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Hartnack: Professor Ayer's Honest Ghost

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Professor Ayer believes there are three theses in the Concept of Mind: A strong thesis, a weaker thesis, and a still weaker thesis. The strong thesis Ayer takes to be untenable and a thesis which Ryle may not wish to hold. The second and weaker thesis is the one that Ayer finds of most interest and which, as he puts it, yields a substantial result. The third thesis, the weakest one, is, in Ayer's words, "Too weak to be of very much interest". And as it is not a thesis which Ryle would like to identify himself with, I shall not examine it, or examine Ayer's examination of it. Nor shall I examine the weaker one, i.e. the thesis that, although there may be inner mental processes, these are, at least not always, what the mental predicates apply to. The strong thesis may be difficult, or even impossible, to defend. Nevertheless, it is the one I shall concentrate on. Because even though it may be erroneous, it is a thesis of great philosophic interest; it is therefore important to try the validity of the arguments Ayer is bringing forth against it.

The strong thesis holds that, as Ayer puts it, "that all our talk about the mind is translatable into talk about behavior". I am not sure, however, that this is a correct description of what Ryle is maintaining. What I am unhappy about is the concept of translation. In order to say that one sentence is translated into another sentence or sentences, it must be the case that the two sentences, or class of sentences, have the same truth-conditions. But if I say that Jones is vain, there is no possibility, according to Ryle's analysis, of translating the sentence 'Jones is vain' into a finite number of sentences. There is an infinite number of sentences none of which is either a necessary or a sufficient condition for the truth of the translated sentence.

To say that Jones is vain, is not to say that he is doing or saying anything, but is to say that he is disposed or inclined to say and do certain things. Now, the things he is inclined to do and say are indeed not specifiable. What Jones is inclined to say or do depends of course upon the situation: it is, furthermore, determined by the fact that he is Jones and not Smith. Smith, who also is vain, may be considerably more sophisticated and may not be inclined to say and do what Jones in the very same situation would be inclined to say and do. The concept of transubility, therefore, is a concept which it is logically impossible to apply to Ryle's Concept of Mind.
However, be that as it may, for Ayer’s arguments it is a small point and a point on which, I am sure he does not wish to insist. In arguing against the strong thesis, Ayer does indeed put his finger on some of the sore spots in *The Concept of Mind*. However, in some of the cases, he does not quite distinguish what ought to be distinguished, and in some other cases he seemed not to be fair to Ryle’s arguments.

When Ayer describes Ryle’s strong thesis by saying: “In the version of the programme which we might attribute to Ryle, what would remain would be a set of dispositional statements about people’s overt behaviour”, the term ‘overt’ is an unhappy term, but it is a term which Ayer uses to justify part of his criticism. To the best of my knowledge, Ryle does not use this term anywhere in the sense in which Ayer takes it. The term ‘overt’ in this sense would have meaning only under the presupposition that the term ‘inner’ would have meaning. The Cartesian thesis, which Ryle is attacking, is using the terms ‘inner processes’, and ‘inner occurrences’ to mean processes and occurrences in an unextended substance. This is what one could call a metaphysical sense of the term ‘inner’. Since, according to Ryle, this is a logical howler, there can be given no sense to that term – from which it follows that there can be given no sense to the term ‘outer’ either. There is another sense of ‘outer’, however, which is not a metaphysical sense but an ordinary language sense. According to this sense, what is outer is either on the surface of my body or outside it, and what is inside my body is what is inner. But in this sense of ‘overt’ or ‘outer’ Ryle does not claim that the dispositional statements should be about overt behavior. The statements I make for instance, be it with my so-called silent voice or with an audible voice, is neither outer nor inner – it is neither since my statements, according to Ryle, cannot be identified with any physiological or anatomical process or any movement of the larynx. Occasionally, he does use the concepts ‘overt’ and ‘covered’. But in these uses the term ‘overt’ has no spatial connotation. It is used to imply that it is neither hidden nor private.

I do not mean to say, however, that Ryle’s strong thesis can be upheld. In fact, I do agree with Ayer that it cannot. But I do not always agree with his arguments against the thesis. Admittedly, when Ryle speaks about dreams, day-dreams, visual imaginary, and seeing in the mind’s eye, the defenders of the strong thesis are confronted with grave problems. To be sure, Ryle tries to rectify what he calls the logical geography of these terms. But it is difficult to see that he has succeeded. It is indeed a well taken argument to say, as he does, that to imagine to see, e.g. a bear, is not to see a mental picture of a bear – it is not to see at all – it is to picture to see a real bear. Nevertheless, since
to picture necessarily must be to picture something and this 'something' — triviality true — must be a picture, it is difficult to be appeased by it. It is of no help to be told, as Ryle tells us — and correctly so — that the concept of seeing does not apply to that which I picture. It is of no help since it does not eliminate what seems to be a fact, namely, that there is a picture.

