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Wittgenstein, Ryle, and the Language of Commonsense Psychology

1 Introduction

In this chapter we will be looking at the birth of the non-reificatory approach to philosophy of mind through the works of Ryle and Wittgenstein, who both presented similar, non-reificatory accounts of psychological concepts around the middle of the last century. To start with, in Sect. 2, we will look at their general approach to philosophy and their ideas concerning the nature, causes and solutions of philosophical problems, noting some of the often neglected similarities between their respective approaches.¹ The purpose of this meta-philosophical interlude will be to set their work concerning philosophy of mind in context, as their aims and respective styles are so different from recent work that it is particularly important to see where they are coming from and what they are trying to do. With the context established, we will turn in Sect. 3 to philosophy of mind, firstly attempting to banish any lingering suggestion that either Wittgenstein or Ryle might have been a behaviourist. Following this we will again look at the general picture of their dual approaches to the problems of mind before turning to the specifics of their treatments for the concept of belief. The aim here is to build a *prima facie* negative case

against the reificatory view, drawing on Ryle and Wittgenstein's work. The thought is that analysis of the concept of belief gives us little reason think that the term "belief" refers to a thing of any sort.

It is fairly clear that I am drawing heavily on the ordinary language tradition here. This is not because I believe that linguistic analysis is the only way to do philosophy, or even that it is the right way to do it most of the time; it is simply because in order to work out whether certain metaphysical questions about beliefs make sense, a certain amount of linguistic analysis needs to be done. I have sketched the shared approach of Ryle and Wittgenstein below to help the reader make sense of how and why this approach applies to the concept of belief in particular. But in order for this application to be justified, and successful, it need not be the case that this approach is the only way of doing philosophy, and I have no intention of claiming that it is.

2 The Nature and Role of Philosophy

As explained above, we will first look at the Rylean and Wittgensteinian conceptions of the nature and role of philosophy so as to set the discussion of their work in philosophy of mind in its proper context. With Ryle and Wittgenstein, as with Descartes, we have a problem when trying to discuss their work alongside more recent contributions to philosophy of mind. If we look at the taxonomies of philosophy of mind given by Fodor² and Dennett³ in the 1980s we can see how central the propositional attitudes had become to the discipline. The problem this throws up is that Ryle and Wittgenstein, like Descartes, do not use quite the same jargon as their successors. So to properly understand their contribution to the field we need to know what they are trying to achieve in comparison with those that followed them.

A crucial issue both for Wittgenstein and Ryle is the issue of meaning, and in particular how words can be said to "have a meaning". Traditionally it was thought that words got their meaning by referring

to “things”—this was the view Wittgenstein himself expressed in the *Tractatus*⁴—and that the meaning of a word was something separate from it, something extra. But Wittgenstein and Ryle, amongst others, criticised this picture, emphasising the complexity of language, and the variety of jobs that words and expressions can do, in contrast with the traditional idea that language serves only to describe the world (this again is an idea that pops up in Wittgenstein’s work as late as 1929⁵). This is particularly important for their treatments of the problems of mind, one of the crucial elements being the functions of the various concepts at work in commonsense psychology. If our commonsense psychological statements are merely descriptions of some part of the world (most likely the insides of our heads) then we have a fairly good reason to suspect that the words involved refer to particulars, but if we let go of the word-object picture of meaning then this conclusion becomes far less certain, and questions about mental concepts become questions of a different sort, with different answers.

In this section we will look at the Wittgensteinian/Rylean approach to language and meaning, and at what this entails about the formation and solution of philosophical problems. In the following section we will look at what this entails about the problems involved in philosophy of mind, and specifically at questions about the nature of belief.

2.1 The Meaning of Words and Expressions

An idea that Wittgenstein and Ryle both attack is the suggestion that if a word means something then there must be *some thing* that it means, maybe an object, an idea, or whatever, and this thing literally *is* the meaning of the word. Ryle first draws attention to this problem in “Systematically Misleading Expressions”:

A host of errors of the same sort has been generated in logic itself and epistemology by the omission to analyse the quasi-descriptive phrase ‘the meaning of the expression *x*’. I suspect that all the mistaken doctrines of

concepts, ideas, ...and the like derive from the same fallacy, namely, that there must be *something* referred to by such expressions as 'the meaning of the word (phrase or sentence) *x*' on all fours with the policeman who is really referred to by the descriptive phrase in 'our village policeman is fond of football'.⁶

As mentioned above, this was a mistake Wittgenstein himself had made in the *Tractatus*, saying "The name means the object. The object is its meaning".⁷ But by the time of the *Investigations* he had decided that even in the case of proper names this view was not correct:

Let us first discuss *this* point of the argument: that a word has no meaning if nothing corresponds to it.—It is important to note that the word "meaning" is being used illicitly if it is used to signify the thing that 'corresponds' to the word. That is to confound the meaning of a name with the *bearer* of the name. When Mr. N.N. dies one says that the bearer of the name dies, not that the meaning dies. And it would be nonsensical to say that, for if the name ceased to have meaning it would make no sense to say "Mr. N.N. is dead." (§40)

In a later essay "The Theory of Meaning", Ryle is unequivocal:

Meanings are not things, not even very queer things.⁸

Another way in which Wittgenstein undermines the traditional view of language and meaning is through his discussion of the idea of "family resemblance". He introduces the term during his discussion of the concept of a game in the *Philosophical Investigations*:

§66: Consider for example the proceedings we call "games". I mean board-games, card-games, ball-games, Olympic games, and so on. What is common to them all?—Don't say: "There must be something common, or they would not be called 'games'"—but *look and see* whether there is anything common to *all*, but similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them at that...

