RYLE'S THEORY OF PERCEIVING

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The primary objective of this paper is to show some of the difficulties that are encountered when one attempts to understand what Ryle's theory of perception is. In the course of doing that, I will point out what seems to be a serious omission in the theory.

I begin by contrasting Ryle's theory with the theory that he is attacking. The latter theory, which I shall call the traditional theory, holds that when we perceive something there occurs inside us two different but related processes—the having of sensations, or sense impressions, produced in us by something external to the sensing apparatus and an interpretation by us of what the sensations mean or signify; and it is usually further pointed out that it is the interpretative element that confers upon the perceptual claims the property they have of being true or false. The most explicit statement that Ryle makes of what he thinks perceiving to be is found in the chapter on sensation and observation in *The Concept of Mind*. Perceiving, he says there, entails the having of at least one sensation. But he goes on to say that this is not all that perceiving entails. In order to perceive something, one must not only be having sensations but one must be having them according to a perceptual recipe.[1]

Ryle's own theory has some strong similarities with the traditional theory. In both the traditional theory and Ryle's theory, perceiving entails the having of sensations, and in both cases something else is entailed. The disagreement then would consist in a disagreement over what that something else is. But, prima facie, the similarity between the two theories does not stop with the similarities that have already been mentioned, because some accounts that Ryle gives of what seem to be perceptual recipes sound suspiciously like what a reader might encounter in the writings of one of the more traditional theorists, such as C. I. Lewis. Consider the following two passages from Ryle, the first of which is his account of what I am calling the traditional theory, while the second is a part of his own account of what it is to be hearing a tune.

Listen to the way Ryle thinks that his opponent would describe an act of perceiving. "His [the successful perceiver's] report of what he sees is inflated with knowledge which the other man does not possess; in short it carries a mass of ideas or thoughts, which are absent from the other observer's report of what *he* sees. In detecting a misprint or a field of young wheat he seems, therefore, to be combining a piece of seeing, which, presumably, contains only what the townsman's seeing contains, with a piece of thinking, which the townsman is unable to supply. What is

more, this extra thought-luggage may be right or wrong. The countryman may have misidentified the green crop."[2]

Compare this with Ryle's account of what it is to be hearing a tune. "To describe him as knowing the tune is at least to say that he is capable of recognizing it, when he hears it; and he will be said to recognize it when he hears it, if he does any, some or all of the following things: if he does not erroneously expect the previous bars to be repeated; if he detects omissions or errors in the performance; if, after the music has been switched off for a few moments, he expects it to resume where it does resume; if, when several people are whistling different tunes, he can pick out who is whistling this tune; if he can beat time correctly; if he can accompany it by whistling it or humming it in time and tune, and so on indefinitely."[3]

The further similarity to which I was referring should be apparent. Just as the countryman thinks that the green stuff that he sees is a field of young wheat so does the person listening to a tune expect the bar that he is hearing now to be followed by the bar that he really does hear a moment from now, and just as the countryman is mistaken if the green stuff turns out not to be a field of young wheat so is the expectation of the listener defeated if the next bar that he hears is not the bar that he expected.

What might make us fail to see the similarity is that Ryle's description of the traditional belief is a caricature of that belief. In referring to the other element, besides sensations, that is involved in perception, the traditional theorist was wont to use such terms as "thoughts," "concepts," "predictions," and "inferences." The theorist must have known, of course, that no such conscious processes or events occur in perception, and what he was doing (I suppose) was merely to liken the postulated events which he thinks does occur to those conscious events which we are all thoroughly familiar with. If, in order to show that his words, "inference," and "prediction," were not to be taken literally, he used the words, "unconscious inference," and "unconscious prediction," this merely laid him open to the charge that he had committed a contradiction.

I have been saying that the traditionalist account is an analogical account. No less is Ryle's. Just as the traditionalist likens what happens in perceiving to thinking or inferring, so Ryle likens what happens to following a recipe, and just as we really don't think or infer when we perceive, neither, at least not most of the time, do we follow a recipe in any literal sense. Following a recipe entails that there be a recipe to follow, and a recipe is a set of instructions for doing something. It seems clear that when one sees an apple or smells a skunk that one is not following a recipe, for the very good reason that there is not a recipe to follow. That

is, there is not a set of instructions that has been written down, heard and memorized or recorded on a tape. There are exceptions, of course, such as when a person recognizes aircraft by following instructions that he has received in a training school for aircraft recognition or when a person looks at paintings according to instructions that he has received in an art appreciation course. But surely these are not representative of ordinary, run-of-the-mill perceivings. Ryle then is also employing an analogy, which is all right. But if this is so, and if the apparent similarities that have been noted are real, then it would seem that the sole difference between Ryle and his opponents might be merely a difference in the suitability of language expressions that are being used to refer to the same set of facts. This, of course, obviously won't do as an accurate account of what Ryle means, because if it were true that this difference in language were the only difference, Ryle would be admitting that his opponents were on the right track, whereas it is plain that he thinks that they have gone completely off the track.