On this point, therefore, I agree with Ayer. I am not so sure, however, that his argument concerning perception-verbs is correct. Ryle mentions that perception-verbs are achievement-verbs, and from this Ayer concludes that there must have been a preceding activity whose purpose it was to achieve that which the achievement verbs are used to denote. But is it correct that such activities necessarily precede the achievement verbs? In most cases where we use the verb 'to win', it is in situations where at least two persons have engaged in some activity. But not always. Let us imagine a mother who tells her two children that tomorrow morning she will give a winning prize to the one who is the first one to fall asleep after being put to bed. Both children wish very much to be the winner. Now compare this situation to a situation where the two children are engaged in a running match. To win a running match is the termination point of an activity — it is the successful completion of it. But in the former situation, it is quite different. The only thing common to the two children is their wish to be the first one to go to sleep. And, of course, no one would want to say that to wish is an activity. One of them may have counted sheep; the other one may have tried to quote some dull rhymes, or he may have been involved in many other activities. But whatever they have done, there is no special activity called trying to go to sleep — at least not in the sense in which there is an activity such as 'running a race'.

Or take the verb 'to find'. It is true, of course, that 'to find' may be to find that which you are looking for, but it does not necessarily have to be so. I may also find something without my previous search. I may find a dime on the street — I certainly have not been looking for it. Or somebody may ask me to look for his glasses. The moment I direct my attention to the task, at that very same moment I find the glasses. In such situations it would not be correct to say that the achievement of finding was preceded by an activity directed toward the finding of that which one wants to find. Thus, there is nothing which forces us to arrive at the embarrassing conclusion that if perception-verbs are achievement-verbs then there must be a preceding mental activity — an activity ending with the achievement of having seen whatever is in fact seen. If it is argued that the very meaning of the verb 'to achieve' entails a preceding activity, the purpose of which has been accomplished, the answer is rather
simple: if this is so it follows that the verb 'to achieve' is not the right
way to characterize such verbs. The philosophically important point is
that the perception-verbs are not used to denote any mental process. And
if the verb 'to achieve' has consequences which may mislead us, we
better find another verb.

Ayer is also doubtful about the validity of Ryle's attack on privacy.
I shall not here examine the difficult problem of finding out how much of
our concept of privacy is a matter of logical grammar and how much, in
one sense or another, is metaphysical. I just want to examine one of
Ayer's arguments against the thesis that the question of privacy is re­
ducible to a question of logical grammar. Ayer's point is that if what
Ryle says about sensation is correct then it must be also correct for
perception. And surely, so Ayer maintains, Ryle would not wish to deny
that we observe or witness what we see. This seems to be a statement
worthwhile investigating. First of all: What do we see? The question is
not meant as an empirical question but as a category-question. Or to ex­
press it differently: What is the logical character of the sentence or sen­
tences constituting answers to that question? It has been thought that
the answer must be one of two possibilities: Either the sentences must
be the so-called M-sentences, i.e. sentences containing names of materi­
al objects; or S-sentences, i.e. sentences containing names of sense-data.
I do not think that this is correct. My answer to the question: "What do
we see?" is neither to mention a material object nor to mention sense­
data but is to state that something is the case. I may answer that I see
that the cat is on the mat, or that the animal on the mat is the cat. Ad­
mittedly I may also, in an appropriate situation, say that I see e.g. an
airplane, or that I see something bluish on the wall. But, as Kant was
eager to emphasize, I surely cannot see something as, say, an airplane,
or as something bluish unless I possess and employ the concept of air­
plane and the concept of color and of blue. And to employ a concept is,
as Kant also emphasized, to pass a judgment. In other words, the atoms
of consciousness are judgments; and this is so independently of whether
we speak about being conscious in terms of being aware of something,
taking notice of something, paying heed to something, etc. If this is so —
and the time allotted to me does not permit me to argue further for it — it
follows that it is difficult to give a sense to the statement that we wit­
ness or observe what we see. The verb 'to observe' is sometimes used
synonymously with the verb 'to see'. If I say that I observe that the cat
is on the mat, it does not mean anything different from saying that I see
that the cat is on the mat. Sometimes, however, it is used in the sense
of holding something under observation. In this sense of the verb I am
engaged in a process — it is something I do for a shorter or longer period.
The psychiatrist may think it of importance to observe the patient’s behavior by talking to him. The psychiatrist is seeing many things. He is seeing the patient making a certain grimace; but what he is holding under observation is not the grimace but the person making it. It would not be correct to say that the psychiatrist is observing what he sees. Or take the sailor who watches the horizon or holds it under observation in order to find out when he can see land. If asked what he sees, he may truthfully say that he sees nothing. If somebody rejects his answer and tells him that he must have seen the horizon, he may answer that he holds the horizon under observation in order to discover when he can see land — and so far he has not seen anything. Should it be objected that he cannot hold the horizon under observation unless he does see it, the answer is, I suppose, both yes and no. If I am asked to see what a certain box contains, and after having opened it discover that it is empty, it would be perfectly correct to say that I saw nothing; it would be beside the point if my statement was rejected on the grounds that I must have seen e.g. the inside of the box. In other words, the verb ‘to see’ and the verb ‘to observe’ — in the latter mentioned sense of that verb — require accusatives which belong to different logical categories.