§67: I can think of no better expression to characterize these similarities than “family resemblances”; for the various resemblances between members of a family: build, features, colour of eyes, gait, temperament, etc., etc. overlap and criss-cross in the same way.—And I shall say: ‘games’ form a family.

What this shows is that it would be a mistake to suggest that the word “game” has a single meaning such that it means the same “thing” every time it is used, that every “game” is something of the same kind, with a specific set of attributes. But at the same time we are using the *same concept* when we talk about someone “playing a dangerous game” or two people being caught in “a game of cat and mouse”, we are just using it in a slightly different way. This could be described as an ambiguity, but it is not an ambiguity in the same way as when the word “game” is used in the phrase “fair game”, or if we ask someone “Are you game?”

Ambiguity of the first kind, where we witness examples of apparently the same word doing slightly different jobs, is what Ryle would call “systematic ambiguity”. And while Ryle does not use the same terms as Wittgenstein, it is clear that he is talking about a very similar linguistic phenomenon. In Ryle’s paper “Philosophical Arguments,” having dismissed the pun-making ambiguity of words which happen to have multiple different meanings, he has the following to say about the “elasticity of significance” of certain expressions:

But there is another sort of elasticity of signification which characterizes the use of not a few but of most or of all expressions and which is such that the paraphrases and translations of an expression with a certain elasticity of significance will normally have a precisely similar elasticity. This sort of ambiguity is systematic in further respects. The various ideas expressed by an expression in its different uses are intimately connected with each other. They are in one way or another different inflections of the same root.⁹

Ryle also offers us an example in the form of “punctuality”:

Consider the adjective ‘punctual’. It can be used to characterize a person’s arrival at a place, the person who arrives there, his character and even the average character of a class of persons. It would be absurd to compare the punctuality of a man on a particular occasion with that of his arrival on that occasion; it would be absurd to compare the punctuality of his character with that of his arrival on a particular occasion; and it would be absurd to compare the punctuality of Naval officers as a class with that of a particular Naval officer.¹⁰

What this shows is that to ask “what is punctuality?” is frankly the wrong question, the punctuality of an arrival is not the same as the punctuality of Naval officers in general. What we can do is give an account of how we can use the word “punctual”, and what this use entails about the events, people, or groups to whom it is applied.

Ryle’s claims here do seem to be more general than Wittgenstein’s regarding games; Wittgenstein is talking about the relationship between members of a category rather than the varying uses of a concept. But the more general claim does seem to follow from Wittgenstein’s observations about family resemblance, and about the nature of meaning. This comment about the use of the word “think” seems to bear this out, and give a hint toward a Wittgensteinian outlook on mental concepts:

You must never forget that “think” is an everyday word, just as are all psychological terms.

It is not to be expected of this word that it should have a unified employment; rather it is to be expected that it doesn’t have it.¹¹

The significance of this observation will become apparent when we discuss (later in this chapter and in Chap. 5) the different uses of the terms “belief” and “believe” and what this entails about the sorts of questions we can reasonably ask. In addition, a question to bear in mind is this: if one accepts this view—that it is a mistake to expect that

any single everyday word such as “think” has a “unified employment”—then how sensible is it to suspect that all of the disparate terms (“pain,” “hope,” “vanity,” “fear,” “itch,” “seeing red,” “belief,” etc.) traditionally supposed to refer to mental states do the same sort of job?

So what is the meaning of a word? Wittgenstein has an answer for us:

For a *large* class of cases – though not for all – in which we employ the word “meaning” it can be defined thus: the meaning of a word is its use in the language.

And the *meaning* of a name is sometimes explained by pointing to its *bearer*.¹²

There are of course occasions for which this is not the case, for instance, the popular expression of outrage “What is the *meaning* of this!” But this definition does seem quite satisfactory; we can tell what a word means by what we do with it. The word-object account of meaning works *prima facie*, a lot of words work by pointing at things, but then there are plenty that do not. What, for instance, does the word “what” point at? This would be a problem if we thought that a word could only mean something by standing for some object or idea, but if we define meaning as use then we can simply look at what we use the word “what” for and we will be able to see what it means. There is clearly not space for a full defence of this account at this point, but to emphasise the point I would like to bring in the following example of the “five red apples” language game:

Now think of the following use of language: I send someone shopping. I give him a slip marked ‘five red apples’. He takes the slip to the shopkeeper, who opens the drawer marked ‘apples’, then he looks up the word ‘red’ in a table and finds a colour sample opposite it; then he says the series of cardinal numbers—I assume that he knows them by heart—up to the word ‘five’ and for each number he takes an apple of the same colour as the sample out of the drawer.—It is in this and similar ways that one operates with words—”But how does he know where and how he is to look up the word ‘red’ and what he is to do with the word

‘five’?”—Well, I assume that he ‘acts’ as I have described. Explanations come to an end somewhere.—But what is the meaning of the word ‘five’?—No such thing was in question here, only how the word ‘five’ is used.¹³

We have reason to believe that Ryle is with Wittgenstein on this. First, because of his emphasis in *The Concept of Mind* on discussing how psychological words are used rather than immediately asking what kinds of things they refer to, and second, from the following description of how we learn what things mean:

Learning the meaning of an expression is more like learning a piece of drill than like coming across a previously unencountered object. It is learning to operate correctly with an expression and with any other expression equivalent to it.¹⁴

The picture we must get away from is that a word gets its meaning from the fact that it *stands for something*, when in fact what a word means depends on what we do with it. In some cases what we do with a word is point to some object, or some specific group of objects. And in these cases it is not the object or group that is the meaning of the word, the word gets its meaning by being used to point to them.

