

Can a behaviourist admit that we have feelings or thoughts that we keep hidden?

Introduction

The term “behaviourism” is one that is used in many contexts, and so I will begin this essay by describing the meaning of the term in the context of the philosophy of mind (“analytical behaviourism”). A key issue here is the concept of “dispositions”, so I explain how these fit in to the behaviourist story. I will then explore what might be meant by the idea of “hidden” thoughts and feelings, suggesting three possible interpretations of the concept, and explore how the behaviourist might respond to each of these interpretations, to show that it is possible for a behaviourist to admit that we can have thoughts or feelings that we keep hidden.

What is “Behaviourism”?

While this essay is concerned with the philosophy of mind, it is useful to provide some background on behaviourism as a psychological methodology, in order to be able to make distinctions between the two uses of the term in subsequent sections. One of the early proponents of psychological behaviourism, John Watson, in an article that came to be referred to as the “behaviourist's manifesto” argued that science should investigate only those things which can be objectively verified (i.e. observable behaviour) and suggested the “elimination of states of consciousness as proper objects of investigation” (Watson 1913). Others have since taken a less strict approach, suggesting that “Even if mental events are

not among the *data* of science, this does not mean we cannot study them scientifically” (Dennett 1991:71). In any event, the main thrust of behaviourism in the field of psychology the aim to study the mind using scientific methods.

This essay is concerned with that branch of the philosophy of mind which may be referred to as “analytical behaviourism”, and from now on the terms “behaviourism” and “behaviourist”, are used in this context unless otherwise stated. Behaviourism “insists that statements describing mental or psychological states can be translated, without loss of meaning, into statements describing *possible* and actual behaviour” (Maslin 2001:108; my italics). Significant is the word “possible”: it is not only overt behaviour, but potential behaviour, that is of interest. Ryle uses the term “disposition” to characterise this potentiality to exhibit behaviour: “To possess a dispositional property is ... to be bound or liable to be in a particular state, or to undergo a particular change when a particular condition is realized” (Ryle:1949:43). The idea of dispositions is therefore central to the behaviourist model, and will be elaborated in the next section.

What is a “Disposition”?

A disposition can be thought of as a propensity, or preparedness that something possesses which can, under the appropriate circumstances, result in certain things happening (one might think of it as a “causal power” (Heil 2004:197)). For example, we might say that a ball has the disposition to roll, provided certain conditions are fulfilled (e.g. that it is placed

on a sloping surface).

For any given situation, there are likely to be multiple dispositions. Some of these may be completely independent: for example as well as having a disposition to roll, the ball, having been coated with luminous material, has a disposition to fluoresce, provided it has been exposed to light recently. Its disposition to roll is not affected by its disposition to fluoresce: either, both, or neither of these dispositions may be manifested at any given time. In other cases, one disposition may override another. If the luminous material covering the surface of the ball is also made from Velcro “hooks”, then the ball's disposition to roll down a slope may not be manifested if the slope is covered with Velcro “loops”, since it will have an overriding disposition to become attached to the surface.

For any disposition, some set of conditions has to be in effect in order for the behaviour to be manifested: until and unless those conditions are met, the dispositions remain latent. The ball, after sitting on a level glass table in the dark for three weeks, does not roll, fluoresce, or stick to the surface on which it is sitting, even though it retains all three dispositions.

How do dispositions fit into a behaviourist theory of mind?

For a behaviourist, all mental states, such as desires, beliefs, feelings, subjective experience, etc., are identical with dispositions to cause certain behaviours. “[W]hen we characterise

people by mental predicates, we are not making untestable inferences to any ghostly processes occurring in streams of consciousness which we are debarred from visiting ... [we are] considering, in the first instance, the powers and propensities of which their actions are exercises” (Ryle 1949:50). For example, to attribute to Fred the mental state of believing that someone is knocking at the door may be to say no more than that Fred is disposed to open the door. To say that Sally desires a cup of tea may be to say no more than that she is disposed to go into the kitchen and put the kettle on, etc..

Just as is the case for the Velcro ball, not all of Fred and Sally's dispositions are necessarily manifested as behaviour: either circumstances (such as Sally's being in the bath with her toe accidentally stuck in the tap) or other dispositions (such as Fred's desiring to be alone) may obtain.

