The Epistemic Structures of Polanyi and Ryle:

*Working Through Polanyi's Critiques of Concept of Mind*

Michael Polanyi’s writings are a pool, deep and broad. At times, I find myself in the deep end of probability theory or linguistic theory trying to tread water; thankfully, the water is relatively clear. One particular place I have enjoyed swimming has been in his description of skill. It is evident that he has thought through much of British philosopher Gilbert Ryle’s work—the similarity of examples of skill-based actions invite one to attempt at translation between the two authors. It is clear, however, that his need to address directly Ryle’s account of the mind and body would undermine any attempt at direct translation. This presentation is directed at finding the key differences between their epistemic frameworks through Polanyi’s criticism of Ryle. At the end, remarks about the usefulness of this pursuit will be made, time allowing.

Polanyi’s main problem with Ryle is his description of “overt intelligent performances” as the “workings of the mind” (*The Concept of Mind*, 58). In *Personal Knowledge*, Polanyi refers to this as “logical behaviourism,” and confronts it in the same passage as psychological behaviorism. The source of this problem, according to Polanyi, is Ryle’s framework, which, lacking any distinction between focus and subsidiary, identifies performance with mind at the focal level only (*PK*, 372).

“Tacit Knowing: Its Bearing on Some Problems of Philosophy” again considers this problem, though this time giving a much quicker reply. Here, Polanyi summarizes the argument so quickly that he only alludes to the structural problem within Ryle, saying that “Ryle’s conclusion that the workings of the mind are the mind, is like saying that the word ‘table’ is a table” (*KB*, 169).

Within “The Structure of Consciousness” he grounds his concerns with Ryle in the lack of ontology, comparing the British philosopher with the work of French philosopher Merleau-Ponty. This
adds a further nuance to the argument presented in *Personal Knowledge*. The separate efforts by both phenomenologists and “contemporary English and American philosophy” to resolve the mind and body problem of Cartesian dualism presents the problem as an experiential one.

Merleau-Ponty says ‘I do not understand the gestures of others by an act of intellectual interpretation’, and Ryle says the same: ‘I am not inferring to the workings of your mind, I am following them;’ but Merleau-Ponty finds an alternative to ‘intellectual interpretation’ in existential experience, while Ryle has none and affirms, therefore, that ‘most intelligent performances are not clues to the mind; they are those workings’, which is absurd. *(KB, 222)*

Within the framework of tacit knowing, the depth of experience is a source for subsidiaries which add to the meaning of the focus. Ryle’s framework lacks this, and thus cannot incorporate it into the description, leading to the absurdity pointed out by Polanyi.

Finally, in *Meaning*, the description of the problem is briefly mentioned, summarizing his previous efforts. Polanyi’s main argument centers on Ryle’s description of the mind as identical to the intelligent performances of a person, which removes the aspects of mind that involve more than merely those acts. As Polanyi puts it,

The fact is, we know other minds by *dwelling in* their acts–as the chess player comes to know the mind of the master whom he is studying. He does not *reduce* the master’s mind to the moves the master makes. He dwells in these moves as subsidiary clues to the strategy in the master’s mind which they enable him to see. The moves become meaningful at last only when they are seen to be integrated into a whole strategy. *(M, 48)*

The reduction of mind to performances strips the world of a semantic component that tacit knowing reintegrates into the epistemological framework.

However, Polanyi may be misreading, or perhaps over-emphasizing, Ryle’s description of the mind. Ryle’s project is not designed to investigate the metaphysical framework of the mind as much as
it is to prune it. Cartesian dualism had distorted the descriptions of intelligence through the positing of a para-mechanical mind, creating the problem of privileged access and misrepresenting the relationship between thinking and action. In responding to the problem of dualism, Ryle is avoiding the classic reductions – mind and body cannot be reduced to one another. Instead, mind and body must be understood as different categories because they do not take the same sets of logical properties.

The physical cannot subsume the mental. Ryle uses the example of a chessboard to demonstrate. If a physicist, not knowing the rules of baseball, watched all of the motions of the game, he would be able to say to the players,

“Every move that you make is governed by unbreakable rules.... True, I am not yet competent to explain every move that I witness by the rules that I have so far discovered. But it would be unscientific to suppose that there are inexplicable moves” (CM, 77).

Of course, this attempt at determinism falls short because it is an attempt to reduce the mental entirely to physical characteristics, which it cannot be limited to. Much like grammar providing the structure and limits of what can be written, physical laws of nature may limit the possible actions, but they do not determine the actions within a given framework.

Likewise, the mental cannot be described like the physical (in other words, para-mechanically) because the mental does not operate in a separate causal sequence “outside” of the body, in parallel with the body, or in direction of the body. The mind is not a non-extended substance cog that turns the extended substance that is the body. He establishes this through a reductio ad absurdum which goes something like this:

1. If the mental causes of an action are going on in my mind, which only I have access to, then only I can understand my own actions. (Problem of privileged access.)
2. Clearly, we frequently can and do understand the actions and intentions of others.
3. Thus, mental actions are not hidden mental causes. (CM, 51-54)
It is clear from these two approaches to the mental and physical that Ryle does not want to reduce the mind to mere physical actions, but that he does want to avoid positing extra metaphysical structures which end up creating further theoretical problems.

