Chapter (XI)

Bertrand Russell: What is Mind?, The Journal of Philosophy, Vol. 55, No. 1 (Jan. 2, 1958), pp. 5-12.

Professors Ryle's book The Concept of Mind has a thesis which is very original, and, if true, very important. I find myself unable to accept his thesis, and I propose to give my reasons in what follows.

I will begin, however, with certain points as to which I had already expressed opinions similar to his, although he does not seem to be aware of this fact.

The first point as to which I agree with him is the rejection of Cartesian dualism which he sets forth in his opening chapter. I was somewhat surprised by his emphasis upon this point. Cartesian dualism was rejected by Malebranche, Leibniz, Berkeley, Hegel and William James. I cannot think of any philosophers of repute who accept it in the present day, except Marxists and Catholic theologians, who are compelled to be old-fashioned by the rigidities of their respective creeds. I imagine, however, that Professor Ryle would defend his emphasis on the ground that many who reject Descartes's doctrine in words nevertheless retain a number of beliefs which are logically connected with it. I think this is true of Professor Ryle himself on one important point, as I shall argue presently.

A second point upon which I am in agreement with him is the rejection of sense-data. I believed in these at one time, but emphatically abandoned them in 1921.

A third matter, which is one of considerable importance, is the rejection of sensation as a form of knowledge. It is not denied, either by him or by me, that sensation is an indispensable part of the causes of our knowledge as to matters of fact; what is denied is that it is itself knowledge. There must be added what Professor Ryle calls "observation" and I call "noticing".

Since we agree on these points, I shall say no more about them. I come now to Professor Ryle's main thesis. I think his thesis may be stated as follows: the adjective "mental" is not applicable to any special kind of "stuff", but only to certain organizations and dispositions illustrated by patterns composed of elements which it is not significant to call "mental". He gives a great many examples of the kind of adjective or noun that he has in mind. Cricket, he points out, is not another "thing" side by side with particular matches and particular players, but is something of a logically higher order. Another example is the British Constitution. The House of Commons, as he remarks, is one of the constituents of which the British Constitution is composed, but when you have visited both Houses of Parliament, the Law Courts, Downing Street and Buckingham Palace there does not remain another place for you to visit which is the British Constitution.

He contends that the word "mental" is only applicable to objects having the kind of logical status belonging to cricket or the British Constitution. His favorite examples of "mental" adjectives are such words as "intelligent", "lazy", "good-natured ،"which denote dispositions.

I will quote a summary which seems to me to state his thesis very clearly:

One of the central negative motives of this book is to showv that 'mental' does not denote a status, such that one can sensibly ask of a given thing or event whether it is mental or physical, 'in the mind' or 'in the outside world'.

To talk of a person's mind is not to talk of a repository which is permitted to house objects that something called 'the physical world' is forbidden to house; it is to talk of the person's abilities, liabilities and inclinations to do and undergo certain sorts of things, and of the doing and undergoing of these things in the ordinary world. Indeed, it makes no sense to speak as if there could be two or eleven worlds. Nothing but confusion is achieved by labelling worlds after particular avocations. Even the solemn phrase 'the physical world' is as philosophically pointless as would be the phrase 'the numismatic world', 'the haberdashery world', or 'the botanical world'. (Page 199)

I have failed to understand why other adjectives having a similar logical status are not considered by Professor Ryle to be "mental". One of his favourite examples is the adjective "brittle". When you say that a piece of glass is brittle, you do not say that it will break, but only that in certain circumstances it would break, just as you may call a man "intelligent" even though he happens to be asleep at the moment, if he would exhibit intelligence in suitable circumstances. But Professor Ryle never explains, or seems to think it necessary to explain,

what is the difference between "brittle" and "intelligent" that makes the latter mental and the former not. A plain man would say that "brittle" denotes a disposition of bodies and "intelligent" denotes a disposition of minds-in fact, that the two adjectives apply to different kinds of "stuff". But it is not open to Professor Ryle to say this, and I do not quite know what he would say.

Professor Ryle backs up his rejection of all mental "stuff " by denying that, in principle, there is anything that a man can know about himself which another cannot know unless he is told. He does not, of course, mean that in fact everything is known to observers as well as to the patient. You may hear a clap of thunder when you are alone in the desert and when no one else hears it, but this may be called an accidental privacy. What he means to deny is that there are occurrences which are essentially private which are known to one person but are such as others could not possibly know except through testimony. On this point, as on a good many others, I find that he is astonishingly slap-dash and is content to let dogmatic assertion take the place of refutation of adverse theories. I will take one quite obvious example: dreams. Except in the Book of Exodus, it is generally accepted that one man cannot know what another dreams unless he is told. But Professor Ryle has nothing to say about dreams. They do not occur in the index and his few allusions to them are entirely perfunctory. It is singular that, although he goes out of his way to praise Freud, he does not allude to Freud's work on dreams and no one could guess that he even knows of it. He does deal, after a fashion,

with such things as stomach-aches and toothaches, but such things, he maintains, become known to the observer through the patient's groans. Evidently none of his friends are Stoics.