However, it is time to get back to a more detailed analysis of Ryle's theory of perception. Not much need to be said about what he has to say about sensations. He is using the term in what he calls its technical sense, which is simply the sense that the term has—whatever it may be—when it is used by philosophers, and perhaps psychologists, in their talk about perceivings. He recognizes two other nontechnical meanings of "sensation," which are not entailed by "perception," and so need not be discussed here. Curiously, most of the things that he has to say about the sensations that are involved in perception are of a negative nature. "Sensations are not perceivings, observings or findings; they are not detectings, scannings or inspectings; they are not apprehendings, cognisings, intuitings or knowings. To have a sensation is not to be in a cognitive relation to a sensible object. There are no such objects. Nor is there any such relation. Not only is it false as was argued earlier, that sensations can be objects of observation; it is also false that they are themselves observings of objects."[4] One of the very few positive things that he has to say about sensations is that they are something we have as contrasted with something we do; we can also heed or take notice of them. There are some questions which he does not give very clear answers to. For instance, can we fib or tell the truth about our sensations? Presumably we can, since we can make reports of them to oculists or others, and if we can make reports, we can make false reports. But the evidence is mixed.

The difficulty in understanding Ryle's description of perceptual recipes and their workings is that he seems to be promising to tell us what it is to have and apply a perceptual recipe while all he ever does is tell us what it is to have a perceptual recipe. We want an account of a disposition and an

account of an occurrence, but all we get is an account of a disposition. If he really does fail to tell us what applying a perceptual recipe is, the omission is serious. Consider some example of a recipe that is easier to understand than perceptual recipes are, say a recipe for baking a cake. Suppose a person wants to bake one of these cakes. He will, of course, have to know the recipe, but more than that, he will have to do whatever is prescribed by the recipe. Let us examine some examples from Ryle and see what, if any, evidences of the occurrent elements can be found.

In one of his examples, he tries to explain what it is to detect a mosquito in a room. "When we describe someone as having detected a mosquito in the room, what more are we saying than that there was a certain sort of singing in his ears? We begin by answering that he not only had a singing in his ears but also recognized or identified what he heard as the noise of a fairly adjacent mosquito. . . ."[5] The long sentence goes on with a recitation of some things that we should never say when we talk about the detection of mosquitoes. The singing in the ears is obviously the having of a sensation. What is the other element that is entailed by the detection of the mosquito? Ryle seems to be saying that the other element is the identification or recognition of the mosquito. But this won't do, because identifying or recognizing a mosquito is the same as detecting it, and if we speak of entailment here, it is entailment only in the sense that detecting a mosquito entails detecting a mosquito. It is true that in the concluding sentence of the same paragraph he says that detecting a mosquito means knowing what a mosquito is and applying that knowledge, but this leaves unanswered the question that we would like to see answered.

Here is a better example. "Certainly a person who espies the thimble is recognizing what he sees, and this certainly entails not only that he has a visual sensation but also that he has already learned and not forgotten what thimbles look like."[6] While the sentence does not logically imply that this is all that is entailed, the reader naturally expects, or hopes, that the listing of the entailments will be complete, and if Ryle knew what all the entailments are, it would have been the way of wisdom to have listed them all. Further, the rest of the paragraph seems to be an explication of what the quoted sentence means. Let us assume for the moment then that having sensations together with learning and not forgetting is all that is necessary for perceiving a thimble or anything else. It is plain that learning a perceptual recipe and not forgetting it is the same thing as knowing a perceptual recipe, and knowing a perceptual recipe is quite clearly a disposition, so that it may be said truly of a person who is asleep that he

knows how to bake a cake or follow a perceptual recipe. The dissatisfaction remains. We still do not have an account of the occurrence of applying a perceptual recipe.

So far, I have not said anything about Ryle's long explanation of what it is to be listening to a tune. For one thing, it is not a very good paradigm if Ryle's purpose is to analyse the *concept* rather than the *process* of perception. Most occurrences of what are uninhibitedly called perceivings are cases of what Ryle calls "perception in a flash." It sounds odd to say that I perceive the William Tell Overture, but not so odd to say that I perceive that the Lone Ranger sequence has just commenced. But waiving this objection aside, is there anything in Ryle's description of listening to a tune that could count as the successful application of a perceptual recipe?

