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Research Paper

Understanding the Concept of Sensitisation in Humanities and Social Sciences : An Exploration in Philosophy of Mind

Philosophy

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ABSTRACT

The paper seeks to use insights generated by the Philosophy of Mind -particularly Gilbert Ryle's exposition of human dispositions- for a better understanding of the concept of sensitisation in humanities and social sciences. Sensitisation is an important category of contemporary discourse related to the domain of humanities and social sciences. Be it the domain of gender, human rights, environmental, or queer studies, the use of term sensitisation is on the rise. In contrast to growing body of usage, efforts aimed at clarifying the concept are rather limited. Paper is a humble attempt in this direction. It is divided into three sections : Section I explores the usage of the concept of sensitisation; Section II seeks to explore Ryle's insights regarding the nature of mentalistic terms and their relationship with human behaviour and dispositions; Section III aims at using these insight for understanding the concept of sensitation.

Section I In last few decades there has been a flurry of studies, workshops, training mannuals, campaigns and programmes related to sensitation of various groups of people towards human nights, gender, environmental and other social or human concerns. The number is steadily growing not only in the academic journals, but also on the world wide web and in the domain related to the practices of various NGOs. These sensitisation campaigns, programmes, workshops etc. aim at modifying the behaviour of the target group by raising awareness of the concerns about which they seek to sensitise the people. They aim at bringing about behavioural changes by changing the mind set of the people. For example, gender sensitisation workshops aim at sensitisation of the people towards gender concerns by making them aware of the gender equality issues and seeking to ensure that this awareness is reflected in their behaviour also. A person who becomes aware of gender equality concerns, and whose awareness is reflected in his/her behaviour in the sense that he/she behaves in a manner which is sensitive to gender equality issues, is termed as a gender sensitised person. Thus, a gender sensitised person is not only aware of the gender concerns, but also behaves in a manner which is sensitive to gender equality issues. In case of a person who is sensitised towards gender or environmental concerns, his/her sensitivity is related to his/her behaviour in the same manner in which honesty of an honest person is related to his/her behaviour. These, like many other concepts and terms which describe specifically human pehenomena, are mental conduct concepts or mentalistic terms having bearings on human behaviour.

In order to understand the concept of sensitisation in human and social discourse better, it would be pertinent to explore various approaches that illuminate the relationship between mental conduct concepts and human behaviour. In the discourse related to Psychology and Philosophy of mind, there are three such major approaches. The first of these positions known as cartesianism is based on the mind-body dualism of Rene Descartes. It considers the relation between mentalistic terms and bodily behaviour to be purely contingent one. This approach formed the basis of introspectionist school of Psychology. The second, known as behaviourism, considers the relation to be logical one and contends that mental predicates do not say anything over and above the bodily behaviour. This approach finds expression in the psychological theories of J.B. Watson, Clark Hall, B.F. Skinner, etc. The third approach based on the thinking of Gilbert Ryle and Ludwig Wittgenstein contends that the relation is neither contingent nor logical, rather it is conceptual one. We propose to explore the position of Gilbert Ryle in detail as it not only throws light on the strengths and weaknesses of caretesianism and behaviourism, but also because his account of human dispositions and their relation with human behaviour provides a backdrop that illuminates the concept of sensitization better.

Gilbert Ryle has sometimes mistakenly been interpreted as a logical behaviourist. Logical Behaviourism is a view about the Section II analysis of mentalistic terms and it holds that they actually refer to and are translatable without loss of meaning into certain pattern or patterns of actual or possible behaviour. The logical Behaviourists contend that mentalistic terms can be defined by a disjunctive listing of types of behaviour or tendencies to behave in certain ways. According to Pratt, a logical behaviourist would analyse term such as "anger" by characterising how the person whom we ascribe this predicate is behaving or is likely to behave. When we say that a person is angry, "we are saying that he is liable to shout, and shout unreasonably harsh things, try to injure whatever has angered him, reject requests he might at other times have met, and so on"(1978, 16)

This view of logical behaviourism has been ascribed by certain writers to Gilbert Ryle on the basis of their interpretations of his book *The Concept of Mind*. Ryle's *Concept of Mind* is a polemic against cartesian dualism and traditional understanding of mentalistic concepts based on that dualism. This doctrine, described by Ryle as "official theory", holds that there are two substances : mind and matter. Every human being has a mind and a body. Descartes had conceived the possibility of mind existing and functioning independent of the body. The dualists hold that while bodily phenomena are public in the sense that they are amenable to observation, mental phenomena are inherently non-observable and private. It is further held that mental-conduct concepts refer to objects and occurances in the private world of mind which are similar in nature to those referred to by physical concepts in the physical world. Since this world (the world of mind) is private and (to others) occult, it follows that the individual has privileged access to this world and only he/she can ascertain whether the mentalistic descriptions being ascribed to him/her are correct or not. Any onlooker's ascription of these mentalistic terms can at best be a mere guess work on his/her part.

