons as intelligent, stupid, rational, hypocritical, cowardly, brave, and so on, could never have been made. The original reason for providing a special causal theory of mind would never have arisen. Ryle claims this demonstrates that the para-mechanical hypothesis, and any doctrine that follows from it, is fundamentally in error.

Ryle accuses these theorists of mistaking the logic of their problem. In effect, Descartes and others realized that the problem of accounting for rational, voluntary, intelligent human action in terms of mechanics would lead to certain difficulties, but then they assumed that the solution was a counterpart of mechanics. They asked, "Given

the principle of mechanical causation does not tell us the difference between say autonomous and involuntary action, what other causal principle will tell us?" They perceived the problem as a causal problem—as a problem within the idiom of causes and effects, which, on Ryle's analysis, undermines the whole para-mechanical project. At this point we could object to Ryle's treatment of the para-mechanical hypothesis as a number of accounts, but it is not my purpose to defend or criticize his position here. Whether we are trying to understand how Ryle could be anti-reductionist about the mind, it is important to keep in mind what Ryle thinks he has done with this analysis of the para-mechanical hypothesis. The central point seems to be that the problems of a Cartesian picture of mind, namely the problems of mind-body interaction, the freedom of the will, and even the problem of other minds, are merely symptomatic of a deeper conceptual confusion. This confusion consists in thinking of the mental as being of a kind with the causal or mechanical. That is, much as thinking of a university as another building among buildings is a confusion about the concept of a university, so too taking the mind to be another causal component of the world is a confusion about the concept of the mental. It is a category mistake.

If Ryle's argument is successful it will have devastating implications for how we conceive of the mental. But these consequences won't just affect dualist accounts, they will be equally applicable to materialist theories of mind. For if Ryle's central criticism of the para-mechanical hypothesis is that 'mind' and 'body' are erroneously understood as being terms of the same logical type, then Ryle would resist the notion that the mental could be reduced to the physical. And indeed Ryle makes a point of this.

Ryle argues that in order for two terms to be legitimately conjoined or legitimately opposed they must belong to the same category (ibid., 22 f.). But mind and matter, or the mental and the mechanical do not belong to the same categories. Thus conjoining them or opposing them is logically illegitimate. For example, to say that she has just purchased a left-hand glove and a right-hand glove is a logically legitimate conjunction of "left-hand glove" and "right-hand glove." However, it would be illegitimate to say she bought a left-hand glove, a right-hand glove, and a pair of gloves. That is, to understand three terms as being members of the same logical type would mean that she bought three distinct and separate items, and this is absurd. This is exactly what Ryle accuses the Cartesians of doing, and by extension the para-mechanical hypothesis about the mental: "It maintains that there exists both bodies and minds; that there occur physical processes and mental processes; that there are mechanical causes of corporeal movements and mental causes of corporeal movements" (22).

Now the reduction of mental states and processes to physical states and processes that materialism suggests presupposes the legitimacy of the conjunction of mind and matter. In other words, mind and matter are considered as two types of mechanical entities, in particular as purveyors of causes and effects. But this is precisely what Ryle attempts to argue against in his analysis of the para-mechanical hypothesis. If mind and matter are no longer seen as sharing the same logical category, then materialism is just mistaken as dualism.

It will also follow that both Idealism and Materialism are answers to an improper question. The 'reduction' of the material world to mental states and processes, as well as the 'reduction' of mental states and processes to physical states and processes, presuppose the legitimacy of the disjunction "Either there exist minds or their exist bodies (but not both)." It would be like saying "Either she bought a left-hand and a right-hand glove or she bought a pair of gloves (but not both)" (ibid., 22–23).

With this I think we can say that Ryle was indeed anti-reductionist about the mind. He resists the reduction of mental states to physical states because he thinks they are of different logical types. To think that they can be reduced is to commit the same category mistake as Cartesianism; it is to perpetuate the para-mechanical description of the mental.

If we interpret logical behaviorism as attempting to translate all mental propositions into propositions about observed or expected behavior (as I think we should), then it is misleading to interpret Ryle as a logical behaviorist. Bearing in mind what was just discussed regarding the legitimacy of reducing mind to matter, if we were to press the point and still interpret Ryle as a logical behaviorist, this would be tantamount to accusing Ryle of committing the same category mistakes he accuses dualists and materialists of committing. This interpretation is obviously uncharitable.<sup>4</sup>

This argument, I think, provides very strong reasons for rejecting the conventional interpretation of Ryle as a logical behaviorist. As such the immediate aim of this paper has been fulfilled. However, removing the orthodox interpretation of Ryle as a logical behaviorist is not so simple a task. More would have to be said about the passages in Ryle's work that appear to proclaim a behaviorist position. Some discussion of the proper logical category for mental terms according to Ryle, would also be needed. The present argument is simply a starting point for reinterpreting Ryle's work.

I want to close with this final remark. In his book *Dilemmas* (1954) Ryle advises us that "to understand the work of an original philosopher it is necessary to see—and not merely to see but to feel—the logical *impasse* by which he was held up. We should always be asking the question 'Just what was the conceptual fix that he was in? What dilemma was pinching him?'" (125). This is especially true in understanding Ryle himself. His work, I would argue, is best understood as a reevaluation and wholesale rejection of the traditional answers to the question "What is Man?" Ryle's central concern, the logical impasse that perturbs him, is how to understand human nature. It may not be clear what answer Ryle would like to give to this problem. However, what is clear, given the content of this paper, is that neither the dualist answer nor the materialist answer are satisfactory for Ryle. "Man need not be degraded a machine by being denied to be a ghost in a machine. He might, after all, be a sort of animal, namely, a higher mammal. There has yet to be ventured the hazardous leap to the hypothesis that perhaps he is a man" (Ryle 1949, 328).

## Notes

1. Reviews and books abound with such references to his alleged logical behaviorism (see, e.g., Wisdom 1950; Hampshire 1970; Hofstadter 1951; Miller 1951; Weitz 1951; Garnett 1952; Pap 1952; Geach 1957; Russell 1958; Smart 1963; Armstrong 1968; Lewis 1972; Fodor 1975; Dennett 1978; Rorty 1979; and Stich

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1983, just to name a few). One noteworthy exception is Park (1994), who attempts to give a strictly non-behavioristic analysis of Ryle's position.

2. This story is present throughout Ryle 1949, but he first uses it in 18-19; see also 23-24 and 76 ff. Similar accounts also occur in Ryle 1954, especially in chapters 5 and 6; and in his posthumously published notes on the freedom of the will in Ryle 1993.

3. The historical accuracy of this story is not the central issue here. Ryle could and did concede that any number of historical precedents could be used to illustrate his point. He focuses on Descartes because he most clearly delineated the issue.

4. It is more dubious when we also consider Ryle's explicit denials of being a behaviorist. See Ryle 1949, 327-29; and his interview in Magee 1971.

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