Thus, Ryle concludes that the mental can be found in the ways actions are performed, not in a separate set of actions. The mental is not a substance, but instead a capacity or tendency to act in certain ways. Our own minds are thus defined by the ways in which they act. My mind is not a substance, para-mechanically forcing my eyes to read along a page while interpreting the arguments written down by also thinking of all of the rules associated with the formation of good and bad arguments. Instead, paying attention as I read the argument is a method I have developed, both in the sense of having had to get some basic training to approach arguments in the first place, and also in the sense of developing an interpretation in this particular new circumstance through the dispositions this method has given me. Evaluating my own mode of operating to be intelligent instead of lazy, or hasty, or whatnot, is done in the same way as I evaluate others performances and thereby their minds. The key difference is in access to evidence – I do not have access to all of the silent statements others make to themselves. I do not have access to the imaginings of moves on the chessboard that the player is thinking through as she plans her strategy. The only way I can access that strategy is through watching the moves themselves and developing expectations about how she will act through trying to come to some understanding about her method, or in other words, by understanding the dispositions of her particular mode of operation while playing chess. Others are understood only through our experiences of them as agents within the world; for Ryle we cannot understand any mind as some substance, but instead only as the characteristics they display in their actions.

To summarize, Ryle is stating that the mind consists of dispositions and that there is no substance which these dispositions are found in. The mind is thus tied into the way actions are
performed and nothing else. As noted earlier, Polanyi take the mind to be known in two ways; first, as a focally known object where performances, behaviors, etc., act as subsidiaries and give it meaning; secondly, as as a subsidiary where it provides meaning for a focus, such as the interpretation of some individual performance or instance of behavior. With this understanding of mind, Polanyi criticizes Ryle by stating that he is reducing the mind to a logical aspect of performances, thus labeling it as “logical behaviorism.” Polanyi interprets Ryle as arguing “that there is no mind as distinct from its workings and that it is meaningless to refer to it as such” (PK, 372).

It is at this point that Polanyi is misreading Ryle. There is no simple identification of mind as its workings. The mind is not the intelligent performance, but rather the mode in which a performance is carried out. Thinking critically is not a set of operations, it just how thinking is done. Likewise, thinking critically is not just the way a single act of thinking is carried out, but how thinking is done in an instance, and probably future instances.

If Polanyi makes the argument about the word “table” being identified with an actual table in “Tacit Knowing” with this same identity relation mistake in mind, then that argument is also misguided in similar way. The description of the mental as it relates to performance is not simply the direct reference between bare logical descriptions and actual performances. Ryle is relying on “thick” linguistic descriptions to capture the differences between an intelligent performance and a fortuitously successful performance. These linguistic descriptions are based on the grounding of language in its common use. In this sense, Polanyi’s argument that Ryle is equating ‘t-a-b-l-e’ with what the actual table that the word refers to, a criticism along the lines of distinguishing between use-mention, is misdirected. Ryle is not saying that understanding the word “table” (for instance, how it is spelled) provides information about the table. Rather, he is saying that the table has various dispositions that allow us to ascribe common hypothetical interactions to it, some of which are indeterminable in their
list of hypotheticals. He states, “When an object is described as hard, we do not mean only that it would resist deformation; we mean also that it would, for example, give out a sharp sound if struck, that it would cause us pain if we came into sharp contact with it, that resilient objects would bounce off it, and so on indefinitely” (CM, p.44). The thickness of the description from mode to mind does not hold with the simplicity of the analogy of “t-a-b-l-e” to a table.

Polanyi’s better critique is the issue of a missing ontological component. Ryle’s description of understanding, especially compared with the Structure of Consciousness’s description of the mind and body as tacitly structured, reveals the nuances of his shortcomings. Understanding, for Ryle, is the ability to act (or follow an act, or imagine doing act, etc.) in a critical manner; taking heed in what one is doing for the sake of doing it successfully. Understanding thus rests on the idea of knowing-how, or a mode of operating whereby the agent is ready to respond to the possibilities that come with a performance without needing to keep in mind each of those possibilities. This clearly covers the same ground as the functional and semantic aspects of tacit knowing. However, it is important not to confuse these two aspects of knowing others with the phenomenological aspect. According to Polanyi, the phenomenological side of knowing, or the process of dwelling-in a complex entity, involves interiorizing the parts as subsidiary that provide meaning to the focus. (All three aspect of knowledge of course require the from-to relationship, but here the focus is on how they relate to the phenomenological specifically.) To put Ryle’s problem into more complex words than “he does not use the structure of tacit knowing,” it is important to pay attention to the lack of distinction between interiorizing and externalizing. Though a disposition or mode of operating may be indeterminate and thus allow for the particular process of knowing-how to be inclusive of an epistemic model like tacit knowing, it does not take into account the necessity of it. Both Ryle and Polanyi describe the personal, skill-based process of knowing; but where Ryle moves freely between the understanding of a chess strategy through the dispositions of the chess player as revealed by qualities in the way the chess player acts, he does not
describe how the individual actions of the chess player open a world to the observer where the quality of the strategy as played by the player is revealed. To take another example, Ryle's description of learning a language may involve appropriately being able to use the idiomatic expressions of said language, but it does not include the new aspects of thinking to which those idioms open the language learner.

This is all a preliminary conclusion. Ryle’s work does seem to constantly hint at a way of expressing this phenomenological quality of knowing, though it never explains it in a systematic way. The heart of this difference in epistemic model comes from an approach to metaphysical commitments. Ryle seems much more hesitant to make any metaphysical claims beyond explicating what common language tells us. Polanyi, on the other hand, has both grounded personal knowledge in the biological, as well as interlaced the his epistemic model with his model of moral judgment. Any system that borrows from both epistemic models would likely need to accept Ryle's negative description and integrate the idea of modus operandi with the ontological aspects of in-dwelling, from Polanyi. Further, the hermeneutic, personal structure of knowledge and its metaphysical grounding as found in Polanyi extend beyond much of the positive account of understanding found in Ryle's work.
Bibliography


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