SOME LOGICAL MUDDLES IN BEHAVIORISM

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Psychologists think of themselves as scientists offering causal explanations of human actions, but there are certain popular forms of behaviorism that would deny that psychology either is or could become a science. The effort to develop a systematic body of psychological knowledge is bound to fail because it is based on wholesale linguistic confusion. I will argue that the effort to rule psychology out of court by *a priori* arguments is itself a conceptual muddle. But first I must be as clear as I can about the forms of behaviorism that are my targets here.

Not all theories that hve been called behaviorisms would make psychology impossible. If 'behavior' is defined as matter in motion and 'behaviorism' be taken to be the belief that everything that happens in the lives of human beings is simply matter in motion, then behaviorism is as old as materialism. Materialism is not antagonistic to psychological explanation. Witness Hobbes attempting to explain everything that we do and say in terms of the movements of phantasms inside our bodies. And today's mind-brain identity theorists too, identifying as they do mental states with brain states, would not be averse to admitting that mental states might have important effects upon human actions. However, not many people nowadays would regard all materialists as behaviorists.

Another kind of behaviorism that is consistent with psychological explanation is the social behaviorism of G. H. Mead. Mead certainly had no objection to psychologists offering causal accounts of conduct. In fact, he regarded himself as a social psychologist as well as a philosopher. If, however, Mead is a behaviorist, he is a behaviorist only in one of the weakest senses of that term—the sense in which anybody can qualify as a behaviorist if his purpose in using mental predicates is the explanation of outward conduct.

What usually goes under the heading of behaviorism is far more restrictive in regard to what can count as explanations of behavior. At least two forms can be distinguished, and I will mention a third, which if it is not a behaviorism, is at least closely related to behaviorism. The simplest form, "radical behaviorism," identifies mental events with easily observable bodily happenings—anger with striking, grief with weeping, thinking with writing or speaking and so on. An obvious weakness of the theory is that it does not do justice to those aspects of mentality that show no outward signs. What is perhaps more important is that the nature of the organism is not taken into account in explaining human behavior. All that needs to be explained, they say, can be explained in terms of stimulus and response. If

there is anything that goes on inside the organism when the organism responds, knowledge of these internal happenings would not be helpful in explaining the response. But it is surely wrong that something as complex as a human organism is as passive as a piece of clay, which it would have to be if the radical behaviorists were right.

The best known form of philosophical behaviorism is that form associated with the name of Gilbert Ryle. I call the theory the dispositional theory because of its strong tendency to turn all mental predicates into dispositional predicates describing how a person would behave under certain circumstances. Though Ryle might not admit this, dispositional behaviorism is very similar to radical behaviorism. As has been noted, the explanations of radical behaviorists are in terms of stimuli and responses. Ryle's explanations are in terms of dispositions to behave, but since dispositions to behave are manifested by behavior (responses of organisms to stimuli), there is a strong similarity. Thus, like the radical behaviorists, Ryle is deficient in his regard for the contributions of the organism. Moreover, believing as he does that dispositions are totally powerless and mind therefore a mere epiphenomenon in nature, Ryle is more radical than the radical behaviorists.

The other philosophical theory I will refer to as a form of behaviorism might not usually be called that, and I am not sure that its exponents would think of themselves as behaviorists. Nevertheless there are broad-brush similarities between these theorists and more straightforward behaviorists. There are the same misgivings regarding the causal potency and even the reality of interior mental events, and as with Ryle, the same doubt regarding the possibility of a science of psychology. I am talking about certain philosophers in the field of action theory, the best known of which is perhaps A. I. Melden. Melden asks what the necessary and sufficient conditions for a man raising his arm. Then replies as follows to the question that he has put to himself. "A desire, purpose or anything else mental? Surely not. For the necessary and sufficient conditions of the movements of one's arm is a contraction of the muscle. The causal explanation of the latter lies in the transmission of a nerve impulse to the muscle tissues. And so it goes. There is no room for the causal agency of mental events in the explanation of the bodily movements."[1] This is serious. Not only would a wedge be driven between psychology and the natural sciences, but social science would be ruled out as well. For if the only appropriate causal explanations for actions are explanations in terms of the physical requirements for the actions, then there is no role for the social sciences to play.

In *The Concept of Mind* and in other places Ryle is attempting to provide, as he says, conceptual elucidations of sentences containing terms

normally thought of as mental terms. Melden is especially concerned with the concept of a human action. In order to evaluate their efforts, it is necessary to have some kind of idea of the sorts of things that are spoken of as being mental or related to the operations of the mind. Of course, there are terms in ordinary language that are used to refer to these things. If it turns out that the elucidations have these terms referring to things that they do not refer to, or the overall concept of the mind is such that it provides no means of referring to these things, then the elucidations have gone wrong. This is so because the referents of the terms are clear, even if their meanings are not, and people do succeed (usually without any particular effort) in referring to these things and communicating information about them.