If we accept the above claims then the consequences are quite significant: rather than trying to look for the essence of concepts such as “punctuality” or “justice”, we should be looking at how we use the words “just” and “punctual”, at what we mean when we say that someone or something is just, or is punctual. We are no longer trying to discern the essential nature of abstract ideas, but looking at what kind of job a certain word does within a certain context. This is another shared feature of the philosophy of Wittgenstein and Ryle, that words and expressions can do all sort of different things besides representing the state of the world. Wittgenstein explains how accepting this fact can help remove certain problems:

The paradox disappears only if we make a radical break with the idea that language always functions in one way, always serves the same purpose: to

convey thoughts—which may be about houses, pains, good and evil, or anything else you please.¹⁵

He also provides a handy list of some of the many different functions which language can perform:

Giving orders, and obeying them-
 Describing the appearance of an object, or giving its measurements-
 Constructing an object from a description (a drawing)-
 Reporting an event-
 Speculating about an event-
 Forming and testing a hypothesis-
 Presenting the results of an experiment in tables and diagrams-
 Making up a story; and reading it-
 Play-acting-
 Singing catches-
 Guessing riddles-
 Making a joke; telling it-
 Solving a problem in practical arithmetic-
 Translating from one language into another-
 Asking, thanking, cursing, greeting, praying.¹⁶

Ryle's agreement is apparent from passages such as the following:

But the truth that sentences containing words like 'might', 'could', and 'would...if' do not report limbo facts does not entail that such sentences have not got proper jobs of their own to perform. The job of reporting matters of fact is only one of a wide range of sentence jobs.¹⁷

2.2 The Causes and Solutions of Philosophical Problems

With the emphasis on the idea that the meaning of a word is grounded in the purpose for which it is employed, it seems only natural that both Ryle and Wittgenstein thought that the primary (or perhaps *sole*) source

of philosophical confusion was people's (and especially philosophers') misunderstanding of exactly what kind of job a certain word or expression is doing (much as the present hypothesis suggests that many of the problems of mind are due to confusion about what purpose is served by mental talk—a point we shall return to later). This is often down to a disparity between the surface grammar of an expression and its actual role; expressions may not always be doing what they appear to be doing.

Wittgenstein described the problem in his usual idiosyncratic style: "For philosophical problems arise when language *goes on holiday*." He uses this phrase in the context of an example concerning a philosopher's misuse of the word "this", suspecting that because "this" sometimes plays the same role in a sentence as a name, it can itself be used as a name, and because an object can be referred to as "this" it could also be *addressed* as "this". But to do so is to misunderstand the grammar of the word "this".¹⁸

Ryle gives the example of the concept of time, citing the confusion expressed by St. Augustine when he says: "When you do not ask me what Time is, I know perfectly well; but when you do ask me, I cannot think what to say."¹⁹ Because we can say that there is double the amount of time in a fortnight as there is in a week, just as we might say that there is double the amount of water in these two jugs as there is in just one, it sounds as if we can ask exactly what it is that there is twice as much of in two weeks, and we find ourselves unable to give an answer. So now we have a problem "what *is* time?" But, Ryle explains, we are mistaken if we think that the abstract noun "time" refers to some kind of substance or thing. When someone asks "what is time?" they are not asking "what is this mysterious thing to which "time" refers?" and we should not answer them with a definition or description. If we attempt to do so we are taking language on holiday, and this will inevitably lead to problems. Abstract questions such as these are questions not about special objects (like *meanings*), they are questions about concepts, and they should be answered with an explanation of how the concept is applied, what we can and cannot do with it. Wittgenstein also gives an account of how asking abstract questions about time can lead to problems:

The man who is philosophically puzzled sees a law in the way a word is used, and, trying to apply this law consistently, comes up against cases where it leads to paradoxical results. Very often the way the discussion of such a puzzle runs is this: First the question is asked “What is time?” This question makes it appear that what we want is a definition. We mistakenly think that a definition is what will remove the trouble (as in certain states of indigestion we feel a kind of hunger which cannot be removed by eating). The question is then answered by a wrong definition; say “Time is the motion of celestial bodies”. However in saying the first definition is wrong, we are now tempted to think we must replace it by a different one, the correct one.²⁰

As far as Wittgenstein and Ryle are concerned, for the word “beauty” to have meaning, we should not, as explained above, assume that there is some abstract concept to which the abstract noun corresponds. To understand the meaning of the word “beauty” we need to ask what we are saying when we say that something is beautiful, what follows from it. If we understand how the word is used, what people can do with it, then in a sense we know what beauty is, and this does not mean that we have discovered some special thing called “beauty”, just that we know how the concept *works*, what it “contributes to the statements in which it occurs”.²¹ If we try to find the essence of beauty, and fret about the fact that it seems unattainable, we have misunderstood how the word works.

Wittgenstein and Ryle are both concerned with the problems inflicted by mistakes arising from the grammar of certain expressions in ordinary language; the problem with abstract nouns is only one example of this general problem. This view of the role of philosophy and of the nature of philosophical problems is evident early on in Wittgenstein’s later period:

Philosophy, as we use the word, is a fight against the fascination which forms of expression exert upon us.²²

This sounds rather like a precursor to the phrase which appears in the *Philosophical Investigations* at §109:

Philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language.