Some difficulties in his denial of private data he does deal with, more or less. He has a whole chapter on imagination, but I entirely fail to understand how he can be satisfied by what he says .He says that operations of imagining are exercises of mental powers, but what we imagine exists nowhere. Let us examine this for a moment. In its obvious sense, it is, of course, a truism.

If I shut my eyes and imagine a horse, there is no horse in the room. But it is one thing to imagine a horse and another to imagine a hippopotamus. Something happens when I imagine the one, and something else happens when I imagine the other. What can it be that is happening in these two cases? Professor Ryle states explicitly (page 161) that there are no such things as mental happenings. Where perception is concerned, he contents himself with naive realism: I perceive a horse, and the horse is out there. It is not a "mental" horse. But when I imagine a horse, it is not out there, and yet the occurrence is not the same as imagining a hippopotamus. I should have thought it as obvious as anything can be that something is happening in me and cannot be known to anybody else unless I do something overt to let it be known what it is that I am imagining.

I should have thought that the same sort of thing might be said about pleasure and unpleasure (Professor Ryle agrees

with most psychologists in pointing out that "pain" is not the opposite of "pleasure"). A man may exhibit overt signs of pleasure, but it is quite possible for him to conceal pleasure, for example, if he hears of a misfortune to a man whom he hates but pretends to love.

It is difficult to suppose that stocks and stones feel either pleasure or unpleasure, but it would be an impossible paradox to maintain that human beings do not. I should have regarded this as one of the most important differences between what is mental and what is not. I should not give this position to intelligence, because calculating machines are, in some ways, more intelligent than any human being. But I should not favour a campaign to give votes to calculating machines, because I do not believe that they experience either pleasure or unpleasure.

Professor Ryle's denial of introspection as a source of knowledge links him with the Behaviourists. He ends his book with a discussion of Behaviourism in which he says that the only point on which he disagrees with its advocates is that they believe in mechanistic explanations and he does not. Mechanism is another of the matters that he treats with cavalier dogmatism. When he speaks of it, he seems to be thinking of the old-fashioned billiard-ball mechanism and to think that since physicists have abandoned this, they have abandoned mechanism. He never gives any reason for rejecting mechanism in the modern sense of the word. The question that deserves to be discussed is this: do the equations of physics, combined with data as to the distribution

of energy at some given time, suffice to determine what has happened and will happen to portions of matter not below a certain minimum size? To make the question concrete: since speaking involves macroscopic movements of matter, could an ideally competent physicist calculate what So-and-So will say throughout the rest of his life? I do not profess to know the answer to this question, but Professor Ryle does. I wish he had condescended to give us his reasons.

Professor Ryle's attitude to science is curious. He no doubt knows that scientists say things which they believe to be relevant to the problems he is discussing, but he is quite persuaded that the philosopher need pay no attention to science. He seems to believe that a philosopher need not know anything scientific beyond what was known in the time of our ancestors when they dyed themselves with woad. It is this attitude that nables him to think that the philosopher should pay attention to the way in which uneducated people speak and should treat with contempt the sophisticated language of the learned. To this principle, however, there is, in his opinion, one exception: common people think that thoughts and ideas are in people's heads. As Goldsmith says, Still the wonder grew That one small head could carry all he knew.

On this point, Professor Ryle rejects common usage. He cannot believe that thoughts and feelings are in our heads, and tries to make out that on this point the plain man agrees with him. He offers no argument of any sort or kind to show that thoughts are not in people's heads, and I fear-though I say

this with trepidation-that he has allowed himself to be influenced on this matter by the Cartesian dualism, which makes it seem preposterous to assign a spatial location to anything mental. Granted his thesis as to the sorts of structure that can be called mental, it would, of course, follow that what is to be called mental is not in space. Cricket is not located on the cricket field and cleverness is not located in clever people. But if his thesis is rejected, as I believe it should be, there remains only a dualistic prejudice to prevent us from locating mental occurrences in brains.

The problem of perception has troubled philosophers from a very early date. My own belief is that the problem is scientific, not philosophical, or, rather, no longer philosophical. A great many philosophical questions are, in fact, scientific questions with which science is not yet ready to deal. Both sensation and perception were in this class of problems, but are now, so I should contend, amenable to scientific treatment and not capable of being fruitfully handled by anyone who chooses to ignore what science has to say about them.

Professor Ryle ties himself in knots in struggles to maintain naive realism. He almost denies that a round plate tilted away from the observer looks elliptical. He says :A person without a theory feels no qualms in saying that the round plate might look elliptical. Nor would he feel any qualms in saying that the round plate looks as if it were elliptical. But he would feel qualms in following the recommendation to say that he is seeing an elliptical look of a round plate. (Page 216).

