

Themes in the Philosophy of Mind – 1

Hand-out

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[...] during the three centuries of the epoch of natural science the logical categories in terms of which the concepts of mental powers and operations have been co-ordinated have been wrongly selected. Descartes left as one of his main philosophical legacies a myth which continues to distort [déformer] the continental geography of the subject.

G. Ryle, *The Concept of Mind*, Oxford, 1949, éd. Routledge, 2009, lx.

Teachers and examiners, magistrates and critics, historians and novelists, confessors [directeurs de conscience] and non-commissioned officers [sous-officiers], employers, employees and partners, parents, lovers, friends and enemies all know well enough how to settle their daily questions about the qualities of character and intellect of the individual with whom they have to do. They can appraise [évaluer] his performances, assess [juger] his progress, understand his words and actions, discern his motives and see his jokes. If they go wrong, they know how to correct their mistakes. More, they can deliberately influence the minds of those with whom they deal by criticism, example, teaching, punishment, bribery [corruption], mockery and persuasion, and then modify their treatments in the light of the results produced.

Both in describing the minds of others and in prescribing for them, they are wielding with greater or less efficiency concepts of mental powers and operations. They have learned how to apply in concrete situations such mental-conduct epithets as ‘careful’, ‘stupid’, ‘logical’, ‘unobservant’, ‘ingenious’, ‘vain’, ‘methodical’, ‘credulous’, ‘witty’, ‘self-controlled’ and a thousand others.

It is, however, one thing to know how to apply such concepts, quite another to know how to correlate them with one another and with concepts of other sorts. Many people can talk sense with concepts but cannot talk sense about them; they know by practice how to operate with concepts, anyhow inside familiar fields, but they cannot state the logical regulations governing their use. They are like people who know their way about their own parish, but cannot construct or read a map of it, much less a map of the region or continent in which their parish lies.

G. Ryle, *The Concept of Mind*, Oxford, 1949, éd. Routledge, 2009, lix.

In other words, the critics fear that advertising and the media may be contributing to our immersion in an environment which is in fact becoming increasingly manipulative. Someone (or several someones)—the media, the government, or pick your pet bugbear [bête noire] —is setting our agendas for us, dictating not what we think but what we think about. To borrow from Pratkanis and Aronson [social psychologists] again, ‘Consider someone who watches TV and repeatedly sees competing adverts extolling

[vanter / vantant] the virtues of Chevys and of Fords. It is unlikely (in most cases) that any given advert will cause that person to switch his or her preference for one car over the other. However, it is very likely that this heavy dose of car adverts will lead that person to want a car and to give little consideration to alternative modes of transportation.’

Kathleen Taylor, *Brainwashing*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2004, p. 54.

That an entire mythology is laid down in our language is nowhere better exemplified than in the words, phrases and idioms we invoke in speaking about ourselves, our nature and our identity. We human beings are *persons*. We *have a mind*, which may be sharp, lively or dull. We *have a body*, with which we may feel comfortable or ill at ease. We are also said to possess – and sometimes to lose – *a soul*. We speak of *having a self*, to which we are instructed to be true. And it seems entirely natural – even though mistaken – to suppose that it is *a self*, *an I*, or *an ego* to which we refer when we employ the first-person pronoun. These expressions ‘human being’, ‘person’, ‘mind’, ‘body’, ‘I’ and ‘soul’ are used quite unproblematically in the daily stream of life. But they typically slip out of focus as soon as we subject them to philosophical scrutiny. The more closely we look at them, it seems, the more blurred they become.

P. M. S. Hacker, *Human Nature : the Categorical Framework*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2007, p. 233.

Sue Blackmore’s interest in the paranormal dates back to 1970 when she was a student at Oxford University and had a dramatic out-of-body experience. After several hours experimenting with the Ouija board and then relaxing with some marijuana, Sue felt herself rise out of her body, float up to the ceiling, fly across England, travel over the Atlantic, and hover around New York. Eventually she travelled back to Oxford, entered her body through her neck and finally expanded to fill the entire universe. Other than that it was a quiet night.

Upon her return to reality, Sue became fascinated with weird experiences, trained as a white witch, and eventually decided to devote herself to parapsychology. For many years she examined the psychology of paranormal experiences and beliefs, trying to figure out why people experienced seemingly supernatural sensations and bought into such strange stuff. Most recently she has turned her attention to the mystery of consciousness, focusing on the ways in which the brain creates a sense of self (although, rather disappointingly, the ‘Who Am I’ tab on her website delivers a straight biography).

Richard Wiseman, *Paranormality*, Macmillan, 2011, p. 45.