For the behaviourist, to attribute someone with a “mind” is to say nothing more than that they have a collection of mental states: that is, a “mind” is nothing more than a set of behavioural dispositions. Obviously, this set of dispositions may be very large, and the interactions between them very complex. But at least in principle, it would be possible to predict how Fred will behave in any given set of circumstances, given that we know his dispositions.

Note that Fred may behave in a particular way for more than one reason. The observed behaviour “Fred opens the door” could be driven by the fact that he entertains the belief that someone is knocking at the door, or it could be because he wants some fresh air. Because

many combinations of circumstance and disposition may map to a single behaviour, it looks like it is not the case (even in principle) that we can infer dispositions, given circumstances and behaviour. By analogy, although we can work out a value for “x” in the equation “ $x=3+4+5+6$ ”, it is impossible to derive values of “y” and “z” given the equation “ $18=3+4+y+z$ ”. This issue comes up in the context of hidden thoughts and feelings, as discussed in subsequent sections.

What does it mean for a thought or feeling to be hidden?

Thoughts and feelings are instances of mental states, and therefore, according to the behaviourist, equivalent to dispositions to behave in certain ways. There are three ways in which we might construe the idea of a “hidden” thought or feeling, each of which I outline below before discussing in the following sections:

1. It may be claimed that there are certain thoughts and feelings which are not identifiable with any behavioural disposition(s). For the sake of argument, assume that I hope that in the year 2150, a black hole appears on the far side of the galaxy. On the face of it, this would not appear to dispose me to behave in any particular way.
2. Perhaps it just so happens that circumstances do not arise which cause the thought/feeling to have been manifested as behaviour. For example, I may believe that there are dangerous snakes that live in computer keyboards in Australia, but so long as I don't visit Australia, this doesn't affect my behaviour.

3. It is possible for someone deliberately to conceal certain thoughts and feelings in some way. For example, I may suspect that it will benefit me to give the impression that I am younger than I am, so even though I believe I am fifty years old, I don't articulate that belief when filling in a job application form.

Mental states without corresponding dispositions

This claim, if true, would refute behaviourism, which claims that mental states are nothing *but* dispositions. For the behaviourist, it does not make sense to say that a mental state can exist that is not a disposition. So a behaviourist must simply reject this construal of the question. In the case given, that of hoping for an event in 2150, it can be argued that this mental state *is* in fact identical to a disposition: for example the disposition to express frustration should science demonstrate that no new black holes will appear in the next thousand years. More generally, in the case of mental states which have no obvious behavioural correlate, the argument can be made that holding such a state at least disposes me, if asked, to articulate that state in some way. For example, I would answer "2150" if asked when I hope a black hole will appear. In any event, the claim that thoughts and feelings may be hidden because they don't dispose me to behave in any way is not one that the behaviourist will concede, so long as he remains a behaviourist.

Absence of suitable conditions

Consider the example of the ball placed on a level tabletop. It doesn't roll, even though it

retains the disposition to do so. Does that mean that its disposition is “hidden”? In my view, it makes sense to say that it is “hidden”, but that it is discoverable: we could tilt the table, and subsequently infer the presence of the disposition by seeing that the ball rolls.

Perhaps the ball has other, more surprising dispositions, such as the disposition to explode if a grasshopper jumps on it. Even these dispositions are in principle discoverable: there is no disposition that could remain hidden if we had enough time and grasshoppers.

Now take the case that of my belief about Australian keyboards. For the behaviourist, my believing something about Australia is a mental state, and must therefore dispose me to behave in certain ways. But it only does so if conditions happen to be conducive. I can hold my belief without doing anything about it, and if I die tomorrow without ever going to, or being asked about, Australia, then my belief about snaky keyboards will not have influenced my behaviour at all. And when I am dead then all of my mental states disappear, and so those dispositions can never be realised. Might a behaviourist concede that such a belief had been “hidden”? I think perhaps so, but this is not really any surprise: *all* dispositions (and therefore mental states) are “hidden but discoverable”. It is not unreasonable to say that I may have many mental states that don't in practice get realised as behaviour, just as a ball left sitting on a level surface for ever would never roll. The fact that some of my thoughts and feelings are more likely to affect my behaviour than others is accidental: none of them would be manifested as behaviour unless conditions are favourable.