This is also true of the verb ‘to witness’. I cannot hold a car accident under observation but I can witness it. And what I witness I must also see; but not all that I see do I witness. I see that the cigar box is empty but I do not witness it. I witness events, but that the cigar box is empty is not an event.

While I think it is correct to maintain that the verb ‘to see’ does not imply a ghost, the question is more complicated when we deal with such process-verbs as ‘to watch’, and ‘to hold under observation’. What I see, in the sense of ‘to see’ in which human beings are said to be able to see, is a mental act but not a process; but to watch and to hold under observation are mental processes. In what sense and to what degree — if any — it implies a ghost I shall remark about in connection with my discussion about thinking.

I am not quite sure about Ayer's position about thinking. In mentioning the weaker thesis, i.e. the thesis that logical behaviorism gives a correct account of a great deal of what is ordinarily classified as talk about the mind, Ayer maintains that it may apply to thoughts when they are overtly expressed. I have the impression that Ayer, somewhat like Ryle, thinks there are two possibilities: Either the thought is the sentence when the latter is overtly expressed, or the thought is the sentence I run through in my head before I utter it. Ryle maintains that the thinking is identical with what I say independent of whether it is with my inner silent voice or whether it is with an audible voice. According to
Ryle, it is a logical error to assume that the thought could not be identified with, e.g. the overtly expressed sentence but has to be identified with an inner ghostly process. Ayer seems to think that sometimes, although not always, there is a silent thought before the overtly expressed thought. However, what Ayer means by inner silent thought is not, I believe, what Ryle means when he speaks of the inner planning - the inner ghostly planning. It may in fact be what Ryle is talking about when he speaks of the non-ghostly silent talk - which is not more ghostly as, say, my whispering of a sentence. If this is so, there seems to be no difference between Ryle and Ayer on this point. Be this as it may, I believe the concept of thinking to be much more complicated than it is suggested if one says that the overtly expressed sentence - the sentence not preceded by an inner planning - constitutes the thought. A thought is identical neither with the sentence, be it expressed silently or audibly, nor with any inner silent ghostly process. Against Ryle, and also possibly against Ayer, although I am not certain about his view on this point, I shall maintain that the utterance of the sentence presupposes the thought. A sentence expresses a thought but is not identical with it. When I utter a sentence I already know what I am going to say. I do not learn it by listening to my own utterance. Suppose I wonder what day of the month next Tuesday is. As I happen to know that today is Thursday, May 14, I conclude that next Tuesday is the 19th. What psychologically happened may be something like this: I added seven to fourteen and subtracted two and thereby arrived at the number nineteen. However, this makes sense only because I know that there are seven days in a week and I know that Tuesday is two days before Thursday. But this certainly was not part of what happened psychologically. Nevertheless, the two propositions (the proposition that there are seven days in a week and the proposition that Tuesday is two days before Thursday) constitute part of my knowledge and a knowledge which is a necessary condition for the validity of the result. It is a condition for the validity and not a psychological cause. But although it is not a psychological occurrence, it is nevertheless something I know. However, to know something is not a psychological occurrence. For most of my life, I have known that there are seven days in a week and that Tuesday is two days before Thursday. But I have not spent most of my life expressing that knowledge. To know these propositions is, among other things, to be able to make assertions which are justifiable by them. It is to be able to formulate them if needed and requested. It is what makes the proposition that it is the nineteenth, something which I do not learn by the stating of it, but makes it something I know while stating it. If I want to make explicit the validity or justification of an assertion I may write down all the premises and pre-
suppositions from which it follows. But quite obviously I cannot use such terms as 'it follows' and 'therefore' unless I have already arrived at the conclusion. The language which applies to these terms is not a language which describes the psychological processes. It is a language which is used to write down the logical structure of it and to prove the validity of it.

