

Ryle on Motives and Dispositions

Introduction

In *The Concept of Mind*, Ryle discusses dispositions in some detail both in the chapter on emotions, especially in relation to the concept of motive and, of course, in the chapter entitled ‘Dispositions and Occurrences’. These discussions show that he regarded the dispositional concepts as central to a proper understanding of the mind and of behaviour. He held that ‘many of the cardinal concepts in terms of which we describe specifically human behaviour are dispositional concepts’ (117) and he also thought that ‘the vogue of the para-mechanical legend has led many people to ignore the ways in which these concepts actually behave and to construe them instead as items in the description of occult causes and effects’ (*ibid*). In other words, Ryle thought that ‘the official doctrine’ about the mind (see *CM*, 11ff.) tends to treat these psychological terms as ‘episodic words’ denoting occurrences, or as terms used to report ‘particular but unwitnessable matters of fact’ (117),¹ when in fact they express dispositional concepts. Moreover, according to the official doctrine, these occurrences are causes of behaviour, albeit ones that are not accessible for public inspection – hence the ‘para-mechanical’ label. Much of the discussion in the two chapters mentioned above is devoted to bringing out the logico-grammatical features of these mental dispositional concepts in order to show how ill-suited they are to play the role of cause in the production of behaviour that the official doctrine traditionally ascribes to them.

Chief among the dispositional concepts in terms of which we describe and explain human behaviour, Ryle thinks, are motives (others such concepts are habits, attitudes, instincts, etc.). And a central claim in *The Concept of Mind* is that ‘to explain an action as done from a specified motive is not to describe the action as the effect of a specified cause’ (113). The reasoning behind this claim will be examined below but it depends crucially on three doctrines held by Ryle: the first is that motives are dispositions; the second is that the cause of an event is a happening or occurrence, that is, another event or, perhaps, a process; and the third is that the explanation of an occurrence by reference to a disposition is not a causal explanation at least not if by causal explanation one means an explanation that refers to some event, state or condition. I shall examine these doctrines in turn in the next two sections.

My aim in this paper is to tease out and assess Ryle’s position on the relationship between motives and actions, in particular his claim that this relation is not causal and that, therefore, the corresponding explanations are not causal explanations. I shall argue that, although Ryle mistakenly assimilated explanations by motives to explanations by character traits, he nonetheless has much of interest to say about how motives and character traits are related to the actions they explain, respectively, and also about whether we should think of explanations of either kind as causal explanations.

¹ By ‘reports of matters of fact’ Ryle seems to mean reports of actual events, processes and states of affairs but he excludes from these attributions of (actual) abilities, liabilities, capacities, etc. Thus Ryle says that when inquiring about the mental factors that explain action, ‘our inquiry is not into causes (and a fortiori not into occult causes), but into capacities, skills, habits, liabilities and bents’ (45).

1. Motives and Dispositions

In chapter 5 of *The Concept of Mind*, Ryle characterises motives as dispositions.² And, as is well known, he says that the way to understand dispositions is to focus on the logic of dispositional statements, which he took to be captured by law-like statements. Famously, he thought of dispositional statements as ‘inference tickets’ which enable their ‘holders’ to ‘predict, retrodict, explain and modify the actions, reactions and states’ (124) of the thing that has the disposition mentioned in the statement.

Because he thought of motives as dispositions, and thought that the logic of the latter is captured by law-like statements, Ryle says that a statement that gives someone’s motive for acting is to be understood by reference to such law-like statements: ‘The expansion of a motive-expression is a law-like sentence and not a report of an event’ (113). And he adds that, for example, the statement that a man boasted from vanity should be construed not as ‘he boasted and the cause of his boasting was the occurrence in him of a particular feeling or impulse of vanity’ (89) but, rather, as

He boasted and his doing so satisfies the law-like proposition that whenever he finds a chance of securing the admiration and envy of others, he does whatever he thinks will produce the admiration and envy of others (*Ibid*).

While Ryle’s negative claim about how to construe motive statements may be plausible, his positive claim is problematic. His proposal has been criticized on the grounds that it implies that it is not possible to act out of a motive, such as vanity or greed, only once – which is clearly false:³ a person can act out of vanity or greed once or twice without being a vain or greedy person.