Ryle contends that this doctrine is the result of a 'category-mistake' and calls it a philosopher's myth. He defines myth as "the presentation of the facts belonging to one category in the idiom's appropriate to another" (*The Concept of Mind* hereinafter CoM, p.10). He undertook the task of exploding the myth and to indicate to what logical types the concepts under investigation ought to be allocated.

Thinkers who describe Ryle as a logical behaviourist hold him to be rectifying the mistake committed by the *myth* through the concept of dispositions to behave, i.e. by saying that our mental talk is nothing but a talk about (i) present bodily behaviour or/and (ii) behavioural dispoisitions which are hypothetical statements about bodily behaviour. For example, Weldon interprets Ryle to be saying that the mistake commited by the cartesians is that they have taken dispositional talk to be the categorical talk. He holds Ryle to be saying that "Dispositional words have been misconstrued as occurance words, and a special place called mind has been invented to house the non-existent episodes to which the misconstruction give rise". (1950:267)

Ryle holds a number of words which we commonly use to describe and explain people's behaviour signify dispositions and not episodes, but he also points out that "the scope of this point must not be exaggerated. The vocabulary we use for describing specifically human behaviour does not consist only of dispositional words. The judge, the teacher, the novelist, the psychologist and the man in the street are bound also to employ a large battery of episodic words when talking about how people do, or should, act and react." (CoM, p.113).

Let us return, for the time being, to his analysis of the dispositional words. Know, believe, aspire, clever, humorous, vain, indolent, patriotic, greedy, proud, etc., are some of the examples of dispositional words given by Ryle. Brittleness of glass is a dispositional property. It does not refer to its actually being shattered at a particular moment, rather it means that it may fly into pieces if it is struck. So the statement 'Glass is brittle', on unpacking, turns out to be a hypothetical statement 'If glass is struck, then it may fly into pieces'. Similar is the case with human dispositions. For example when someone is described as a vain or indolent man his vanity and indolence are dispositional properties, which could be unpacked in such expressions as 'Whenever situations of certain sorts have arisen, he has always or usually tried to make himself prominent' or 'Whenever he was faced by an option between doing something difficult and not doing it, he shirked doing the difficult thing'. (CoM, p.83)

These are simple single track dispositions as they refer to proneness to do one determinate thing only. Ryle calls them 'determinate' dispositions. But "the higher grade dispositions of people... in general, are not single track dispositions but dispositions the exercise of which are indefinitely heterogeneous" (CoM, p.44). He names such dispositions as 'determinable' ones. Being proud and being greedy are examples given by him of determinable dispositions as they refer to proneness to do a wide variety of things in different situations.

Philosophers and scholars, who interpret Ryle as a logical behaviourist, hold him to be giving a similar analysis of heed concepts as well. Ryle refers to the concepts of noticing, taking care, attending, applying one's mind, concentrating, putting one's heart into something, thinking what one is doing, alertness, interests, intentness, studying and trying as heed concepts. These concepts are differentia of specifically human activities. Ryle calls them semi-episodic, semi-dispositional and mongrel categoricals i.e. they explain something as both occurant and dispositional.

William Lyons holds that "he [Ryle] gives a purely dispositional account of ... heed concepts" (1980, p.166). According to him the occurant in a mongrel categorical is the overt behaviour or *actualisation of one track of multi-track determinable disposition and the hypothetical part consists of the other tracks of that very disposition*.

Logical behaviouristic interpretation fails to give account of some of our everyday life-situations. A person, say, an intelligent driver, may be driving a car with care, but, at a certain point she may continue to drive but cease to take care; or a person who is reading something may continue to read but cease to attend. By merely confining to such an account it is not possible to differentiate a person playing a piece of music for his own pleasure from a person who is doing so for practice or for instructional purposes or as a parody of another performer or quite absent mindedly, by sheer rote. It cannot differentiate a person who is whistling casually from a person who is doing so with concentration.

This is what Ryle precisely says. Anticipating the above interpretation he points out that "dispositional account would apparently involve us in saying that though a person can be described as whistling now, he cannot be properly described as concentrating or taking care now" (CoM, p.133). According to Ryle, it is right that "certain kinds of accidents or near accidents would satisfy us that driver had not been taking care. To take care entails being prepared for certain sorts of emergencies" (CoM, p.133). But he insists, this cannot be the whole story as while we are certainly saying something dispositional in applying such a heed concept to a person we are certainly also saying something episodic. We are saying, that he did what he did in a specific frame of mind and while the specification of the frame of mind requires mention of ways in which he was able, ready or likely to act and react, his acting in that frame of mind was itself a clockable occurance". (CoM, p.134).