This is Wittgenstein being typically gnomic. Ryle, however, is somewhat more explicit about how the grammar which is used to express something in ordinary language can cause confusion as to exactly what is being said, and what it entails:

The point is that anyone, the philosopher included, who abstracts and generalizes and so tries to consider what different facts of the same type (i.e. facts of the same type about different things) have in common, is compelled to use the common grammatical form of the statements of those facts as handles with which to grasp the common logical form of the facts themselves. For (what we shall see later) as the way in which a fact *ought* to be recorded in expressions *would* be a clue to the form of the fact, we jump to the assumption that the way in which a fact *is* recorded *is* such a clue. And very often the clue is misleading and suggests that the fact is of a different form from what really is its form.²³

And later on:

Those who, like philosophers, must generalize about the *sorts* of statements that have to be made of *sorts* of facts about *sorts* of topics, cannot help treating as clues to the logical structures for which they are looking the grammatical forms of the common types of expressions in which these structures are recorded. And these clues are often misleading.²⁴

Some of the examples that Ryle gives involve statements the subject of which appears to not, strictly speaking, exist, such as “Satan is not a reality” or “Mr Pickwick is a logical construction”. The first is statement is of the form $\sim Fx$ (Ryle likens it to “Capone is not a philosopher”) where the statement itself seems to state that there is no x ; it seems to be denying a predicate of something which is non-existent; there is nothing of which the *F-ness* can be denied. The second is a simple Fx , where again the statement claims that there is no x , so it is difficult to see how it can be *F*. This is a prime example of the mistaken assumption that the grammatical form of an expression accurately represents the logical form

of what is being said. This assumption leads either to mistakes about the nature of certain concepts or to meaningful statements appearing to be nonsensical, as was the case in the examples above. The way to avoid these problems is to come to a clear understanding of what these misleading statements really mean, to look beyond the surface grammar. Given that, as Ryle and Wittgenstein both claim, people are generally able to use ordinary expressions without getting confused, and it is philosophers who cause all the trouble by making abstractions and generalisations, if we can give a clear and accurate description of how certain words and expressions are used then philosophical problems should not arise.

An issue that we touch on only briefly in this chapter²⁵ is that the surface grammar is sometimes misleading because it is part of a certain picture or metaphor which is being used to help us to talk and think more simply about a complex phenomenon. The metaphors which we use to talk about the mind might well be described as “systematically misleading expressions” and there is a good chance that they have “bewitched our intelligence.” In Chap. 6, we will see the full extent to which our everyday talk and thought about the mind has affected philosophical theory.

3 Philosophy of Mind

3.1 Behaviourism

Both Ryle and Wittgenstein have been accused of some sort of behaviourism or other at some point. Later, in Chap. 5, I will piece together a very soft form of behaviourism which can be detected in their comments about the dispositional character of belief-statements (though Ryle is the primary focus). This view will serve as a bit of groundwork for my own positive account of the concept of belief, and makes some typically unbehaviourist admissions. For now, I would like to discourage any traditional behaviourist interpretation (psychological, logical, analytical, etc.) on the basis of the following evidence.

Wittgenstein does have a lot to say about behaviour, but none of those things is that mental concepts themselves refer to behaviour, or dispositions to behave. Wittgenstein's work may be highly obscure, and been subject to a wide variety of different readings, but on closer investigation his labelling as a behaviourist²⁶ is still somewhat baffling, not least because he openly and directly denies it. Consider the following snippets from his *Philosophical Investigations*:

§304: "But you will surely admit that there is a difference between pain-behaviour accompanied by pain and pain-behaviour without any pain?"—Admit it? What greater difference could there be?...

§307: "Are you not really a behaviourist in disguise? Aren't you at bottom really saying that everything except human behaviour is a fiction?"—If I do speak of a fiction, then it is of a grammatical fiction.

The first quote draws a quite clear distinction between pain itself and pain-related behaviour, a distinction which a logical behaviourist would appear to deny. The second shows that whatever Wittgenstein does think about the nature of the mental, he accepts that there is more to it than behaviour, which, again, the behaviourist does not. And then there is the following:

§244: How do words refer to sensations? - there doesn't seem to be any problem here; don't we talk about sensations every day, and give them names? But how is the connection between the name and the sensation set up? This question is the same as: how does a human being learn the names of sensations? - of the word pain, for example. Words are connected with the primitive, the natural, expressions of the sensation and used in their place. A child has hurt himself and he cries; and then adults talk to him and teach him exclamations, and, later, sentences. They teach the child new pain-behaviour. "So you are saying that the word 'pain' really means crying?" - On the contrary: the verbal expression of pain replaces crying and does not describe it.

Wittgenstein is quite clear here: for him, the word "pain" does not refer to or describe actual or possible pain-behaviour.

Ryle, like Wittgenstein, both directly denies that he is a behaviourist and makes claims that a behaviourist would find quite odd. First consider the following quotation from *The Concept of Mind*:

The general trend of this book will undoubtedly, and harmlessly, be stigmatized as 'behaviourist'.²⁷

And the following from *On Thinking*:

My long-range objective is to find out how to talk sense about the thinking that *Le Penseur* is doing without committing...the Category-howler of Behaviourism²⁸

This suggests not only that Ryle does not consider himself to be a behaviourist, but that he considers behaviourism to be a mistake (although we cannot be certain about the sort of behaviourism to which he is referring). The following two selections from *The Concept of Mind* also show that he thinks there is a lot more to the mental than actual or possible behaviour:

Theorizing is an activity which most people can and do conduct in silence. They articulate in sentences the theories that they construct, but they do not most of the time speak these sentence out loud. They say them to themselves. Or they formulate their thoughts in diagrams and pictures, but they do not always set these out on paper. They 'see them in their minds' eyes'. Much of our ordinary thinking is conducted in internal monologue or silent soliloquy, usually accompanied by an internal cinematograph-show of visual imagery.²⁹

And:

Knowing *how*, then, is a disposition, but not a single-track disposition like a reflex or a habit...its exercises can be overt or covert, deeds performed or deeds imagined, words spoken aloud or words heard in one's head, pictures painted on canvas or pictures in the mind's eye. Or they can be amalgamations of the two.³⁰

As suggested above, we will have a more detailed look at Ryle's work and the commitments of a dispositional account of belief in Chap. 5. This section is not supposed to be an exhaustive refutation of the claim that either Wittgenstein or Ryle is a behaviourist, but rather an attempt to sow a few seeds of doubt. There may be a case to be made for describing the views of Wittgenstein and Ryle as a very mild kind of behaviourism, and some, Ryle included, might think this is a fairly harmless categorisation. But at best I would suggest such a description fails to do proper justice to the sophistication of their approach, and at worst it subjects said approach to a harsh and unfair dismissal. What Ryle saw as a harmless label has in fact lead to his almost complete marginalisation in the sphere of philosophy of mind, and his distinctive³¹ and insightful contribution to the field is routinely swept under the carpet.

3.2 The Problems of Mind and the Ways to Solve Them

According to Wittgenstein and Ryle, the problem concerning the nature of mental states is no different from any other: we have made a mistake about the meaning of certain words and expressions because of how they are used in ordinary language. Wittgenstein gives a good example in this famous passage:

How does the philosophical problem about mental processes and states and about behaviourism arise? - The first step is the one that altogether escapes notice. We talk of processes and states and leave their nature undecided. Sometime perhaps we shall know more about them-we think. But that is just what commits us to a particular way of looking at the matter. For we have a definite concept of what it means to learn to know a process better. (The decisive movement in the conjuring trick has been made, and it was the very one that we thought quite innocent.) - And now the analogy which was to make us understand our thoughts falls to pieces. So we have to deny the yet uncomprehended process in the yet unexplored medium. And now it looks as if we had denied mental processes. And naturally we don't want to deny them.³²

If we talk about the process of remembering, we see remembering as a thing of a certain sort, and we assume that certain questions can be asked about it, we assume that we can investigate the nature of the process of remembering in the same way that we can investigate the nature of the process of digestion.

The way to solve these problems is to give a clear account of how our everyday psychological vocabulary works, what the misleading expressions we use actually mean; if we can give an accurate description then the problems of mind should dissolve before our eyes. This is what Wittgenstein is trying to do in his writings on the philosophy of psychology, this also what Ryle tries to do, in a slightly more systematic fashion, in *The Concept of Mind*, and this is what Hacker is trying to do in his article “Of the Ontology of Belief”. The approach is exemplified by the following treatment that the concept of “hope” receives from Wittgenstein:

Imagine someone saying: “Man hopes”. How should this general phenomenon of natural history be described?—One might observe a child and wait until one day he manifests hope; and then one could say “Today he hoped for the first time”. But surely that sounds queer! Although it might be quite natural to say “Today he said ‘I hope’ for the first time”. And why queer?—One does not say that a suckling hopes that....nor yet that he has no hope that....and one does say it of a grown man—Well, bit by bit daily life becomes such that there is a place for hope in it.

But now it is said: We can’t be certain when a child really begins to hope, for hope is an inner process. What nonsense! For then how do we know what we are talking about at all?³³

One of the traditional problems for defining mental activities such as hoping is that we cannot see it happening, there does not appear to be any overt “hoping process”. A popular response to this is to assume that the hoping must take place behind the scenes, but this assumption arises from the mistaken view that for the verb “hope” to have meaning, there must be some thing that people do called “hoping”. If we let go of this assumption then the apparent absence of any specific hoping activity is no longer a problem. We can give an account of the concept

of hope involving descriptions of when it is and is not appropriate to use the word, and what its use entails. Ryle expresses similar sentiments when he explains that we should not be alarmed that a solicitor does not appear to engage in any specific activity called “solicitoring”, or assume that because he does not do it in public, it must be something that he does behind closed doors.³⁴

We are misled by the fact that “hope” is a verb that is used to describe people, into thinking that hoping must be some activity that people do, or some process that they undergo. As explained above, to avoid such confusion with regard to mental terms like “hope” we must give a clear account of how they work, we must look at what it actually means to say that a person hopes, believes, or desires. And we must remember that we are not looking for some corresponding idea of “hope”, “belief”, or “desire”; the account we end up with will not be of a neat, fixed, concept, but of a word with a variety of related but systematically ambiguous uses.

3.3 How to Define “Belief”

If we apply the Wittgenstein/Ryle line here, we should not expect there to be some essence of belief from which all uses of the word get their meaning. If someone asks “but what is belief?” we should not attempt a definition; as with “what is time?” this is a question about the use of a concept, not a question about some special abstract entity. If we are to attempt a positive account of belief, this must take the form of a description of the correct uses of the word, what those uses entail, and how it relates to other concepts.

When looking at Ryle’s positive account of belief attributions we need to remember that he is not trying to give an account of “what belief is” or “what *a* belief is” he is trying to show what sort of statement we are making when we say that someone believes something, trying to look beyond the form of the expression in order to understand the true form of the statement. This is in keeping with his resistance to the idea that we can give a single, unified definition of the concept of belief.