This is a fairly obvious point – so we might wonder why Ryle overlooked it and thought that an inquiry into someone’s motive for acting on a particular occasion is ‘an inquiry into the character of the agent which accounts for his having acted in that way on that occasion’ (89). One reason for his holding this view seems to be the thought that, in general, one of the most reliable clues to what someone’s motive was on a particular occasion is their character. He writes:

We should consider by what tests we should try to decide a dispute about the motive from which a person had done something; did he, for example, throw up a well-paid post for a relatively humble Government job from patriotism or from a desire to be exempt from military service? We begin, perhaps, by asking him; but on this sort of matter his avowals, to us or to himself, would very likely not be frank. We next try,

² Here are some remarks of Ryle’s to that effect (italics all mine): ‘When we ask ‘Why did someone act in a certain way?’ [we are making] ‘an inquiry into *the character of the agent* which accounts for his having acted in that way on that occasion’ (89); ‘to ask whether an action was done from force of habit or from kindliness of heart is therefore to ask which of *two specified dispositions* is the explanation of the action’ (92); ‘to explain an action as done from a certain motive is not to correlate it with an occult cause, but *to subsume it under a propensity or behaviour-trend*’ (110); ‘in ascribing a specific motive to a person we are describing the sorts of things that *he tends to try to do or bring about*’ (112; see also p.113 quoted above).

³ See, e.g. Anscombe (1957: 21). Wilkins (1963) claims that Anscombe’s criticism fails because it depends on attributing to Ryle the view that a vain person must ‘always or very often’ act vainly. But, Wilkins says, this is to misunderstand Ryle’s remarks about dispositions and laws, since ‘law-like propositions about how a person behaves when in certain situations do not imply propositions about the frequency with which a person does in fact behave in certain ways’ (Wilkins 1963, 112). But this defence is simply off-target because Anscombe’s objection is not that a man must act out of vanity *very frequently to be a vain man* but rather that a man may act out of vanity *once without thereby being a vain man* (i.e. without having a *disposition* to act vainly); but Ryle’s construal of motive statements seems to exclude this possibility.

not necessarily unsuccessfully, to settle the dispute by considering whether his words, actions, embarrassments, etc., on this and other occasions square with the hypothesis that he is physically timorous and averse from regimentation, or whether they square with the hypothesis that he is relatively indifferent to money and would sacrifice anything to help win the war. We try, that is, to settle by induction the relevant traits in his character (92).

But the importance of character traits as clues for establishing someone's motives does not sanction the conclusion that someone's motive on any one occasion must be a character trait of theirs – for at least two reasons. First, attributions of character traits depend *conceptually* on attributions of the corresponding motives to that person on particular occasions. What this means is that being motivated in the relevant way at least some times is part of what it is to have the corresponding character trait: only someone who has been motivated by generosity on a sufficient number of occasions is a generous person.⁴ This is not simply a point about how we discover or decide whether someone is a generous person; it is about what it is to be a generous person (more on this in section 3 below). And so it must be possible to impute the motive (vanity, generosity) without thereby (yet) attributing the character trait to the person; and moreover, the character trait is attributed on the basis of imputing the motive, and not vice-versa. Ryle himself makes a similar point in the following passage:

The tendency to ruminate and the habit of cigarette-smoking could not exist, unless there were such processes or episodes as ruminating and smoking cigarettes. 'He is smoking a cigarette now' does not say the same sort of thing as 'he is a cigarette-smoker', but unless statements like the first were sometimes true, statements like the second could not be true (119; see also p.85).

In the second sentence of this paragraph Ryle seems to be saying that the presence of certain tendencies, dispositions, habits, etc., in a thing depends logically on the occurrence of the corresponding episodes. And just 'A is smoking a cigarette' does not say the same thing as 'A is a smoker', saying 'A acted vainly' is not the same thing as saying 'A is a vain person'. And conversely, unless A is motivated by vanity from time to time she cannot be said to be a vain person.