I cannot understand what, exactly, he is maintaining. In the case of the plate, you know that it is round because that is the way plates are made. But suppose it is an object in the sky which you cannot touch. You will be at a loss to know whether it is "really" circular or elliptical, and you will be confined to saying what it "looks like". The essential point is that a given thing looks different from different points of view, and that differing things may look alike from different points of view, and, further, that what things look like is essential to our knowledge of what they "really" are, although, for the above reasons, it does not b itself afford conclusive evidence. It is quite unnecessary, in considering this problem, to bring in minds or sensations: the whole thing is physical. A number of cameras photographing a given object produce results which differ in just the same way as our visual perceptions do.

The same sort of considerations apply to colours. Professor Ryle says :When I describe a common object as green or bitter, I am not reporting a fact about my present sensation, though I am saying something about how it looks or tastes. I am saying that it would look or taste so and so to anyone who was in a condition and position to see or taste properly. Hence I do not contradict myself if I say that the field is green, though at the moment it looks greyish-blue to me. (Page 220).

I am particularly puzzled by the word "properly". Birds, whose eyes look in opposite directions, presumably see things quite differently from the way in which we see them. Flies, which have five eyes of two different sorts, must see things even

more differently. A bird or a fly would say that it sees "properly" and that Professor Ryle's way of seeing is eccentric and peculiar. Seeing that there are more flies than human beings in the world, democratic principles should lead us to agree with the fly.

The complications into which Professor Ryle is led by his desire to uphold naive realism remind me of the complications into which upholders of the Ptolemaic theory were driven by their opposition to the Copernican system. The Copernican system demanded one considerable effort of imagination, namely, to entertain the possibility that the earth, which seems so immovable, can be conceived as rotating and revolving. By means of this initial effort of imagination, an immense simplification was effected in astronomy. An equal simplification is effected in the theory of perception if we can learn to imagine what is called "perceiving an object" as a remote effect of the object, which resembles it only approximately and only in certain respects. It is only in regard to every-day objects in our neighbourhood that this theory offers serious imaginative difficulties. Nobody can suppose that the Pleiades, if you got near to one of them, would look at all the way they look to us. The difference between the Pleiades and the furniture of our room is only one of degree.

Professor Ryle shares with the School that he adorns a passionate determination to give a linguistic form to the problems that arise. He says, for example ،in regard to our perception of visual objects :

The questions ‹that is, are not questions of the Para mechanical form 'How do we see robins?', but questions of the form, 'How do we use such descriptions as "he saw a robin"' (Page 225).

This seems to me to involve dismissing important scientific knowledge in favour of verbal trivialities. The question, "How do we see robins?", is one to which physics and physiology, combined, have given an answer which is interesting and important, and has somewhat curious consequences. It appears that certain processes in the optic nerve will cause you "to see a robin" even if these processes have not been caused, as they usually are, by something outside the body of the percipient. I have been taken to task for saying that what a physiologist sees when he examines another man's brain is in his own brain, and not in the other man's. To justify this statement fully would require a long discussion of the word "see" and the word "in". This latter word, in particular, is much more complicated and ambiguous than is usually supposed. But I will not go into these questions here as I have dealt with them elsewhere.

I suppose Professor Ryle might agree that the main purpose of his book is to give a new definition of the adjective "mental". This, of course, is a linguistic question, and, in so far as it is purely linguistic, it is proper to give weight to common usage in arriving at a definition. But the ways in which it is convenient to use words change with changes in our knowledge. At one time, it was not convenient to speak of the earth as a planet .But this has become convenient since

the adoption of the Copernican system. If there were, as Descartes contended, two radically different kinds of substance, one approximately co-extensive with what common sense regards as bodies, and the other approximately co-extensive with what common sense regards as minds, then it would be convenient to divide mind from matter as Descartes did, even if this involved some departure from the way in which these words had been used until Descartes's time. But if ‹as Professor Ryle contends, and as I agree, there is not this fundamental dualism, then we are compelled, if we wish to continue distinguishing mind from matter, to seek some other basis for our distinction. Professor Ryle finds the distinction in syntax: mental adjectives are of a higher type than those which may still be called physical.

For the reasons given above ‹I do not think that such usage is useful, and I also do not think that Professor Ryle has made his own thought clear since he has not explained why he does not consider "brittle" a mental adjective. My own belief is that the distinction between what is mental and what is physical does not lie in any intrinsic character of either, but in the way in which we acquire knowledge of them. I should call an event "mental" if it is one that somebody can notice or, as Professor Ryle would say, observe. I should regard all events as physical, but I should regard as only physical those which no one knows except by inference. Although it might seem as if my disagreement with Professor Ryle were linguistic, this is only superficially true. It is from differences as to the

constitution of the world that he and I are led to different views as to the most convenient definitions of the words "mental "and "physical".

One very general conclusion to which I have been led by reading Professor Ryle 's book is that philosophy cannot be fruitful if divorced from empirical science. And by this I do not mean only that the philosopher should "get up" some science as a holiday task. I mean something much more intimate: that his imagination should be impregnated with the scientific outlook and that he should feel that science has presented us with a new world, new concepts and new methods, not known in earlier times, but proved by experience to be fruitful where the older concepts and methods proved barren.