The main difference between Ryle's description of listening to a tune and his description of "perception in a flash" is the large role that expectation plays in the one and not the other. What is hopeful in the situation is that "expectation" can be, and often is, used in an occurrent sense. An example would be the description of a dog expecting to be fed when he sees and hears his master opening a can of dog food; his expectation of being fed is, among other things, the wagging of his tail and the dripping of his saliva. What is still more hopeful is that Ryle himself seems to be using "expectation" occurrently. Expecting the next stretch of Lillibullero when one is hearing this stretch is surely a lot more like the dog expecting to be fed than it is like expecting the Yankees to win the pennant. If "expectation" is indeed being used in an occurrent sense, we may have found the missing element that we want. Other considerations, however, strongly suggest, appearances to the contrary, that Ryle is not using "expectation" in its occurrent sense. For one thing, the long paragraph in which expectations are discussed begins with the sentence, "What then is it for a person to know a tune, that is to have learned and not forgotten it?"[7] Knowing a tune is a disposition, not an occurrence. Thus, the reader naturally expects an account of a disposition, not the description of the exercise of a disposition, or in the language of recipes, the reader expects an account of having, or knowing, a recipe, and not an account of applying, or following, a recipe. Moreover, and more importantly, it would be impossible for Ryle to speak of expectations in an occurrent manner in his description of "perception in a flash"; at least, it would be impossible for him to do so in terms that would be acceptable to him. When some person hears a whistle, smells a skunk, sees a rock or tastes an apple, knowing perfectly well what these things are, he does not, in addition to the sensations he has, have to have any conscious expectations of anything in order to recognize what these things are. If any expectations of the occurrent sort occur at all, they are unconscious

expectations, and unconscious expectations should have as unsavory a taste for Ryle as unconscious inferences obviously do. This being so, Ryle cannot use the concept of occurrent expectation in his general description of what it is to apply a perceptual recipe. And it is significant that when he talks of espying thimbles or detecting mosquitoes, he talks about what one would expect, not about what one does expect. The reader is tempted to draw the following conclusion: to perceive X is to have a recipe for perceiving X together with certain sensations presumably produced by X, though Ryle does not say that they are so produced. At this point, some readers feel inclined to ask further questions about what goes on. Ryle's response is not to answer their questions but to tell them it is wrong to have asked the questions.

I have time to consider only one of these questions about perceiving which Ryle thinks it is wrong to ask. We should not ask, he says,"What is an observer doing besides having sensations?" In place of that question, we should ask the question, "What does the description of an observer embody over and above the description of him as having those sensations?"[8] Now it is not immediately obvious that these are two different questions. Suppose some person P is X-ing and Y-ing, and somebody asks what P is doing besides X-ing. The obvious answer is Y-ing. And if the question were framed in the form, "What does the description of what P is doing embody over and above the description of him as X-ing?" the answer would still be Y-ing. Ryle says that the difference between a person who is merely having sensations and a person who is perceiving something is a difference in logical complexity. I have already given one reason why one description may be more complex than another; it may be more complex than the other because the situation it describes is more complex. But Ryle seems to be saying that one description may be more complex than another even though the facts that they describe are precisely the same facts. One of his favorite examples is the contrast between the movements of a skillful clown and a clumsy man who makes the same movements by accident.[9] The following example is intended to be logically similar. A king, who has a voracious appetite for pineapple upside-down cakes, demands of his two bakers, Peter and Paul, that each of them bake him one of these cakes. The demand is repeated 365 days a year. Suppose furthermore that there is one and only one recipe by which the cake of his decription can be baked. The first part of the example is concerned only with what happens on the first day. Peter alone knows the recipe and bakes the cake according to the recipe. Paul, not knowing the recipe and not seeing what Peter is doing, nevertheless succeeds by a stroke of the wildest luck in baking a cake that is exactly like the cake that Peter bakes. Though the facts are the same, one might say that there is a

difference in logical complexity–indicated by the words, "according to the recipe"–between the description of what Peter does and the description of what Paul does. In the second part of the example, it is assumed that both bakers are successful on all 365 occasions. Here it seems to be going beyond wildness to assume that Paul still does not know the recipe but continues to succeed by guess and by golly. We would say, rather, that if Paul succeeds on all or even most occasions, that he knows how to bake the cake; and, if he does not know how to bake the cake, then he will do things that are different from the things that Peter does, and the differences can be marked off by different descriptions of what each was doing. By the same token, it is incumbent upon Ryle to provide some general description of the difference that applying a perceptual recipe makes. It is not clear that he does this.

Elsewhere, Ryle expresses grave doubts whether or not sensations exist.[10] If in fact sensations do not exist and he sticks by his general formula, he must conclude that nobody ever perceives anything, but if he drops the requirement of having sensations without putting anything in its place, perceiving collapses into capable of perceiving, e.g., espying a thimble becomes the same thing as knowing what thimbles look like. But since it may be true to say of a person who is asleep that he knows what thimbles look like, it seems to follow that the only escape from seeing thimbles is in forgetting what they look like. And the only escape from smelling skunks is in forgetting what they smell like. And so on.

NOTES

[1] Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (London: Hutchinson and Co., 1950), p. 224.

[2] Ryle, "Sensation," in *Perceiving, Sensing, and Knowing*, Robert J. Swartz, ed. (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday and Co., 1965), p. 196.

[3] *The Concept of Mind*, p. 226.

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 214.

[5] *Ibid.*, p. 225.

[6] *Ibid.*, p. 230.

[7] *Ibid.*, p. 226.

[8] *Ibid.*, p. 223.

[9] *Ibid.*, p. 33.

[10] See the article, "Sensation," where these doubts, already present in *The Concept* of Mind, become especially acute.

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