The second reason why motive explanations of action cannot be attributions of dispositional character traits is the mirror image of the first: although character traits are good clues to people's motives, they are not decisive in establishing someone's motive on a particular occasion because people can and do act out of character; that is, they occasionally act motivated by things that do not normally motivate them, and occasionally are not motivated by the things that normally motivate them. Both these considerations suggest that a motive is not in itself a disposition, and *a fortiori*, not a character trait.

A.R. White successfully identifies the cause of this blind spot in Ryle's understanding of motive statements. As White points out, the problem arises because Ryle conflates the concept of a motive with the things that can be motives; that is, he makes a 'category mistake' in supposing that

a motive is, to use a vague word, some kind of thing; that motives are of the same general type as moods, agitations, habits, reflexes, traits, attitudes (...) (White, 1958,

⁴ This is consistent with the fact that, in certain cases, because of the nature or circumstances of the action, imputing a motive on a particular occasion might be enough to impute the character trait to the person – still in these cases it would be true that the character trait is attributed on the basis of the imputation of the motive and not vice-versa.

258).

But, as White goes on to say, to ask for the motive for an action is not to ask for one thing among a person's moods, habits, or character traits that may contribute to explain that action but rather it is to ask for a certain kind of explanation for that action. (I shall return below, at the end of this section, to White's claim that motives are 'not kinds of things which feature in our explanations of human conduct' but are, rather 'kinds of explanation' of human conduct (1958, 259) making use of an idea of Anthony Kenny's that motive explanations work by bringing the agent's desires, goals, beliefs, etc. and behaviour under familiar patterns, and that motive terms ('ambition', 'jealousy', 'generosity', etc.) are precisely names for such patterns.)⁵

So Ryle may be right that vanity is a character trait that involves a tendency to act in ways that fall under the kind of law-like proposition he suggests, and be right also that vanity can be a motive. But he is wrong to say that the *motive* of vanity that leads someone to do something is a disposition (*viz.* to do vain things). The point may be seen clearly if one considers the difference between explaining an action by reference to a character trait of the agent's and explaining it by reference to his motive, *even when* the thing that is the motive in the second case is also a character trait in the agent. So consider the difference between saying that John joined the tennis club because he's very ambitious and saying that his motive in joining the club was ambition. In the first case, we do two things: we explain John's action by reference to a motive *and also* say that his action manifests a character trait of John's (a disposition): we say both that John's motive on this occasion was ambition (he did it out of a desire to get ahead) *and* also that John tends to be motivated by ambition. But the second explanation, which simply gives John's motive, says only that he joined the club in order to get ahead, without imputing to him ambition as a character trait. As Ryle himself notes, to say '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 ...' (1949: 90). But, to repeat, the reverse is not true: to say that someone acted out of a motive is not to say that that motive is a trait in his character, so it is not to say that he is generally inclined to do certain kinds of things, etc.

So motives are not dispositions, although something that is a character trait, which is a kind of disposition, can also be the motive for an action. For instance, a person who is compassionate tends to be motivated by compassion and, so, on particular occasions, his motive for acting will be compassion: he will be moved to act in ways he thinks will help those in need by his sympathy for their plight. But if so, his motive on any of those occasions will be compassion and not a disposition to be compassionate.

Thus, although Ryle is right that motives are not occurrences, acts, performances, events, states, etc., that is not because they are dispositions, and so he is wrong to think that the logic (or logics) of dispositional statements gives the logic of motives. And, therefore, and to return to the construal of the statement 'He boasted from vanity', we might accept Ryle's contention that this statement carries no implication of the occurrence in the man of a particular feeling or impulse or 'psychological episode' of vanity which might be said to be the cause of his boasting. But we need not accept that it carries instead an implication that his boasting was the manifestation of a general *disposition* to say things that he believes are likely to secure the admiration and envy of others when the occasion arises, nor need we accept the related claim that motives are dispositions.

⁵ Kenny, 1989, 59ff..

If this is right, if motives are not dispositions or occurrences and not, as White puts it, ‘some kind of thing’, what are they? I mentioned above White’s remark that motives, far from being elements in the explanation of action are ‘kinds of explanation’. And I want to explore that suggestion now. I will do so by examining some things Ryle says about the distinction between acting out of habit and acting out of a motive.

