

## The Ghost in the Machine (G. Ryle)

Gilbert Ryle thought that most of the problems encountered when we deal with questions of mind and consciousness come from what he calls "categorical errors", which consist in attributing to mental the same kind of existence given to other entities of the physical world.

In his main work, *The Concept of Mind* (1), Ryle proposes an imaginary situation as a clarifying example of what he calls "categorical error". A stranger is visiting a university town. He is accompanied to see the classrooms, laboratories, libraries, student housing and administrative offices. At the end of his tour, the stranger observes that he has visited many interesting things, but has not yet seen the university.

According to Ryle, the stranger has not understood that university is not some institution added to what was already shown to him, but the way it is organized: there is nothing more to see or discover (2). With this example, Ryle shows clearly what his idea of the mental is: in its various manifestations, the mental is not something endowed with consistency in real world, but is a *concept* derived from the belief that it corresponds in every way to the activity of the different brain areas. Just as the university coincides entirely with the organization of the classrooms, laboratories, libraries, etc., of which it is composed, so mind is not something different from the brain processes that underlie our behavior.

In order to solve at the root the problems that arise when we deal with mind, according to Ryle, it is necessary to avoid any reference to mental life, replacing to it with assertion concerning the *disposition* to act in certain ways. (3)

Within such a concept, consciousness is also treated as a *concept* (hence the "categorical error" denounced by Ryle), without considering that conscious experience, by which consciousness expresses itself, is not a concept, but a fact of empirical relevance, whose consistency does not depend on our beliefs or the categories of thought by which we represent our mind.

Such clarification is essential to unmasking the underlying error inherent in Ryle's position. He does not refer to real objects and phenomena; he merely analyzes the ways and meanings with which the terms commonly associated with mental are used in daily practice. Moving on a purely linguistic level, as is typical of the analytical tradition, Ryle can easily highlight the variability of meanings that such terms assume in different contexts and therefore conclude that they are fundamentally evanescent and ambiguous. He doesn't start from the "facts" of consciousness, that is, from the concrete experiences lived by individuals; instead, he focuses on the current use of words such as "conscious" and "consciousness" (4). He does the same with the concept of *sensation* (5) and with that of *will* (6), describing in detail the different meanings attributed to the linguistic terms that refer to them. The conclusion he draws is that all these concepts are hopelessly vague, generic, often even

misleading, so they must be abandoned in favor of a perspective that considers the mental as an ability to do certain types of things. (7)

It is a way of proceeding that shows its limits, especially when it addresses the conscience. Ryle does not seem to realize that everything that presents itself, instant by instant, on the horizon of a given subjectivity constitutes a primitive datum, having value of reality as lived experience. Put more simply: the existence of contents and conscious states, the circumstance that someone lives them first-hand, has nothing to do with the opinions we have about them or with the conceptual categories that mediate between us and the world. In consciousness, in fact, *appearance and reality coincide completely*: it cannot happen that someone lives, with more or less deep involvement, a certain type of experience and at the same time that experience *does not exist*, that is, presents itself as such because of an erroneous belief. (8)

In some cases, it is possible that certain contents of consciousness do not correspond to any object or event of the natural world, i.e. that the experience is completely illusory, but this doesn't take anything away from the reality of the experience itself, which, merely by posing itself to a specific conscious subjectivity, comes to acquire the status of "empirical data".

To consider the states and contents of consciousness as *dispositions to behaviour*, as simple *inclinations* determined by a certain configuration of brain processes to perform given operations, it is like saying that men don't really feel pleasure or pain, they are not capable of emotion, haven't got desires, hopes, aspirations; it is to deny that these inner states are placed to a given individuality with the same kind of evidence that distinguishes the common perceptual data that refer to the external world. [...]

The analytical tradition, to which authors such as Ryle, Churchland and Dennett belong, has developed as an attempt to use logical analysis to unmask conceptual errors that generate apparently insoluble problems. It focuses its attention on language, considered a kind of mirror capable of faithfully reflecting the real phenomena, and not a *human construction* elaborated from such phenomena, which reproduces the main characteristics of phenomena on the basis of historically determined *points of view*. When everything is brought back into language, when observational data become "elementary propositions of observation", logical analysis seems however to become unable of clearly distinguishing the concepts elaborated by man from the objects of the empirical world. It thus happens that conscious experience or freedom, actually experienced by individuals, are confused with the terms of the language that describe them, and the conviction is matured that it is possible to show the *ontological inconsistency* of such realities, experienced on a subjective level, simply by highlighting the *inadequacy of the language* used to describe them.

Analytical philosophy, applied to the problems of mind, has not produced significant progress in the knowledge of phenomena; it has also led to a progressive alienation of researchers from themselves, i. e. from the original basis of their personal experience. Completely subservient to a certain ideal of philosophy, assumed as an absolute principle, they have come to deny the reality of the experience lived by each individual in his or her own subjective dimension, i.e. they have come to deny the existence of the main facts relating to consciousness, an indispensable basis for the knowledge of mind.

## NOTES

(The page numbers of the works mentioned refer to the Italian edition)

(1) Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind*, University of Chicago Press, 1949; trad. it. *Lo spirito come comportamento*, Laterza, Bari, 1982.

(2) *Op. cit.*, pp 9-10.

(3) *Op. cit.*, p. 171: "Speaking about the mind of a person is not to speak of a warehouse which receives objects excluded from the world called "physical", but of what the person knows, tends and is subject to do in the ordinary world".

(4) *Op. cit.*, Chapter VI.

(5) *Op. cit.*, Chapter IV.

(6) *Op. cit.*, Chapter III.

(7) *Op. cit.*, p. 143.

(8) See John Searle, *La mente*, Raffaello Cortina, Milano, 2005, p. 111.

[Astro Calisi, *Oltre gli orizzonti del conosciuto ...*, pp. 248-250 and pp. 253-254].