

**Reconsidering Ryle: Editor's Introduction to *Electronic Journal of Analytic Philosophy* Special Issue on the Philosophy of Gilbert Ryle.**

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[1] Among the many things I learned from Paul Vincent Spade is that there are three reasons to be interested in the history of philosophy. First, one might be interested in plunder, hoping to return from excursions into the past with booty (concepts, distinctions, arguments, etc.) that might be useful in present day arguments. Second, one might be looking for the stamp of authority for current pet ideas. Although we all know that arguments from authority are fallacious, we are still quite happy to remind others that our positions would have been endorsed by Aristotle, Kant, etc. Finally, and this was Professor Spade's preferred reason, the history of philosophy (the history of anything really) is an intrinsic good. We should do history for the joy of learning about the past.

[2] Although there is a lot to be said for the joys of learning about the past, I must say (with apologies to Professor Spade) that such joy is not the reason the contributors to this special issue of the *Electronic Journal of Analytic Philosophy* have written about Gilbert Ryle. The fact is that the Ryle's philosophy is of special relevance to philosophical issues of today, especially in the philosophy of cognitive science and mind, but also in logic and epistemology. Given the issues of our time, Ryle is a good philosopher to plunder, and has become (after a generation of relative neglect) a good authority to cite. Before saying a few things about how the contributors to this special issue plunder from Ryle, I will spell out very briefly what it is about today's issues that make Ryle so relevant in my main research area, the philosophy of cognitive science.

[3] In the cognitive science of the last decade (at least), more and more focus has been placed upon models of cognition which do not make use of sentence-like, internal representations. Highly successful research on connectionist networks, situated robots, and dynamical systems models have made it seem less and less plausible that the mind is a storehouse of sentences. Though the scientific benefits of this still-emerging view of the mind are many and quite obvious, it has wreaked havoc in the philosophy of mind, where hundreds of years of work has explored the ins and outs of the idea that thoughts are inner sentences. But if our best science of the mind shows that there are no inner sentences, how do we understand thought?

[4] Ryle's ascriptivist explanation of the mind from *The Concept of Mind*, is of immense service here, providing a ready way to understand thought in the absence of inner sentences, as well a prefiguring many of the claims later made by cognitive scientists. Although the entire work is worthy of serious attention, I will mention just three related positions developed by Ryle in *The Concept of Mind* that have been re-discovered by contemporary philosophers of mind and cognitive science: the primacy of knowledge

how, the intrinsic connection between thought and action, and anti-representationalism, the idea that thinking is not the processing of representations. These have been among the hottest topics in the philosophy of mind/cognitive science literature over the last decade or so. Ryle, who is rarely cited on these debates<sup>1</sup>, had set these positions out convincingly and in great detail, long before anyone had built a mobile robot. Here, far too briefly, is how.

[5] In chapter II of *The Concept of Mind*, called "Knowing How and Knowing That" Ryle goes to great lengths to emphasize that much of what we usually think of as thinking is actually the manifestation of skill. This view of cognition has been seized upon by connectionist cognitive scientists, and later by proponents of so-called "embodied cognitive science". It is in emphasizing knowledge how instead of knowledge that we normally that, from the point of view of today's philosophy of mind and cognitive science, Ryle makes his most important contributions. In Ryle's picture, theoretical cognition is of decidedly secondary performance.

The central point that is being laboured in this chapter is of considerable importance. It is an attack from one flank upon the category mistake which underlies the dogma of the ghost in the machine. In unconscious reliance upon this dogma theorists and laymen alike constantly construe the adjectives by which we characterise performances as ingenious, wise, methodical, careful, witty, etc. as signaling the occurrence in someone's stream of consciousness of special processes functioning as ghostly harbingers or more specifically occult causes of the performance so characterised. They postulate a internal shadow-performance to be the real carrier of the intelligence ordinarily ascribed to the overt act, and think that in this way they explain what makes the overt act a manifestation of intelligence. They have described the overt act as an effect of a mental happening... (p.50<sup>ii</sup>)

[6] On Ryle's view, it is not internal happenings, following an internal set of rules, that makes action intelligent, but rather it is the way that action is performed. Acting intelligently is not doing two things, one mental and one bodily. It is instead doing just one thing, but doing it efficiently or shrewdly or successfully in the face of unexpected obstacles. So knowledge is primarily knowing how to do things. That is, most of what is normally called knowledge, is actually *skills*. Consider, for example, Ryle's justly famous description of what is to believe something.