Ryle thinks that a statement of the form “ x believes the P ” is a *dispositional* statement (and it looks as if Wittgenstein agrees,³⁵ to an extent), but we need to distinguish between this claim and the claim that “a belief is a disposition” or even “belief is a dispositional concept”. This is not an abstract claim about belief in general, or a claim about what any particular belief is, it is a claim about the logic of statements involving the verb “believe”. Ryle uses the word “dispositional” in a fairly loose sense; he characterises a dispositional statement primarily by saying that a dispositional statement does not describe anything that is presently happening, or that anything is presently the case; it says that things will be the case in certain circumstances; rather than asserting either that P or that Q , a dispositional statement will assert that $P \rightarrow Q$. In this sense a dispositional statement is rather like a law statement:

Dispositional statements about particular things and persons are like law statements in the fact that we use them in a partly similar way. They apply to, or they are satisfied by, the actions, reactions and states of the object; they are inference-tickets, which license us to predict, retrodict, explain, and modify these actions, reactions, and states.³⁶

Thus when Hacker—during his detailed discussion of *what belief is not*—draws careful distinctions between dispositions, habits, tendencies, etc., he is not actually refuting Ryle’s categorisation, and his assertion that belief is not a disposition does not entail that Ryle’s treatment of the verb “believe” is wrong. What Hacker does remind us—and this is something that Ryle’s comments about systematic ambiguity would suggest that he would agree to—is that we should not expect a full account of the concept of belief to be a neat, straightforwardly definable one:

It is not at all obvious that there is *any* categorial term under which believing can illuminatingly be subsumed. There is certainly no reason for thinking that there must be.³⁷

This is one way in which we might make sense of Wittgenstein’s comments about the incompleteness which is inherent in the descriptions of psychological concepts:

Mere description is so difficult because one believes that one needs to fill out the facts in order to understand them. It is as if one saw a screen with scattered colour-patches, and said: the way they are here, they are unintelligible; they only make sense when one completes them into a shape.—Whereas I want to say: Here is the whole. (If you complete it, you falsify it.)³⁸

This parallel's Hacker's comments regarding the prospects for a proper positive account of belief:

What we shall find will be, as it were, an untidy scatter of points on a graph. But, as Wittgenstein observed, if we try to tidy them up so that a line can be drawn through them, we shall do no more than falsify the grammatical facts and distort the very concept we are trying to survey.³⁹

The merits of Ryle's account of belief will be discussed in more detail when the time comes to talk about the prospects of a plausible, non-reificatory account, which we will come to in Chap. 5. For now, the important thing to note is how Wittgenstein, Ryle, and also Hacker, suggest that we should approach such a project, what kind of shape a solution to the problem of belief will take, and what this entails about the sorts of questions can reasonably be asked. Talking of which...

3.4 What Is a Belief?

A Rylean/Wittgensteinian response to the question “what is a belief?” is going to be a complex affair. In order to get to a position from which we can ask this kind of question, we need to look very closely at the concept of belief, to try, as suggested above, to work out if there is any use of the concept which permits such a question to be asked.

Wittgenstein mentions how the word “Violin” could mean several different things, even in the same context.⁴⁰ So the question “what do you mean by ‘violin’” will have several different answers, depending on how the word has been used. When someone asks “what is a violin?” this is a question about a specific use of the word: to refer to a

type of object. This question requires a considerable amount of stage-setting in order to be asked. The person asking the question must already know that the word “violin” refers to some kind of object. So the simple asking of the question “what is a belief?” likewise makes reference to a specific way of using of the word “belief”: to refer to something; it presupposes that there is a particular of some kind to which the word “belief” refers, and what is being asked is what kind of particular it is. As suggested above, the word “belief” when used as a noun is primarily used to individuate the various “things which are believed”. To ask what a belief is, in reference to the use of the word “belief” to point to some kind of object, state, event, or process, requires a considerable amount of justificatory evidence.

We can accept that a violin is a kind of object because of how we use the word. We might say, whilst pointing “This is a violin” and also “this is a violin, but this is a harp”—which suggests that the word violin is used in this context to refer to a type of instrument. It is, however, rather difficult to imagine a situation in which one might point to something and say “this is a belief” although if we could imagine that a person wrote down everything they believed on a piece (or multiple pieces) of paper it might make sense for them to say “here are my beliefs”, but in this case we once again see that the noun “belief” is being used to refer to what is believed rather than some special object called a belief. We saw in Chap. 1 that there do not appear to be many cases where the noun “belief” is used to literally refer to some particular, it is generally either used to refer to “that which is believed” or as a less common variation on the verb (“has a belief that” seems synonymous with “believes that”). So if we accept the view that words need not get their meaning by reference to some “thing” but from how they are used then it appears that the noun “belief” is perfectly meaningful without requiring any particular “beliefs” to refer to. In Chap. 5, I will look in detail at how the term “belief” is used, what its use presupposes, and what sorts of questions can be asked about beliefs and believing. I will argue for an interpretation whereby the question “what is a belief?” is a meaningless one if the questioner expects an account of some particular to which the term refers; what such a question presupposes about the concept of belief is not the case.

3.5 Where Does Believing Happen?

As Wittgenstein explains above, as a result of the fact that many mental concepts are expressed as verbs, they appear to be describing processes, such that we seem to be saying something similar when we say “Bob believed that p ” to what we are saying when we say “Bob walked to the snooker club.” This is a prime example of how the grammatical form of an expression can mislead. The problem that arises is that we can see Bob’s walking, but we cannot see his *believing*, so we wonder where his believing takes place. The traditional responses to this problem are that (a) it takes place outside the physical realm, (b) it takes place inside the physical realm but somehow hidden from view (inside Bob’s head is the best bet), or (c) it does not really take place at all.

Wittgenstein and Ryle both claim that if we properly understand the expression in question then the philosophical problem will go away. Sentences that contain the word “believe” or “believing” are systematically misleading expressions; they appear to be referring to some specific process or activity when in fact they are doing no such thing, and they are no less meaningful for it.

