

Gilbert Ryle

The Concept of Mind - 60th Anniversary Edition.

Abingdon: Routledge 2009.

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Collected Papers Volume I: Critical Essays.

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Collected Papers Volume II: Collected Essays 1929-1968.

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Some years back, before the second-hand bookshop became an endangered species, I entered one such establishment with a friend who had the good fortune of being the first of us to spot both volumes of Ryle's then long out-of-print collected papers. He bought them at less than \$70.00 for the pair, a fraction of what they were going for online, and I remained jealous for months to come.

The republication of Ryle's *Collected Papers* is an important event not only because it makes some previously hard to find tomes available at an affordable price but, more, because it gives us occasion to re-think the entire *oeuvre* of one of the greatest philosophers of the twentieth century, whose current reputation seems to rest on crude behaviourist readings of the first chapter of his second book, *The Concept of Mind*, typically presented in undergraduate courses in philosophy of mind as a theory since surpassed by various forms of functionalism.

Thankfully, Julia Tanney's forwards to the two volumes of collected essays, as well as her laudable essay 'Rethinking Ryle: A Critical Discussion of *The Concept of Mind*'—a substantial fifty-page commentary, previously available only as an introduction to the French edition of Ryle's best known work—do much to remedy the myth that Ryle's philosophy consists of an outdated blend of ordinary language philosophy and behaviorism. Tanney's own philosophical work is recognisably Rylean in a way in which that of Ryle student Daniel Dennett (who wrote the slim introduction to the Penguin Modern Classics Edition of *The Concept of Mind*, published in 2000) is not, and this manifests itself in her sympathetic explorations of key Rylean themes as they emerge in both his essays and his most famous book. Hopefully Routledge will soon publish a

paperback edition of the latter, thereby presenting undergraduates with an affordable choice between this edition and the Penguin one.

Using Roman numerals for any new prefatory material enables Tanney to helpfully keep to the same page numbering as the earlier editions. A noteworthy addition is that of an index to the collected essays. Tanney notes that in his original introduction to his *Collected Papers* Ryle justified the omission of an index by stating that for graduate students ‘the chore of rummaging for themselves will be more rewarding than would be their inheritance of the proceeds of other people’s rummagings’. These days indexes are produced electronically (so nobody needs to rummage much at all), and a very helpful one is provided to help ‘the contemporary scholar’ navigate what are ‘intended to serve as reference volumes’. Different readers will no doubt draw their own conclusions from this reasoning, but it seems to me that contemporary graduate students in philosophy should not be provided with further sufficient disincentives for reading, beyond those produced by the scientistic fashion of the age.

Ryle’s fifty-seven collected essays are divided between a volume on philosophical issues and one on the history of philosophy. The first is primarily constituted by essays in the philosophy of mind & language (including his invaluable later work on thinking), but also includes gems in moral philosophy, the philosophy of religion, philosophy of science, and what has since come to be called meta-philosophy (about which more later), all of which stand proudly beside his most famous paper ‘Knowing How and Knowing That’. The second volume contains essays and critical reviews on philosophers as diverse as Plato, Locke, Hume Heidegger, Carnap, Austin, Moore, and Wittgenstein. The pieces on Austin and Wittgenstein, together with the essay on ‘ordinary language’ in the first volume (which helpfully discusses Hume and Berkeley’s interest in linguistic usage), collectively destroy the thought that there was ever an ordinary language ‘school of philosophy’ headed by Wittgenstein, Austin, and Ryle. The shared presupposition that philosophical questions cannot be completely divorced from conceptual ones was but the scene upon which numerous battles (including meta-philosophical ones) were fought, and whilst so-called ‘ordinary language philosophy’ is dismissed by many contemporary philosophers, very few of them would be foolish enough to maintain that philosophical questions may be completely separated from conceptual ones. Indeed, the currently fashionable experimental philosophy may be viewed as a (confused) attempt to add scientific vigour to questions about meaning and ordinary usage.

Like Anscombe, Ryle seems to assume that many different uses of the term ‘mind’ may be subsumed under one overarching concept. I am unconvinced that there is such a thing as *the* concept of mind (anymore than there ever was such a thing as *the* concept of nature, law, or anything else). What Ryle did demonstrate, however, is that one cannot separate questions about minds from questions about mental concepts. The argument here is not, as is sometimes imagined, that the question ‘what is X?’ is a linguistic or conceptual one, but, rather, that we need to settle upon an agreed concept of X before we can even begin to ask questions about it. Moreover, whereas a question like ‘what is water?’ may be understood as *either* a conceptual question *or* a chemical one (though ever since Kripke contemporary metaphysicians have been conflating the two), it

is not clear that a question like ‘what are minds’ has any kind of answer beyond the clarification of whatever concept(s) of mind we share. Far from being ontologically frivolous, such elucidation—which is not to be confused with the doomed project of conceptual *analysis*—reveals that to have a mind or spirit is not to be in possession of any kind of object, any more than it would be to have a dream, a heavy debt, and a jolly disposition. Over thirty-five years after his death, we live in an age in which a strong dose of Rylean therapy is needed more than ever before.

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