Belief might be said to be like knowledge and unlike trust in persons, zeal for causes, or addiction to smoking in that it is 'propositional'; but this, though not far wrong, is too narrow. Certainly to believe that the ice is dangerously thin is be unhesitant in telling oneself and others that it is too thin, in acquiescing in other people's assertions to that effect, in objecting to statements to the contrary, in drawing consequences from the original proposition and so forth. But it is also to be prone to skate warily, to shudder, to dwell in imagination on possible disasters and to warn other skaters. It is a propensity to make certain executive and imaginative moves as well as to have certain feelings. But these things hang

together on a certain propositional hook. The phrase 'thin ice' would occur in the descriptions alike of the shudders, the warnings, the declarations, the inferences, the acquiescences and the objections. (p.135)

[7] There are two important things to notice in this description. First, we can see that having a belief does not depend upon having an inner sentence. So this is an account of beliefs (and by extension other mental states) that can be applied to thinkers as described by connectionist, embodied cognitive science. Notice also that in this description, a belief *that* something is the case is cashed out in terms of (sometimes potential) *actions*. So despite the 'propositional character' of the belief, it actually depends upon activity, and not vice versa as has been held traditionally. Furthermore, Ryle offers a proof that it has to be this way. Knowledge that cannot be the basis of knowledge how.

The crucial objection to the intellectualist legend is this. The consideration of propositions is itself an operation the execution of which can be more or less intelligent, less or more stupid. But if, for any operation to be intelligently executed, a prior theoretical operation had first to be performed and performed intelligently, it would be impossible for anyone ever to break into the circle. (p.30)

That is, as Ryle puts it "efficient practise precedes the theory of it." (p.30)

[8] The "intellectualist legend" that Ryle refers to in the passage just quoted (and throughout *The Concept of Mind*) just is Cartesian philosophy of mind, which is to say that is just is computational cognitive science. In his criticism of that legend, Ryle explicitly claims that the mind is not a storehouse of representations which are somehow processed when we think or act intelligently; that is, like many contemporary proponents of ecological psychology, situated robotics, and dynamical systems theory, Ryle is an *anti-representationalist*. In fact, Ryle's anti-representationalism is an improvement over many of today's versions of anti-representationalism in that it is more than merely *anti*, more than a mere denial of representational theories of the mind (though Ryle's work also does that). As noted above, Ryle offers a full-fledged replacement for representational theories.

[9] So that's why *EJAP* is having this special issue. What follows is a brief description of the contents of the issue.

[10] With apologies to the living authors of the essays included here, the gem of this special issue of *EJAP* is a 1976 letter from Ryle to former student Daniel Dennett. In it, Ryle mocks cognitive psychology as being "like the later days of phlogiston-theory", and says of the then just-published *The Language of Thought* "it seems that Fodor beats Locke in the intricacy of his 'wires-and-pulleys', when what was chiefly wrong with Locke was the (intermittent) intricacy of his 'wires-and-pulleys'!" Dennett is also subjected to a (more gentle) ribbing: Ryle suggests that his not-yet-published "Toward a Cognitive Theory of Consciousness" focuses too closely on our inner lives, ignoring the

fact that most of the things we are conscious of is not inner at all, but rather are external goings-on. I should add that *if* Dennett really was guilty of such an error in the 1970s (which I rather doubt), he had fully purged such heresies from his thinking by the time he published the thoroughly Rylean *Consciousness Explained* in 1991.