Wittgenstein makes the following, typically cryptic suggestion:

The psychological verbs to see, to believe, to think, to wish, do not signify phenomena [appearances]. But psychology observes the phenomena *of* seeing, believing, thinking, wishing.⁴¹

He seems to be suggesting an account that is similar to how we might understand the verb “to learn”. Learning is not an activity in the same way that eating, sitting, talking, or chopping are, it is not something that someone can visibly do, like break dancing is. So in this sense we might say that the verb “to learn” does not point to any specific phenomenon. But we may also say that an ofsted inspector can go into a classroom and observe the phenomenon of learning, for learning does indeed happen in classrooms, as do believing, seeing, thinking, etc. Again, we more easily accept these claims if we already accept that a word not need to stand for something in order to have meaning.

Ryle’s contribution is less obscure:

Dispositional words like ‘know’, ‘believe’, ‘aspire’, ‘clever’, and ‘humorous’ are determinable dispositional words. They signify abilities, tendencies, or pronenesses to do, not things of one unique kind, but things of lots of different kinds. Theorists who recognize that ‘know’ and ‘believe’ are commonly used as dispositional verbs are apt not to notice this point, but to assume that there must be corresponding acts of knowing or apprehending and states of believing; and the fact that one person can never find another person executing such wrongfully postulated acts, or being in such states is apt to be accounted for by locating these acts and states inside the agent’s secret grotto.⁴²

As explained above, for Ryle, the verb “believe” does not refer to any specific act, it is a dispositional verb. Just as when we say someone is polite or clever, this is (so Ryle claims) a statement about the kinds of things they will do, not about them doing one particular thing, or being in a certain state, the same is the case when we say that someone believes something; it is a statement about what will be the case in certain circumstances, not about what is the case at the moment. The following quote is quite revealing:

Dispositional statements are neither reports of observed or observable states of affairs, nor yet reports of unobserved or unobservable states of affairs. They narrate no incidents. But their job is intimately connected with narratives of incidents, for, if they are true, they are satisfied by narrated incidents.⁴³

The issues discussed in this section will be revisited in Chap. 4, where I discuss the nature of theoretical concepts. The observation that words do not need to refer in order to have meaning—particularly words like “believed” and “learned” that seem to say that something has happened yet do not appear to refer to any specific process—is particularly relevant when discussing what sorts of things an explanatory theory postulates. It has long been thought that commonsense psychology postulates hidden events, states, and processes to explain our overt behaviour. In Chap. 4, I will look at whether this needs to be the case, or whether a psychological theory could explain our overt behaviour without positing hidden things.

3.6 Are Beliefs Real?

Ryle has a quick answer to this:

In a word, all quasi-ontological statements are systematically misleading. (If I am right in this, then the conclusion follows, which I accept, that those metaphysical philosophers are the greatest sinners who, as if they were saying something of importance, make 'Reality' or 'being' the subject of their propositions, or 'real' the predicate. For at best what they say is systematically misleading, which is the one thing which a philosopher's propositions have no right to be; and at worst it is meaningless.)⁴⁴

According to Ryle, the question itself is either systematically misleading, or meaningless, and any attempt to give a straightforward answer to it would most likely fare no better. Even if we interpret this question charitably, as asking something along the lines of "are there really any things we might call beliefs?" (and all this does is interpret the question as systematically misleading rather than as meaningless), it still involves the assumption that the word "belief" has some ordinary use that is supposed to refer to some kind of thing, which, as we have seen, it does not appear to. The only way this question might make sense would be if we postulate some kind of thing, and we appropriate the common sense term "belief" to stand for it. Someone might then ask if this thing we have postulated can really be found. The important issue here is what we think we have done in postulating this particular which we now call "belief". If we think that we have given a definition of the common sense term then we are almost certainly wrong; no account so simple could do justice to the concept of belief as it appears in ordinary language. But this is one of the assumptions that underlies the reificatory approach to mental concepts: the assumption that our ordinary vocabulary serves to describe our inner architecture. On the current evidence it seems that it certainly does not do this in any straightforward way, but there are issues here that need to be addressed.

The first is the very popular claim that a big part of the way in which we are able to understand and interact with other people is that we apply some kind of psychological theory about what is going on inside

them, and if common sense psychology is the way in which we articulate our understanding of other people, and describe, in some sense, their mental lives, then if it is not a direct verbalization of this theory it must surely be in some way quite closely connected to it.

The second is that it is widely thought that belief attributions are used to causally explain people's behaviour. The behaviour of a person is a physical event, and based on the (widespread) assumption that nothing that is not itself physical in some way can cause physical events to happen, we must also assume that belief explanations are telling part of what is an essentially physical story. If this is the case it seems to follow that facts about what people believe must be facts about physical objects or events.

4 Conclusion

The question "what is belief?" yearns for a neat, essential concept of belief from which all uses of the word take their meaning. What Wittgenstein, Ryle, and Hacker show is that language is more complicated, and less perfect than that. What we have is a rough smattering of different uses which are interrelated in a variety of ways, and if we try to tighten things up we will not be able to answer our original question, for the picture we create will not be a true picture of the object we set out to study. The question is not about a phenomenon called belief, it is about a word, "belief," which has a variety of interrelated uses, and an adequate answer will be a clear account of what those uses are.

This book has two main aims. The first is negative: to show that it is a mistake to conceive of beliefs as particulars, and that theories resulting from such an approach are problematic in a variety of ways. The second is positive: to show how the concept of belief can be understood without adopting a reificatory approach, and hopefully how this understanding of belief is advantageous in comparison to the reificatory understanding.