Earlier I pointed out that it many different dispositions might result in a certain behaviour. Just because I refrain from using a keyboard in Australia, it cannot be inferred that I believe the keyboard to be infested with snakes. If that is generally true of the dispositions which are thoughts and feelings, then it would not even in principle be possible to establish my thoughts and feelings simply by observing my behaviour. Perhaps in this sense my thoughts and feelings could be said to be “hidden”, even though they can be observed as contributing to behaviour. However, I think that there is a response to this that a behaviourist can offer: even though there may be many thoughts and feelings I have which dispose me to avoid keyboards, the same set of thoughts and feelings will dispose me to behave in other ways in other situations, and the overall result of my having a set of dispositions is a unique set of potential behaviours from which those dispositions can be derived. In other words, I have extra equations, such as “ $15=3+4+y$ ” to work with.

In short, the fact that conditions may not be conducive to certain dispositions being manifest may mean that a behaviourist admits that thoughts and feelings happen to be hidden in a some contexts, but not that they are in principle non-discoverable.

Deliberate concealment

Perhaps this is the most problematic of the cases that a behaviourist has to answer.

Assume that I hold the belief that I am fifty years old. What happens if I lie when asked

how old I am? Normally, it might be assumed that my belief would dispose me to answer “fifty” when prompted to supply my age. If though, I am determined to keep that information hidden, I can answer “forty”. In this case, I am behaving *as if* I actually believe something that I don't in fact believe. Assume that I am able to carry off this feat, and that I can successfully emulate the behaviour appropriate for someone who believes his age to be forty. This concept is similar to Putnam's “super-super-Spartans”, a race of beings who have developed a culture where pain is concealed: “not only do they not evince unconditioned pain-behaviour, but they have begun to suppress all talk about pain” (Maslin 2001:127).

Surely, if it is conceivable that I can behave as if I don't have a given belief, then the behaviourist has to admit that my true belief is hidden? There are no circumstances which could arise, in this scenario, in which my belief equates as a disposition to behave in any particular way.

How might a behaviourist respond to this? One possibility is to deny the fact that I hold the belief at all. This is a consistent position to take, given the claim that beliefs are identical with dispositions: if I have no disposition to behave in a way consistent with a belief that I am fifty years old, then it follows that I don't believe that I am fifty years old. But it seems unreasonable to say that someone else could have knowledge about my beliefs which is more accurate than my own (unless this is a cunning plan on the part of the behaviourist to get me to exclaim “but you're wrong, I *do* hold that belief”).

Another possibility might be to say that the belief *is* identical a disposition, but one that manifests itself in involuntary behaviour: while I may not openly admit my age, perhaps I exhibit physiological symptoms of stress when asked about it. In other words, the mental states that are my belief and my desire to conceal the belief together combine to create a disposition to sweat when asked how old I am. This seems to verge towards the psychological model of behaviourism, by suggesting that all that matters is observable behaviour. And in response to this I can always posit that I have, like a super-super Spartan, trained myself not to sweat etc. when telling lies.

I think that the most plausible way for the behaviourist to respond to this issue is by saying that my belief about my age *is* identical to a disposition to behave in certain ways, but that it happens to be overridden by other mental states that I hold. This would be analogous to the saying that the disposition of the ball to roll when placed on a sloping surface is overridden, when it's on a Velcro surface, by its disposition to become attached to the surface. The behaviourist can say that my belief about my age does dispose me to manifest certain behaviour, but that that disposition is overridden by the another disposition I have: the desire to keep my age secret. In this sense, the mental state that is my belief is “hidden”, because it is hidden by another mental state.

While I think that this argument works, it does not feel like an entirely satisfactory vindication of behaviourism: to identify all mental states with dispositions is an interesting

idea, but to then have to qualify that by saying that many of those dispositions are hidden behind other dispositions, seems rather to weaken the behaviourist's claim. Given that the behaviourist explanation also omits any reference to the qualitative aspects of personal experience (qualia) which seem to go along with mental states, I don't find the behaviourist theory of mind is as a whole convincing.

Conclusion

Depending on what is meant by a “hidden” thought or feeling, a behaviourist can admit that they exist, without abandoning the idea of mental states being identical with behavioural dispositions: either in the sense that *all* thoughts and feelings are “hidden” until circumstances arise which cause them to manifest as behaviours, or by claiming that a mental state which is deliberately kept hidden still exists as a disposition, but one that happens to be trumped by another mental state. However, I believe that this interpretation of what it means to be a “hidden” mental state is one which is not particularly helpful in making the behaviourist's case convincing.

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