[11] The issue also contains a reprint of Dennett's 2000 introduction to the U.K.-only Penguin edition of *The Concept of Mind*, something until now unavailable to readers in the U.S. In his introduction, Dennett notes that many current trends in cognitive science (some mentioned above) echo Rylean themes: "embodied and 'situated' cognition: your mind is not in your brain; skill is not represented; intelligence without representation—to name only the most obvious." Dennett also suggests something surprising, especially considering that Ryle was his mentor: *The Concept of Mind* is not, after all, a deep book. Instead, it is "wonderfully, importantly shallow". And, indeed, this shallowness is in some ways the most important thing about Ryle's philosophical approach. He shows again and again that the supposedly deep problems, loved by mystery-mongers, can be made to evaporate.

[12] In "Gilbert Ryle and the Chinese Sceptic: Do epistemologists need to know how to?" Istvan Berkeley uses Ryle's famous distinction between knowing how and knowing that—along with arguments from connectionist cognitive science and classical, Chinese philosophy (!)—to re-think the impact of some standard skeptical arguments. As discussed above, Ryle argues quite convincingly that knowing how is not reducible to knowing that. Berkeley is unconvinced by contemporary arguments that the reduction goes in the other direction, with knowing that being reducible to knowing how. This leaves him a believer in knowing how, and agnostic about the reality of knowing that as a separate, non-reducible category. Following Ryle, Berkeley suggests that knowing how is not subject to skeptical worries. Thus, there is at least some knowledge that is not subject to skeptical arguments. And to whatever extent all knowledge is (reducible to) knowledge how, skepticism will be unable to shake its footing.

[13] Hartley Slater updates an earlier essay of his, originally published in 1973 in the Ryle-edited journal *Mind*. In "Namely Riders: An update", Slater discusses the idea of heterologicality, showing that Ryle's analysis of the supposed paradox of heterologicality is correct. Words are heterological just in case they do not apply themselves. For example, the word "monosyllabic" is heterological, because it has several syllables; on the other hand, the word 'English' is homological because it is in English. The paradox of heterologicality, discussed by Ryle in an article called 'Heterologicality' arises when one wonders whether 'heterological' is heterological.<sup>iii</sup> Ryle's solution to the problem is to say that the term 'heterological' has more than one meaning. Slater applies the Rylean solution to the paradox to issues surrounding self-reference. In so doing, he raises troubles for representational theories of mind in general, showing in particular that compositional theories of meaning, such that put forth by Fodor, can be decisively refuted.

[14] In "Ryle's Behaviorism" Rowland Stout suggests that Ryle's position is not the "philosophical behaviorism" that is taught to beginning students in the philosophy of

mind, only to be easily refuted over its inability to deal with the complexity of the relationship between thoughts and actions. In place of this overly simple philosophical behaviorism, Stout offers the “Holistic Ryle”, according to whom behavior licenses ascriptions of entire mental states, and not individual beliefs and desires. The Holistic Ryle, Stout suggests, is not just the most appropriate way to understand Ryle’s behaviorism. It has the further advantage of being superior to both the theory theory and mental simulation in its account of our understanding of other minds, requiring neither knowledge of highly complex psychological theories, nor complex analogical reasoning and shifts in perspective. According to Stout’s Holistic Ryle, knowing other minds—by which he means, whole mental states, not just individual thoughts—just is knowing how others behave.

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<sup>i</sup> Among the few who have bucked this trend, Daniel Dennett and Andy Clark are especially notable.

<sup>ii</sup> Page numbers are to the 1949 U.S. version of *The Concept of Mind*, published by Barnes and Noble.

<sup>iii</sup> It turns out that on first blush ‘heterological’ is heterological iff ‘heterological’ is not heterological. If you are not convinced of this, I suggest convincing yourself before reading Slater’s piece.