Here are some representatives of the kinds of things that have been counted as mental acts or as having some of the characteristics of mental acts–biting one's fingernails when one has a long standing habit of doing so, unintentionally stepping on someone's toes, intentionally stepping on someone's toes, someone raising his arm, a tune going on in one's head which one cannot turn off, a tune going on in one's head which one can turn off at any time, jumping into a flower garden in order to annoy Aunt Mary, working arithmetic on a slate or tablet, doing mental arithmetic, a stomach ache, seeing a large yellow patch and having an after-image of a large yellow patch. Contrast the following with the preceding–falling into a flower garden as a result of being pushed and a person being swept to his death over a waterfall.

C. I. Lewis in his paper, "Some Logical Considerations Concerning the Mental," suggests two features that are comprehended under 'mind,' regardless of whatever else is included under the term.[2] Those features are the content of consciousness and the private nature of mental states. I agree with Lewis that both of these features are included among the criteria for identifying mental events or states. I argue, however, that the term 'private' is ambiguous in an important respect and that both meanings of 'private' are often included in the intension of 'mental.' I also claim that there is another characteristic which is equally important, and that although the concept of mind is vague around the edges, there are excellent paradigms of events that will always be counted as mental.

The examples I gave of mental acts were meant to illustrate, among other things, that if an act is to be referred to as a mental act that a conscious component must be related in some way to the occurrence of the act. A mental disposition can then be defined as a disposition to manifest a mental act. But the point that I am trying to make requires careful formulation. For instance, it would probably be wrong to say of some of these acts that being conscious was a part of the meaning of all, or

even most, descriptions of these acts. Thus biting one's fingernails as the manifestation of a long standing habit does not entail that the act is conscious, but nevertheless, if it is a contingent truth that the act is to some degree mental, then it is also a contingent truth that the act is to some degree conscious. A manifestation of a habit which had become thoroughly automatic would not be a very good example of a conscious act, but neither would it be a very good example of a mental act. Examples such as a person being swept to his death over a waterfall are misleading in a different way. Such circumstances would be expected to evoke strong feelings, but the occurrence of the event seems to be independent of the feelings. Only if the person had deliberately jumped into the stream would the event have had anything of the mental about it.

'Privacy' in one of its meanings may be entailed by the meaning of 'consciousness.' If so, then privacy in this sense will be characteristic of mental states. This seems to be the meaning of 'private' that Ryle and Wittgenstein, among others, often have in mind. Ryle puts it this way: "...there is a philosophically unexciting though important sense of 'private' in which of course my sensations are private or proprietary to me. Namely, just as you cannot, in logic, hold my catches, win my races, eat my meals, frown my frowns, so you cannot have my twinges, or my after-images."[3] In other words, a conscious state is always somebody's conscious state.

The privacy entailed by the consciousness of the individual is important, but it should be pointed out that this is not the meaning that 'privacy' has when the private is contrasted with the public. Ryle himself is aware of the distinction, as he indicates in the following passage: "What makes a verbal operation an exercise of intellect is independent of what makes it public or private. Arithmetic done with pencil and paper may be more intelligent than mental arithmetic."[4] This is a strong meaning of 'private,' stronger than the adjective that is used in attributing privacy to all conscious states. When a person sees or hears something which he thinks anybody else can see or hear–a large yellow patch or the tunes of Lillibullero–he does not suppose that he is aware of anything that is private. Rather he supposes that others in the same neighborhood are aware of, or could become aware of, precisely the same things that he is aware of. But when he is having a toothache, he thinks he is aware of something that nobody else can be as directly aware of. Ryle says that referring to such things as mental arithmetic as being mental or in the mind is a special use of 'mental' or 'mind' and is a "linguistic oddity." He might have mentioned that the adverb 'mentally' is seldom used except in connection with inner happenings. The truth is that there is nothing exceptional about this use of 'mental.' Doing arithmetic mentally is an

excellent example of a mental operation. Doing arithmetic on paper is a mental operation too because, like all intentional actions, it has an inner side, but it is doubtful if it would be called that if it had no inner side at all.