Or think of the surgeon. While he is operating he knows what he is doing. If he should justify or explain each of his acts it would require hours of quotations from medical books and journals. He most certainly does not cite all medical theories or principles while he is operating. While he is operating the surgeon is not rehearsing his knowledge; he is applying it. He is displaying his knowledge in his acts. To the extent that his acts are explainable and justifiable by principles and theories we may apply the language of thought: we may say that from that specific observation he sees or concludes that this or that act is required. Again, whenever he formulates or states a conclusion, it is a conclusion he already knows — he knows it as an instance of applied knowledge. To characterize it as applied knowledge implies, among other things, that while he is performing the act he can at any moment, if needed or requested, explain or justify the act. His knowledge is his reason (but of course not the cause) for it. A reason, in this sense, is not an act occurring prior to the act for which it serves as a reason. It is not an act but is the principles, theories, hypotheses, etc. which validate, explain, or justify it.

The fact that we know what we say while we say it makes it necessary to distinguish between a thought and the expression of the thought. A thought, therefore, is an act which is different from the act of stating that thought. I can state a conclusion or state a rejection of an assertion in English or French; I can state it in a form which is grammatically correct or incorrect, etc., but I cannot conclude in a form which is either English or French, or grammatically correct or incorrect. This does not mean, however, that I perform two acts, thought-acts and the act of stating the thoughts. If there were two acts it would be conceivable that I could perform one without the other. But it would make no sense to talk about thoughts which were not expressed or formulated. If they were not expressed in language, I would not know that I had them. They would not be part of my consciousness. It should consequently make sense, which it obviously does not, to maintain that I may have many thoughts of which I would not have the slightest knowledge. But to deny that thoughts necessarily constitute elements of consciousness is to eliminate an essential part of the meaning of the concept of thought. What then is the relation between a thought and the stating of it? It is necessary to dis-
PROFESSOR AYER’S HONEST GHOST

tinguish between having a thought and thinking. It may be maintained, although a bit trivially, that thinking consists of thoughts. Thinking is the stream of thought. But if thinking consists of thoughts which are not time-occupying processes, how can thinking be a time-occupying process? The clue to the answer is that the thought has to be formulated or expressed; and while it does not take time to draw a conclusion or to question an assertion, it is a time-occupying process to formulate or to express a conclusion or a doubt about an assertion. The thinking process may thus be something like this: An assumption which is formulated as a proposition p succeeded by the rejection of p. The rejection is expressed in the proposition q and so forth. While to assume, to reject, to doubt, or to guess, is to have assumed, to have rejected, to have doubted, or to have guessed. this is not the case with respect to the stating of our assumptions, doubts, or guesses. The stating of an assumption is not to have stated it. I can be interrupted in the middle of stating an assumption but I cannot be interrupted in the middle of doubting. Expressed in a simplified way: to get an idea is to have got it, but to state an idea is not to have stated it.

My view about thoughts are therefore that they are not identical with any sentences – be they spoken with an inner silent voice or with an audible voice. Thoughts are instances of applications of knowledge. They are mental acts but they are not mental processes; consequently, they do not belong to the category of which it makes sense to say that they are either inner or outer.

Let me sum up my response to Professor Ayer’s paper. I agree with him that Ryle’s strong thesis cannot hold. I do not always agree, however, with Ayer’s arguments for rejecting Ryle’s strong thesis. Furthermore, it would have been interesting if Ayer had examined also other aspects of Ryle’s strong thesis. May I mention such concepts as ‘making statements’ or ‘having beliefs’. It seems obvious, as I have argued elsewhere, that neither of these concepts can be regarded as dispositional concepts. One reason is that for both of these concepts, the concepts of truth and evidence are crucial. And, obviously, truth and evidence belong to entirely different categories than does the concept of disposition.

In conclusion, let me say that it has been extremely interesting to read Ayer’s argument against Ryle’s ghost – and it has been quite fun to try to prick holes in some of his arguments. I am afraid, however, that the holes I think I have been able to make are not of any great significance.