In this chapter we have seen a variety of arguments and examples which undermine the reificatory approach to the concept of belief, centring around the claim that the way to understand a concept is to

give an account of how it works, the function(s) it performs. It appears, based on the evidence of this chapter, and parts of the previous one, that the concept of belief is rarely, if ever, used to name a particular process, state, or event, which strongly suggests that the assumption that there are particulars called beliefs is a mistaken one. So at present things look quite promising for our negative project, though we still have the issues of causation and theory-theory to contend with, and we will attempt to do so in the next two chapters. On the positive side, from Ryle we have seen a hint of a sophisticated dispositional account of belief though there is a lack (but not a total lack) of direct discussion regarding the causal/explanatory aspects of the concept; it is to this issue that we will now turn our attention.

Notes

1. In this respect I am indebted to the work of Julia Tanney, and in particular her article on Ryle for the Stanford Encyclopedia: Tanney, Julia, "Gilbert Ryle", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2015 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2015/entries/ryle/>.
2. Fodor, Jerry, "Fodor's Guide to Mental Representations", *Mind*, New Series, Vol. 94, No. 373. (Jan., 1985), pp. 76–100.
3. Dennett, Daniel C., "Mid-Term Examination: Compare and Contrast" in *The Intentional Stance* (MIT Press, 1987), pp. 339–350.
4. Wittgenstein, Ludwig, *Tractatus Logico-philosophicus* 3. 203.
5. Wittgenstein, Ludwig, *Lecture on Ethics* (1929).
6. Ryle, Gilbert, *Collected Papers, Vol. II* (Hutchinson, 1971), p. 56.
7. Wittgenstein, Ludwig, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 3. 203.
8. Ryle, Gilbert, *Collected Papers, Vol. II* (Hutchinson, 1971), p. 365.
9. *Ibid.*, pp. 205–206.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 206.
11. Wittgenstein, Ludwig, *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology: Volume II* (Blackwell, 1980), p. 195.
12. Wittgenstein, Ludwig, *Philosophical Investigations* (Blackwell, 1953, reprinted 2004), §43.
13. *Ibid.*, §1.

14. Ryle, Gilbert, *Collected Papers, Vol. II* (Hutchinson, 1971), p. 365.
15. Wittgenstein, Ludwig, *Philosophical Investigations* (Blackwell, 1953, reprinted 2004), §304.
16. *Ibid.*, §23.
17. Ryle, Gilbert, *The Concept of Mind* (Hutchinson, 1949), p. 115.
18. Wittgenstein, Ludwig, *Philosophical Investigations* (Blackwell, 1953, reprinted 2004), §38.
19. Quoted in Ryle, Gilbert, *Collected Papers, Vol. II* (Hutchinson, 1971), p. 435.
20. Wittgenstein, Ludwig, *The Blue and Brown Books* (Blackwell, 1964), p. 27.
21. Ryle, Gilbert, *Collected Papers, Vol. II* (Hutchinson, 1971), p. 445.
22. Wittgenstein, Ludwig, *The Blue and Brown Books* (Blackwell, 1964), p. 27.
23. Ryle, Gilbert, *Collected Papers, Vol. II* (Hutchinson, 1971), p. 46.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 49.
25. See the beginning of (b) below, in particular the passage from *Philosophical Investigations* §308.
26. Malcolm Budd in *Wittgenstein's Philosophy of Psychology* (Routledge 1989) describes Wittgenstein as a kind of behaviourist (p. 19), though not of the extreme, logical variety described above. Budd seems to think that Wittgenstein's denial of the fact that mental predicates refer to inner states or events which *cause* behaviour is sufficient grounds for calling him a behaviourist. See Mundle "“Private Language” and Wittgenstein's Kind of Behaviourism”, *The Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 16, No. 62 (Jan., 1966), pp. 35–46, for another example, and Whiteley, “Behaviourism”, *Mind*, New Series, Vol. 70, No. 278 (Apr., 1961), pp. 164–174, for another.
27. Ryle, Gilbert, *The Concept of Mind* (Hutchinson, 1949), p. 308.
28. Ryle, Gilbert, *On Thinking* (Blackwell, 1979), p. 17.
29. Ryle, Gilbert, *The Concept of Mind* (Hutchinson, 1949), pp. 27–28.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 46.
31. I say “distinctive” because while Wittgenstein displays similar tendencies he never attempts any sustained treatment on the scale of *The Concept of Mind*.
32. Wittgenstein, Ludwig, *Philosophical Investigations* (Blackwell, 1953, reprinted 2004), §308.
33. Wittgenstein, Ludwig, *Zettel* (Blackwell, 1967), §469.

34. Ryle, Gilbert, *The Concept of Mind* (Hutchinson, 1949), p. 114.
35. Wittgenstein, Ludwig, *Philosophical Investigations* (Blackwell, 1953, reprinted 2004), part II, Section x, p. 163.
36. Ibid., p. 119.
37. Peter Hacker, 'Of the Ontology of Belief', in Mark Seibel and Mark Textor ed. *Semantik und Ontologie* (Ontos Verlag, Frankfurt, 2004), p. 195.
38. Wittgenstein, Ludwig, *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology: Volume I* (Blackwell, 1980), p. 257.
39. Hacker, P.M.S., "Of the Ontology of Belief", in Mark Seibel and Mark Textor ed. *Semantik und Ontologie* (Ontos Verlag, Frankfurt, 2004).
40. Wittgenstein, Ludwig, *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology: Volume II* (Blackwell, 1980), 730.
41. Wittgenstein, Ludwig, *Zettel* (Blackwell, 1967), 471.
42. Ryle, Gilbert, *The Concept of Mind* (Hutchinson, 1949), p. 114.
43. Ibid., p. 120.
44. Ryle, Gilbert, *Collected Papers, Vol. II* (Hutchinson, 1971), p. 45.

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