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Knowing How and Knowing That: Ryle

(This essay is a continuation of Ryle's other essay "Descartes' Myth." Here he tries to show that ordinary discourses on *qualities of mind* do not refer to any occult (secret/splritual etc.) qualities.

Terms referring to mental qualities are like 'intelligent', 'clever', 'careful', 'logical', 'critical', 'witty' etc. So also in the negative line there are terms like 'stupid', 'dull', 'silly', 'unmethodical' etc. corresponding to these adjectives, there are noun terms such as wisdom, ignorance etc. But, Ryle observes, 'stupidity' does not imply 'ignorance'. "There is no incompatibility between being well-informed and being silly".

Qualities of mind are reflected in various activities, but these activities are not themselves intellectual operations, nor are they results of intellectual operations. On the contrary, theorizing is also an activity which can be intelligently or stupidly conducted.

Theorizing is an activity which is normally conducted in silence. One articulates sentences, speaks them to oneself; or draws diagrams and pictures – not necessarily in papers or some other material. "Much of our ordinary thinking is conducted in internal monologue or silent soliloquy, usually accompanied by internal cinematograph-show of visual imagery". But this skill of talking to oneself in silence is acquired from the ability to speak aloud. A child has to learn to read aloud before he learns to read in silence.

But many theorists have supposed that the silence in which we think is a defining property of thought. The assumptions that theorizing is the primary activity of mind and that it is private, silent or internal operation are the "main supports of the dogma of the ghost in the machine. People tend to identify their minds with the 'place' where they conduct their secret thoughts."

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(A man is described as "shrewd", "silly", "cunning" or "intelligent" not on the basis of his knowledge or ignorance of this or that truth but on that of his ability or inability to do or perform this or that activity. In ordinary life and also in technical fields we are much more concerned with people's competence than their cognitive repertoires; with the operations than with the truths they learn. Intellectual excellence or deficiencies are measured by the capacity to find out truths, ability to organize and exploit them. These observations made Ryle distinguish between 'knowing how' and 'knowing that'. One knows (or does not know) how to play guitar; on the other hand one knows (or does not know) that Delhi is the capital of India. But we do not speak of a person believing or opining how.)

Knowing how to play guitar, or to play chess, or to sing etc. also imply that when performed, it comes to a standard – correct, efficient or successful. It also implies the capacity to regulate one's actions. "A person's performance is described as careful or skillful, if in his operations he is ready to detect and correct lapses, to repeat and improve upon successes, to profit from the examples of others and so forth."

However, it is argued by some that an intelligent performance involves observance of certain rules or application of certain criteria. This view has the implication that those rules and criteria are prior to the actual execution of the act. That is, the agent must first go through the internal process of formulating and acknowledging certain propositions about what is to be done; then only he can execute the performance. Thus, according to this view, to do something is to do two things – to consider certain appropriate propositions or prescriptions, and to put those propositions into practice. But, Ryle maintains that this "intellectualist legend" is false.

He points out: 1. Many classes of intelligent performances do not have pre-formulated criteria. For example, a wit can make intelligent jokes but fails to cite the principles or rules of making jokes. 2. Rules of correct reasoning were first extracted by Aristotle. But men before Aristotle also reasoned correctly and incorrectly; they too distinguished between good and bad reasoning. "Indeed if they had to plan what to think before thinking it they would never think at all; for this planning would itself be unplanned." 3. Efficient practice precedes theory. It was because Aristotle found himself and others arguing sometimes correctly and sometimes incorrectly that he could prescribe the rules of arguing. 4. The crucial objection to this legend, according to Ryle is that the consideration of propositions before performing the act, is itself a performance – intelligent or stupid.

The "absurd assumption" of the intellectualist legend is that any kind of performance is the result of some prior internal operation of planning what to do. The assumption would imply, Ryle points out, if we act silly, our planning was silly; and if we act shrewd our planning was shrewd. But it is possible for one to plan shrewdly and to perform stupidly. "By the original argument, therefore, our intellectual planning process must inherit its title to shrewdness from yet another interior process of planning to plan ... The regress is infinite." Ryle says that this is absurd. According to him what distinguishes sensible from silly operations is not their parentage in planning but their procedure. "Intelligent" cannot be defined in terms of "intellectual" or "knowing how" in terms of "knowing that".

The Motive of the Intellectualist Legend:

That people believe an intelligent execution of an act consists of two processes – one of doing and another of theorizing is because of the stubborn belief in the dogma of the ghost in the machine. Because doing involves overt muscular movements, it is supposed to be a mere physical process. Muscular movements cannot itself be a mental operation. The terms like skillful, cunning or humorous are supposed not to be ascribed to the machine, but to the ghost. They are regarded as mental predicates.

Ryle admits that when we call an act witty or intelligent or skillful, we do not simply refer to the muscular movements. But at the same time, in such situations we are also not referring to some extra hidden performance executed in his head. We appreciate the skillful act of a performer. This skill is not observable. But the unobservability of the skill is not because of any occult or ghostly character of 'skill'. Rather is it that, skill is not a happening or an occurrence; it is a disposition or complex of dispositions. Dispositions cannot be seen or unseen just as a habit cannot be said to be seen or unseen. They belong to a different logical type to which observable-unobservable, recordable-not recordable predicates

cannot be applied. Ryle is of opinion that the traditional theory of the mind has misconstrued the type-distinction between disposition and exercise into unobservable mental causes and their observable physical effects.

[Here Ryle points out to certain uses of the word 'mind' or 'mental' as in case of 'mental arithmetic', or 'mind reading'. When a child does mental arithmetic, then he does not make use of pen and paper, nor does he utter the calculations aloud. But if he does the same calculations with the help of pen and paper, then also he is performing the same mental activities in terms of reasoning correctly and organizing the steps methodically. "The sealing of the lips is no part of the definition of thinking", i.e. the child doing it without murmuring does not mean that he has performed some internal (mental) activity of thinking. This special use of the word mind and mental in which they signify what is done in one's head cannot be used as evidence for the dogma of the ghost in the machine.]