Logical behaviourism: objections

This handout follows the one on ‘Logical behaviourism’. You should read that handout first.

LOGICAL BEHAVIOURISM AND MENTAL CAUSATION
According to Ryle’s version of logical behaviourism, there is no mental causation. Mental states aren’t causes. This isn’t to adopt epiphenomenalism. Rather, mental states aren’t the right kind of thing to be causes (or fail to be causes). Talk of mental causation is a category mistake. Instead, we explain how people behave in relation to the dispositions they have.

We may object that there is mental causation. First, while dispositions may not be causes in the same sense as particular events, we can argue that they are part of the ‘causal story’. For example, the stone won’t break the glass if the glass isn’t brittle. So dispositions make a contribution to causal chains, and citing a disposition can be a causal explanation. The same is true of beliefs, desires and other mental states, we may claim. When I say ‘I went to the party because I thought you would be there’, we are citing something that is causally relevant to my action.

A famous argument from Donald Davidson supports this. Suppose I have two reasons to do something, but I only act on one of those reasons. For example, I want to see you and believe you’ll be at the party, and I believe the party will be fun and I want to have fun. Suppose I go to the party because I want to have fun, not because I want to see you. How can this be true? What makes it the case that the second reason, and not the first, is the reason I act on? ‘Central to the relation between a reason and an action it explains is the idea that the agent performed the action because he had the reason’. This ‘because’ must be a causal ‘because’. What makes it true that I act on the second reason, and not the first, is that the second reason causes my action. So behaviourism is wrong to think that there is no mental causation.

Second, there are mental occurrences that may operate as causes like particular events do. For instance, in working through a problem, one thought may ‘lead to’ the next and this ‘leading to’ should be understood causally. The whole mental process is a causal chain, with each stage causing the next stage.

IS MIND WITHOUT BODY CONCEIVABLE?
If logical behaviourism provides the correct analysis of mental concepts, then it seems that it is inconceivable for there to be a mind without a body. A mind is not a thing, it does not ‘exist’ in the same way as bodies exist only with different properties. To think like this is a category mistake, and category mistakes are misconceptions. As dispositions to behave, mental states can only be had by creatures that can behave in certain ways.
Given this, if we can succeed in showing that it is conceivable for the mind to exist without the body, then it seems that logical behaviourism must be false. Now, many people have thought that mind without body is conceivable - belief in God and the existence of one’s soul in the afterlife demonstrate this. Shouldn’t the analysis of our mental concepts make such common thoughts coherent rather than incoherent? Aren’t our concepts defined by how we use them?

Ryle argues that such beliefs don’t actually reflect how we use our concepts in everyday life. The ‘official doctrine’ conflicts ‘with the whole body of what we know about minds when we are not speculating about them’ (p. 13, my italics). The belief in mind without body is not part of everyday use, but the result of theological and philosophical theorising. We cannot have a clear and distinct idea of ourselves as ‘minds’ only, and we are mistaken if we think that we can. ‘Many people can talk sense with concepts but cannot talk sense about them.’ (p. 9)

CIRCULARITY AND MULTIPLE REALIZABILITY OF MENTAL STATES IN BEHAVIOUR
(While discussing this objection, we will ignore mental occurrences, and focus just on the analysis of those mental states that Ryle claims are dispositions.) We can object that logical behaviourism can’t supply a successful analysis of mental states in terms of behaviour. If a mental state is a disposition, or set of dispositions, to behave in certain ways in certain conditions, what behaviour is it a disposition towards?

The first difficulty in answering this question is that a mental state might be expressed in quite different behaviours not only in different situations, but even in very similar situations by different people. In fear, I might freeze, you might run. This is known as the multiple realizability of mental states in behaviour. ‘Multiple realizability’, in this context, just means that there are many ways in which the disposition (the mental state) can be actualised (expressed in behaviour). If different people with the same mental state have dispositions to do different things in similar situations, how can we say that these different dispositions are actually the same mental state? What is it that makes it the same mental state, given that the dispositions are different?

The second difficulty in analyzing mental states in terms of behavioural dispositions is that doing the same thing could, in different instances, be expressions of different mental states. I might run towards something because I’m scared of it, and want to surprise it; or I might run towards it because I’m not scared of it, and want a cuddle.

The logical behaviourist could reply first, that on the whole people in the same mental state have very similar dispositions. Many of these similarities hold even when there are some things they do differently (e.g. for fear, there are similarities in how they answer ‘are you scared?’), their facial expressions etc.). Second, the objection focuses on individual ‘pieces’ of behaviour, which misunderstands the theory. Ryle’s analysis allows that we can’t tell what disposition, if any, is being expressed in a single piece of behaviour. What makes the behaviour the expression of the disposition that it does, in fact, express, depends on whether certain hypothetical statements about other situations are true or not. So whether I am running towards something because I’m scared of it or because I am not isn’t fixed just by running towards it. It depends on what I would say if you asked me ‘Are you
scared?’, what I do next after running towards it, and so on.

