Ryle, Gilbert [addendum] Encyclopedia Article

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From Gilbert Ryle's death in 1976, and through the late 1990s, his views were not the focus of much philosophical attention. Studies of his thought have been published (e.g., Lyons 1980; Stroll 2001) and his character and role in Oxford have been illuminated by the memoirs of others (e.g., Mabbott 1986).

Ryle's own approach to the understanding of psychological concepts was superseded by the emergence of the psycho-physical identity theory, mainly because his analytical concentration on (behavioral) dispositions, of whatever complexity, seemed not to confer a sufficiently real status on lots of psychological processes, for example, feeling a pain or occurrent thinking.

His most lasting intellectual legacy has been the supposed distinction between knowing how and knowing that, which has remained part of philosophical folklore since he propounded it. According to Ryle knowing how to F is distinct from any knowledge that a proposition is true, amounting rather to a capacity to do the action in question. Ryle's distinction has been relied on by those (e.g., David Lewis) who have tried, when answering certain antimaterialist arguments, to give a practical, nonfactualist account of knowing what an experience is like. However, considerable skepticism is being generated about Ryle's distinction (e.g., in Stanley and Williamson 2001; Snowdon 2003). Thus, someone who is injured can know how to do something even though he or she is unable to do it, and much knowhow seems to be knowledge that some way is the way to act. These criticisms have been resisted (e.g., Koethe 2002; Rumfit 2003). There is considerable debate and it remains to be seen whether this aspect of Ryle's thought will suffer the fate of the rest.

See Also

Behaviorism; Lewis, David.

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