It is evident that for Ryle, 'occurant' in case of heed concepts is not mere overt behaviour but implies behaviour *in certain frame of mind*. For example, when we say 'He is driving carefully' it means that he is driving *in a certain frame of mind* and being in that frame of mind he would face many other situations which may or may not arise. *Frame of mind* is not something which is essentially private to the individual -about which an onlooker cannot say anything with certainty. The other person comes to know about it by looking at ways in which he (the person to whom a certain *frame of mind* is ascribed) was able, ready or likely to act and react to the situations. Thus, the statement 'he is acting in a certain *frame of mind'* is a statement about an occurance, but an inference licence as well. Ryle points out that "... there is nothing scandalous in the notion that a statement may be in some respects like statement of brute facts and in other respects like inference-licences; or that it may be at once narrative, explanatory and conditionally predictive, without being a conjuctive assemblage of detachable substatements". (CoM, p.135).

This is Ryle's alternative to double life cartesian theory. He holds that exactly similar overt behaviour in two or more different kinds of cases is differentiated by dissimilar frames of mind (CoM, p.134).

For Ryle, unlike the cartesians, acting in a certain frame of mind is one occurance and not a conjunction of two separate occurances. Cartesians differentiate between two or more instances of similar overt behaviour having different purposes in terms of parallel occurances taking place in the (essentially) private world of mind. The relation between the two worlds is held (by the cartesians) to be a contingent one, namely, that of causation. Ryle contends that this explanation is self-defeating and leads to solipsism. This is his major objection to the cartesian theory. He points out that cartesian theorists correctly assumed that any sane man could already recognise the difference between, say, rational and nonrational utterances or between purposive and automatic behaviour, yet the explanation given presupposed that one person could in principle never recognise the difference between rational and irrational utterances issuing from another human bodies, since he can never get access to postulated immaterial causes of some of their utterances. He stresses that according to the theory "external observer could never know how the overt behaviour of the other is correlated with their mental powers and processes and so they can never know or even plausibly conjecture whether their applications of mental conduct concepts to these other people were correct or incorrect".(CoM, p.22).

Thus, unlike behaviourism, and like cartesianism, Ryle is saying that it is not mere outward behaviour about which we are talking when we describe specifically human activities, i.e. he is not holding the relation between mental concepts and bodily behaviour to be a deductive one. But, like behaviourism and unlike cartesianism, he is denying that this relation is merely a contingent one. He is holding that there is a conceptual relation between mental concepts and behaviour; though all the mental concepts are not reducible to overt behaviour but they do not refer to something which is, in principle, not knowable to the onlooker.

Section III The exploration in the previous section suggests that mental conduct concepts and mentalistic terms do not refer to stream of events, happenings or phenomena that are independent of the behavour, but at the same time they can not be reduced to mere bodily behaviour. Though not reducible to it, mental phenomena have a necessary relation with behaviour

-they inform human behaviour and hence are reflected in it. It also becomes evident that not only most of mentalistic terms are related to human dispositions but also that human dispositions are quite different from natural ones. It has also been seen that there are various levels and types of human dispositions. Some are determinate while others are determinable; some are related to the frame of mind while others are not; some are hypothetical while others are semi-episodic and semi-hypothetical, etc. Dispite various differences one thing is common - they all have a necessary relation with behaviour (though not reducible to it). In contract to the natural dispositions most of the human dispositions can be developed, nurtured and inculcated as humans are not born with all the dispositions that they have. Human dispositions not only have different dimensions, rather they are shaped by various cognitive, affective and active experiences. The behaviour that is associated with such dispositions reflects the cognitive and affective experiences that went into the formation and shaping of the dispositions.

Let us try to understand sensitation better in the light of above insights. As noted, various sensitisation campaigns, programmes, workshops, etc. seek to generate or raise awareness in order to sensitise people towards certain concerns so that they behave in a manner which is sensitive to the issues and situations related to those concerns. Here, sensitisation may be seen as a propensity or disposition which is shaped and formed by awareness, and which aims at modification of behaviour so that it is sensitive to certain issues or situations. Thus, sensitisation refers to the awareness informed disposition or propensity to behave in a manner which is sensitive to certain issues and/or situations. It can be said that sensitisation towards gender concerns refers to the awareness informed disposition or propensity to behave in a manner which is sensitive to gender justice and equality issues. In the same way sensitisation towards environmental concerns refers to the awareness informed disposition or propensity to behave in a manner which is sensitive to the protection and improvement of the environment and ecological balance.

This understanding in the light of insights generated by the Philosophy of mind of Gilbert Ryle can go a long way in clarifying the concept of sensitisation. It can play a significant role in improving the workings and practices of various NGOs. It can also help policy makers in framing the programmes and researchers in evaluating and judging the efficacy of such programmes.

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