But we can now raise a second objection. We cannot analyze what behaviour a mental state is a disposition for without referring to other mental states. Suppose I am afraid of dangerous snakes. Does this dispose me to run when I see one? That depends. Do I believe the snake is dangerous? Do I believe that this type of dangerous snake is one you shouldn’t run away from? Am I able to recognize the type of snake? Do I want to avoid being bitten? And so on. We can’t specify what set of dispositions my fear is without mentioning my beliefs, my knowledge, my desires, and so on. So here’s the objection: We can provide a further analysis of these mental states in terms of dispositions as well, but we will face the same problem. What behaviour my belief that the snake is dangerous disposes me towards will depend on other mental states. In fact, it will depend on whether or not I am also afraid of snakes! This is the problem of circularity.

The problem gets worse. A particular mental state could be compatible with a disposition to just about any behaviour, depending on a person’s other mental states at the time. My fear of dangerous snakes could dispose me to say ‘Well, hello there, Mr Muggins’ if I also believe that this phrase effectively prevents snake attacks! To conclude the objection: Because we can’t effectively identify distinct mental states with distinct sets of dispositions, it is a mistake to think that mental states just are sets of behavioural dispositions.

1. If mental states are behavioural dispositions, then different mental states are dispositions to different behaviour and the same (type of) mental state is a disposition to the same behaviour.
2. However, there is no fixed set of behaviours that any mental state disposes one towards. The behavioural dispositions that are supposed to ‘be’ a particular mental state vary depending on what other mental states someone has.
3. Therefore, different mental states may be dispositions to the same behaviour, depending on other mental states. And the same mental state may be dispositions to different behaviour, depending on other mental states.
4. Furthermore, the analysis of one mental state in terms of dispositions may rely on the analysis of a second, while the analysis of the second relies on the analysis of the first.
5. Therefore, mental states cannot be analyzed as behavioural dispositions.

This objection is particularly forceful against analytical behaviourists who want to ‘reduce’ concepts of mental states to behaviour and dispositions, who say that we can give a complete translation of mental concepts in terms of behavioural concepts.

However, Ryle rejects this view. First, mental concepts are concepts of ‘indefinitely heterogenous’ sets of dispositions. Nothing that is ‘indefinite’ can be
exhaustively characterized. Second, disposition statements are ‘open’, and cannot be replaced by a complete set of hypothetical statements linking particular matters of fact (such as a situation and a behaviour). Therefore, Ryle accepts that it is impossible to specify mental states in terms of dispositions, replacing mental concepts with behavioural ones alone in our thought and language. Nevertheless, he argues, a concept of a mental state is a concept of a set of dispositions. Ryle’s logical behaviourism provides an analysis of the meaning of mental concepts, but it does not justify the claim that we could replace talk of mental concepts with talk of specific behavioural dispositions. Mental concepts work at a higher level of generality that can’t be reduced to sets of individual hypothetical statements about behaviour. This makes the point about circularity true but not an objection.

THE ASYMMETRY BETWEEN SELF-KNOWLEDGE AND KNOWLEDGE OF OTHER PEOPLE’S MENTAL STATES

Ryle observes that it is part of the ‘official doctrine’ of substance dualism that the ways in which we gain knowledge of our own and others’ mental states are very different. We are directly aware of our own mental states, but we can only infer those of others. Our self-knowledge comes from our consciousness of our mental states and our introspection of that consciousness. We cannot be conscious of anyone else’s mental states in the same way. Furthermore, we are aware of our mental states in such a way that we cannot make mistakes, but this is not true of our beliefs about other people’s minds.

On the positive side, rejecting this asymmetry means that logical behaviourism avoids the problem of other minds. Talking about mental states is just talking about dispositions to behave in certain ways. From how someone behaves, we can infer what behavioural dispositions they have. But from this, we don’t then infer that they have a mind. The link between behaviour and minds isn’t based on evidence, it is logical (conceptual). To say someone has certain behavioural dispositions just is to say that they have certain mental states. To understand what others say and do is to understand that they have minds. We can know that other people have minds, because we can know directly that they behave in particular ways.

However, if mental states were dispositions to behaviour, it seems that I would have to infer what mental states I have from how I behave, or how I think I am disposed to behave. But, we can object, this isn’t right. I can know what I believe, what I want or fear or hope, directly, without inference. Furthermore, if I am thinking to myself, I know what I am thinking in a way that no one else can.