The last criterion of the mental that I will mention is the extent to which something is under our control. It is a part of the meaning of the term 'action' in most contexts that what happens is to some extent under our control, and this is one of the reasons why it is not improper to refer to such behavior as mental. Comparisons are helpful here. Falling into a flower garden is not an action at all because it is not something that the person who fell did. On the other hand, jumping into the flower garden in order to annoy Aunt Mary is a full-fledged action and, as such, tells us something about the mind of the person who did it. It is also instructive to compare such conscious states as seeing a large yellow patch and imagining a large yellow patch. The latter is more under our control and also more characteristic of the mental. After-images, on the other hand, are as much beyond our control as veridical perceptions. For that reason, they are not among the best examples of mental occurrences. For that matter, neither are bodily aches and pains, itches and so on.

I turn now to more specific criticisms of Ryle. One of the most puzzling features of *The Concept of Mind* is that it is not at all clear who Ryle's principal target is. He announces at the start that he is offering objections to Descartes' myth–the view that there are two radically different kinds of substance in the world, minds and bodies. But his frontal attacks are not against the Cartesians; rather, they seem directed against believers in the reality of private inner states that cannot be identified with behavior or dispositions to behave in either a logical or contingent sense. In one of his more forcible passages, Ryle writes, "The radical objection to the theory that minds must know what they are about because mental happenings are by definition conscious . . . is that there are no such happenings."[5]

Ryle's casting doubt upon the existence of mental happenings would, if effective, work against mind-body dualism, because if everything deemed to be mental was really behavior, there would not be a special kind of stuff to be labeled mental. But what he fails to recognize, or will not admit, is that not every non-behaviorist is also a Cartesian. A non-behaviorist could be a central-state materialist or a person who merely accepted introspection as a valid method without having or espousing any particular ontological theory. If Ryle's purpose is to destroy the two-worlds myth, he has used a meat ax to accomplish it.

As Walter Alston points out, Ryle confuses meaning and reference.[6] Ryle seems to think that when he has said all that can be said about the

meaning of a term there is nothing else to be said about whatever it is that is referred to by that term. This confusion is especially obvious in his discussion of perceptual verbs. He does not think that there is anything complicated about perception and says that questions about perception cease to be intriguing as soon as a few of the more elementary ones are cleared up. The central question is "How do we use such descriptions as 'he saw a robin'?" The answer to that question is simple indeed. All that needs to be true of him for it to be correctly said that he saw a robin is that he was visually aware of something in the tree where the robin was. It is not even necessary for him to know that it was a robin he saw. But though it is easy to provide an answer about the question of meaning, this does not imply that there are no hard questions to be asked about perception. Quite generally, Ryle seems to suppose that there are no empirical questions to be asked about the mind.

Because of the difference between meaning and reference, a mental term defined entirely in terms of behavioral predicates could still refer to an event which is not a behavioral event. It would be a different matter if every mental term could be replaced by a set of behavioral predicates referring solely to behavioral events. Then all talk about minds would be talk about behavior. It is not true that every mental term can be replaced by an equivalent set of behavioral predicates. To show that this is false all one needs to do is to find some mental state for which there are no behavioral conditions that are necessary and sufficient for its occurrence. Although there are better examples, pain will do. As we all know, a person can pretend to be in pain or be in pain but fail to show it. It may be an analytic truth that a person who exhibits pain behavior is probably in pain, but that is something else. This is a point that Wittgenstein makes.

Ryle claims that his motive is to destroy the two-worlds myth, but I cannot believe that this is his only motive, or even his principal motive. I believe that his motives are more similar to the psychological behaviorists than he is willing to admit. The psychological behaviorist believes that terms in causal laws can refer only to publically observable things. For the psychologist, the publically observable things are bits of behavior. He cannot then easily admit that there are parts of his subject matter that are not subject ot scientific explanation. Ryle accepts the thesis of the psychological behavioristic that only publically observable items can be explained. Thus for him too the only status that strictly mental happenings can have is a status in limbo. The behaviorist thesis is without foundation. Headaches are private, and trembling hands are public. But if excessive drinking causes headaches, this is just as good a law and can be discovered just as easily as the law that excessive drinking causes trembling hands.

Voluntary behavior is universally allowed to have a mental side. The peculiarity of the last theory that I will mention is that it denies that such behavior can be causally explained, or at least it denies that such behavior can be explained in terms of mental facts. Melden is an excellent example. He admits that bodily movements are caused by the contraction of muscles, but it will surely be admitted that this is a minor amendment to the thesis that it is wrong to speak of actions as being caused. As a matter of fact, muscle contractions would seldom be mentioned because they would be taken for granted, and they would do nothing in the way of explaining why people manifest or fail to manifest responses that they are capable of making.

