

PHIL 5983: Action Theory Seminar  
Prof. Funkhouser  
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Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (excerpts)

- Ryle claims that there are at least two different ways in which an occurrence can be explained: 1) in terms of event causation and 2) by law-like general hypotheticals (e.g., dispositional or reasons explanations).

- Ryle claims that motive-explanations are of the second type, and not the first type. One argument Ryle offers for this claim is that the hypothesis that motives are causes could never be directly tested. He then claims that we would never have good reason to posit the occurrence of a feeling as the cause of some action.

- Ryle's positive account of motive-explanations is as follows:

The imputation of a motive for a particular action is not a causal inference to an unwitnessed event but the subsumption of an episode proposition under a law-like proposition. It is therefore analogous to the explanation of reactions and actions by reflexes and habits, or to the explanation of the fracture of the glass by reference to its brittleness. (90)

- Ryle claims that we discover our own (long-term) motives in the same way in which we discover the motives of others. So, he denies that we have any privileged access to our own motives. In fact, due to personal biases, Ryle thinks that other people are better positioned to discover our motives for action.

- Actions can be performed out of habit (literally, absentmindedly) or from a motive.

- This section concludes:

To say, then, that a certain motive is a trait in someone's character is to say that he is inclined to do certain sorts of things, make certain sorts of plans, indulge in certain sorts of daydreams

and also, of course, in certain situations to feel certain sorts of feelings. To say that he did something from that motive is to say that this action, done in its particular circumstances, was just the sort of thing that that was an inclination to do. It is to say 'he *would* do that'. (92–93)

- Q: What conditions are indicative of an agent acting from a motive, rather than out of habit? (110)

- Habits have the following characteristics:

When we say that someone acts in a certain way from sheer force of habit, part of what we have in mind is this, that in similar circumstances he always acts in just this way; that he acts in this way whether or not he is attending to what he is doing; that he is not exercising care or or trying to correct or improve his performance; and that he may, after the act is over, be quite unaware that he has done it. (110)

- And motives have these characteristics:

The sense in which a person is thinking what he is doing, when his action is to be classed not as automatic but as done from a motive, is that he is acting more or less carefully, critically, consistently, and purposefully, adverbs which do not signify the prior or concomitant occurrence of extra operations of resolving, planning or cogitating, but only that the action taken is itself done not absent-mindedly but in a certain positive frame of mind . . . In short, the class of actions done from motives coincides with the class of actions describable as more or less intelligent. (111)

- We can have second-order inclinations to alter our motives. (Soon, we will see Frankfurt putting this simple point to significant use.)

- Motives are not of the right ontological kind to be causes of anything (actions, in particular):

I have argued that to explain an action as done from a specified motive or inclination is not to describe the action as the effect of a specified cause. Motives are not happenings and are not therefore of the right type to be causes. The expansion of a motive-expression is a law-like sentence and not a report of an event. (113)

- Non-mental, usually public, happenings trigger our actions. (114)