

Behaviourism II

Phil 255

In Philosophy: Ryle



- Philosophical views mirrored those of the logical positivists
 - Philosophy should have a clarificatory role
- The science of interest to him was psychology
- Derided Cartesian dualism for positing a “ghost in the machine”
- Accused most psychologists of a serious “category mistake”
- He didn’t deny the existence of mind, just thought most psychologists mis-characterized the concept

Criticism of standard usage

- Begins by sketching opposing view: a “folk psychological” description of thinking
- But thinking is more than just ‘theoretical deduction’: it’s everywhere, all the time
- He notes a “puzzling element” in this standard characterization
 - Puzzling because it’s unlike all other pursuits (singing, etc.)
- We can’t answer a variety of straightforward questions about thinking
- We shouldn’t think of thinking as being the moving around of some kind of stuff
 - Thinking just is a kind of behaviour

Positive View

- Considers a number of examples of thinking: rowing; admiring roses (p.99)
- Ryle points out that there “incipient thoughts,” related to the main topics, i.e., thinking is somehow directed, or dispositional
- People don't ‘forget’ threshold thoughts, they just don't always report them
 - Hence, thoughts are ‘constitutionally inceptive’
- Can answer the two dominant problems:
 - Chronicling:
 - Mind-stuff:
- “thinking is not a rival occupation to the special occupations”

Troubles with behaviourism

- Trouble 1: Diffuseness
- Externalism limits available kinds of explanation
- E.g., emotion explanations needed to be dispositional
 - Anger, love expressed by any number of behavioural acts
 - Highly contextual, hence infinite list
- Such explanations will require long disjunctive lists of behaviour
- Circularity: What groups a set of behaviours as related?

- Need a 'self' to evaluate (or at least a physiological context)
- Watson thought that emotion was the sensation of visceral changes
 - removes autonomy
 - physiological changes don't always result in overt behavioural ones
 - are visceral changes variable enough?
- Maybe have a broader definition of 'physiology'?
 - Even less autonomy

Trouble 2: Privacy

- Explaining the 'easy' cases for introspectionists: e.g.,
- Watson's solution:
 - thinking is simply truncated speech (recall problems)
- Skinner's solution:
 - Self-prediction, but
 - we have to be alert, sophisticated detectives
 - doesn't account for a novel plan
 - it doesn't address the problem(!)

- Ryle's version (can we use dispositions) 'Le Penseur':
 - he isn't doing anything publically observable and
 - nothing follows what he's doing
- Ryle's solution (MM, p. 75):
 - 'as-if' mutterings (that aren't ghostly or symbolic)
 - sleeping analogy
 - why bother with the pretending when thinking?
 - how do you explain non-moving pretending?

Trouble 3: Productivity

- Noam Chomsky ('the' linguist): 1956 Review of Skinner's 'Verbal Behavior'
- Argued that the productivity of language cannot be explained by behaviourists.
- Behaviourist explanation of language was essentially statistical
- Couldn't explain
 - novel grammaticality
 - ambiguity
 - embedded clauses
- One of the main events in the 'cognitive revolution' of the 60s

The legacy

- Many aspects of behaviorist methodology:
 - scientific, materialist approach
 - behaviour as main measure of mental function
- Internal processes like 'imagery' were not taken seriously until the 1970s.
- studying 'consciousness' is only now scientifically respectable
- New movements in philosophy and psychology, like dynamicism, continue espouse behaviorist methods