Melden and other action theorists have made great use of the Humean stricture that causes and their effects must be logically independent, but it is not immediately apparent what it is that is regarded as illegitimate. Under one reading of the rule a large range of fairly simple, presumably causal, explanation of mental events would be excluded. Here are some examples: seeing a robin because there was a robin there to be seen, a person remembering that he was struck by a car, a person grimacing in pain because he is in pain, and a person becoming a medical doctor because of a lifelong ambition. Finally, for the purpose of comparison, consider a non-psychological explanation that might be ruled out. The deflection of the galvanometer needle was caused by a current of electricity passing through its wires. Here the deflection of the needle would be the criterion for the detection of the electricity. The last example points out the need for care in the formulation of Hume's rule if it is to be of any value. The conclusion that there are no effects or causes in the world follows from the interpretation of the rule as meaning that no event can be a cause or effect of another event if any description of the one event entails some description of the other event. The conclusion follows from the fact that if X is the cause of Y, being a cause of Y is a true description of X entailing the true description of Y that Y is an effect of X. Nor is it at all unusual for an event to be described in terms of its causes and effects; as a matter of fact, kinds of events are often *defined* in terms of their causes or effects.

A more defensible interpretation of Hume's rule is to take it to mean that objects of X-kind can be causes of objects of Y-kind only if there are descriptions of occurrences of X which are logically independent of descriptions of occurrences of Y. Let us see how the rule would go. A person being struck by a car is causally relevant to his remembering that he was struck by a car. Some writers have tried to show how this is possible by means of independent descriptions of neural events which are then correlated with the original event and the memory of the original event.

Perhaps this route can be followed, but an easier route would be to describe the act of remembering as an act of believing that one remembers. Such a redescription would sever the logical connection and would be entailed by the statement that asserted the remembering of the original event. The same result could be accomplished for perceptual reports, such as Jones seeing a robin, by redescriptions which would refer to what someone takes to be the case.

Melden writes, "The interior event which we call 'the act of volition' must be logically distinct from the alleged effect . . . Yet nothing can be an act of volition that is not logically connected with what is willed . . . " Melden wants to show that an act of will cannot be the cause of its object coming into being, but his reasoning is faulty; the occurrence of an act of will and the existence of its object are logically distinct. Thus it is possible to know that an intentional act is being performed without knowing whether its object is achieved. For example, I can know that you are looking for your car keys without every discovering whether you find them.

A more serious case is voluntary or intentional behavior itself. Here one finds out what a person's intention is by finding out whether he is manifesting the kind of behavior that the intention is supposed to cause. How we find out about some other person's bodily sensations is almost exactly analogous. We find out that somebody is in pain or in agony by noticing, among other things, that he is grimacing in pain or writhing in agony. And the electricity case, involving as it does observation of the behavior of electricity is very similar. In all of these cases criteria are applied to some things in order to refer to other things, and in all of these cases the connection is only contingent. As Wittgenstein says, it is a necessary truth that certain behavior is evidence for pain, but it is not a necessary truth that certain behavior is, or means, pain. Finally, note how absurd it would be to deny that the electricity is the cause of the deflection of the galvanometer needle or that the pain is the cause of the grimacing. And to me at least it is almost as absurd to deny that our desires and intentions are causally relevant to what we do.

I will close with the statement of a paradox. Authors like Ryle and Melden are ordinary language philosophers, basing their conclusions upon what Ryle calls the unstudied chat of ordinary people. And yet their conclusions are in direct opposition to the common sense of practically everybody. Ryle thinks (or says that he thinks) that his enemies are the Cartesians, but his real enemies are all of those people who are grateful for the fact that some of their thoughts are known only to themselves. Melden thinks that his enemies are certain philosophical determinists who would destroy all agency and responsibility, but his real enemies are agents who

have learned how to make their ways in the world by influencing the motives of other agents. In fact, Melden's theory is totally incompatible with that agency which he has sworn himself to defend. For we are agents only to the extent that our desires can exert a causal influence through our actions upon what goes on around us. When our desires are impotent, what happens is not up to us, and so agency cannot manifest itself.

NOTES

[1] A. I. Melden, "Philosophy and the Understanding of Human Fact," in *Epistemology: New Essays in the Theory of Knowledge*, ed. Avrum Stroll (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), p. 242.

[2] C. I. Lewis, "Some Logical Considerations Concerning the Mental," *Journal of Philosophy*, 38 (1941), 225-33.

[3] Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (London: Hutchinson and Co., 1950), p. 209.

[4] Ibid., p. 35.

[5] Ibid., p. 161.

[6] William P. Alston, "Dispositions and Occurrences," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 1 (1971), 125-54.

[7] Melden, *Free Action* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1961), p. 53.

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