1. The analysis of mental states in terms of behavioural dispositions seems to rule out an asymmetry between self-knowledge and knowledge of other people’s mental states.
2. Yet it seems obvious from experience that there is such an asymmetry.
3. Therefore, logical behaviourism is false.

Ryle’s response is to argue that consciousness, understood in this way, is a myth (p. 156). He argues that self-knowledge and our knowledge of other minds is on a par, gained in the same way in each case, by paying attention. This enables us to
make reliable dispositional claims about our own or other people’s behaviour, whether this is overt or silent. The main difference is simply that we have more evidence available to ourselves.

**OBJECTIONS TO RYLE’S THEORY OF CONSCIOUSNESS**

*The Concept of Mind*, Ch. 6

Central to Ryle’s argument is that being conscious of something is to pay attention (‘heed’) to it. We can pay attention to what we are doing and to what we have just felt or said silently to ourselves. But we can also pay attention to what someone else is doing and what they say out loud to us. To know what we are thinking or feeling is not to stand in some special, inner private relation to certain mental ‘objects’ (‘thoughts’, ‘feelings’), but for us to be ready to say what we think or feel and be unsurprised by the occurrence of the thought or feeling.

Compare not knowing a process in one’s mind: you make a joke spontaneously or come up with a solution to a problem. How did you do it? You can’t say - the joke or solution comes as a ‘surprise’ to you. Knowing what you are thinking or doing is just to be continuously prepared for what comes next in that process.

Hence consciousness provides the same kind of knowledge in cases of knowing our own mental states and knowing the mental states of others. The main difference is that in our own case, we have more to go on, because we are the audience of our silent, inner speech - our thinking - and others are not.

Knowing what you are thinking is not different in *kind* from knowing what someone else in thinking, since I can know just as directly what someone else thinks when they speak, at least when they speak in an ‘unstudied’, unguarded, unembarrassed and uncalculated way, which is the most natural way to speak. When we talk like this - whether to others, or silently to ourselves - we are directly expressing our mental states. So when we pay attention to what we say, we gain knowledge of the mind of whoever is talking. Introspection is not a form of perception of special mental objects. It is just to pay this kind of attention to ourselves.

**Objections**

We can make two objections to Ryle’s analysis of consciousness and self-knowledge. First, can thinking be adequately understood in terms on inner speech, and can internalised speech form the model for mental processes generally? What about non-linguistic mental processes or changes in feeling and mood?

Second, Ryle seems to miss out the ‘inner’, experiential aspect of mental states and processes. There is an element of consciousness that is not about knowledge or paying attention, but ‘phenomenology’, the distinctive quality of certain experiences, e.g. how a sensation or emotion feels to the person experiencing it.

It may be that these objections don’t themselves re-establish a strong asymmetry between self-knowledge and knowledge of others’ mental states. But they attack Ryle’s rejection of it.

**THE CONCEIVABILITY OF MENTAL STATES WITHOUT ASSOCIATED BEHAVIOUR**

We can develop the second objection to Ryle’s theory of consciousness more generally. It seems that many mental states and processes have an ‘inner’ aspect
that can’t be captured by behaviour and behavioural dispositions. We should agree that to be in pain often involves doing certain things, such as wincing, recoiling from the cause of pain, nursing the damaged part of the body, etc. (call all this ‘pain behaviour). But someone stoical might not show their pain (pain without pain behaviour), while an actor might pretend to be in pain (pain behaviour without pain).

There is an easy response to this. The logical behaviourist allows that pain isn’t just to do these things, but to have the disposition to do them. The logical behaviourist can say that the stoic has certain dispositions that the actor lacks.

But now we can object that this analysis misses an important point. Pain isn’t just a disposition to shout or wince; there is also how pain feels, ‘what it is like’ to experience pain. This is what distinguishes the stoic from the actor. It is highly counterintuitive to argue that this aspect of experience is constituted entirely by behavioural dispositions.

Hilary Putnam asks us to imagine a community of ‘super-spartans’. (The Spartans were an ancient Greek community who were very tough and discouraged demonstrations of pain.) These are people (or creatures) who so completely disapprove of showing pain that all pain behaviour has been suppressed. They no longer have any disposition to demonstrate pain in their behaviour. Yet, they could still be in pain. Pain is conceivable without any associated pain behaviour. So pain can’t understood just in terms of dispositions to pain behaviour.

The logical behaviourist can reply that Putnam’s example isn’t coherent. For instance, it is impossible for super-spartans to learn about pain. Without behaviour that expresses the mental state, the concept of such a mental state can’t be learned or used. Yet they need the concept to know what they are supposed to suppress!

Putnam replies that we can suppose that they are born ‘fully enculturated’ - with an understanding of their culture. If this is conceivable, then it is conceivable to experience pain, and to know that one is experiencing pain, without any behavioural dispositions at all.