Ryle thinks that the two classes of action (those done out of habit and motive) are importantly different, even though both are explained by being subsumed ‘under a propensity or behaviour-trend’ (110; which he thinks is true also of reflex and instinctive actions).⁶ According to him, actions done out of a motive are characterized, by contrast to those done out of habit, because in them the agent acts ‘more or less carefully, critically, consistently and purposefully’ (111). Ryle goes on to add that these adverbs 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).

These remarks capture a feature that is indeed defining of acting for a motive, namely that the agent acts purposefully and for a reason; that is, in order to achieve some end and in light of, or guided, by certain facts. This is supported by the logic of motive statements.

I said above that, contrary to what Ryle says, motive statements do not imply that the action explained was a manifestation of a character trait of the agent’s. But what such statements do imply is both that the agent had an aim or goal in acting as she did, and that she believed and perhaps knew that her acting so was, in some more or less direct way, conducive to achieving that aim. So, to go back to Ryle’s example, the statement ‘He boasted from vanity’ implies, not that he always or often seeks to secure the admiration and envy of others when the right occasion arises but that, on this occasion, *his aim* in saying what he did was to secure the admiration and envy of others and that he believed that his boasts would or at least might do so.⁷

So we might say, again following White, that to give the motive for an action is to give the desire or value for the sake of which the action was done (the agent’s goal or aim in acting), and, I would add, it is also to implicitly attribute some belief to the agent, namely that acting as he did was conducive to satisfying the desire or realizing the value. Thus, in knowing the motive why someone acted we know both the desire for the sake of which the action was done and his reason for acting – though neither his aim nor his reason need be explicit and

⁶ Though Ryle notes that the two classes of actions, *viz.* those done out of habit and those done for a motive, are not ‘demarcated from one another as an equatorial day from an equatorial night. They shade into one another as an English day shades into an English night’ (110).

⁷ Davidson makes a similar point in his defence of the claim that actions are explained in the first instance by citing a ‘primary reason’. He notes that Ryle’s

analysis is often, and perhaps justly, criticized on the ground that a man may boast from vanity just once. But if Ryle’s boaster did what he did from vanity, then something entailed by Ryle’s analysis is true: the boaster wanted to secure the admiration and envy of others, and he believed that his action would produce this admiration and envy; true or false, Ryle’s analysis does not dispense with primary reasons, but depends upon them (689).

As is well known, Davidson thinks of a primary reason for an action as a combination of two mental states of an agent’s: a pro-attitude and a belief, that together explain the action by giving the agent’s reason for doing what he did.

fully conscious.⁸ But to say that is not to say that motives are desires or agent's reasons – even though in giving an agent's reason, or the desire from which he acted, we may give (sometimes implicitly) the agent's motive for acting.⁹

Motives are then best thought of as explanatory patterns under which we can bring intentional behaviour and the goals and beliefs or knowledge that prompted and guided that behaviour, so that these are related to each other in intelligible and familiar ways. Thus, behaviour motivated by revenge corresponds to a pattern relating a desire to harm someone on the grounds that that person has caused some harm to oneself (or one's family, group, country, etc.) and a belief that the proposed action will be harmful. Acting out of revenge is acting *in order to* harm someone *because* of that previous (real or perceived) harm caused by the victim of revenge, and of a belief that the proposed action will be suitably harmful. The suggestion that motives are pattern-concepts under which we bring goals, beliefs or knowledge, and intentional behaviour in order to explain the latter gives substance to White's remark that motives are not items in the explanation of intentional actions but rather kinds of explanation of those actions.¹⁰

I shall leave here my examination of Ryle's doctrine that motives are dispositions and turn now to the second and third doctrines mentioned in the introduction, namely, that the cause of an event is a happening or occurrence, and that dispositions are not causes of their manifestations (and, relatedly, that explanations of events that cite a disposition are not causal explanations).

2. Causes, Occurrences and Dispositions

Ryle's causal doctrine is expressed in this passage:

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 (113).

Here Ryle seems to subscribe to the view, which was beginning to gain popularity at the time of the publication of *The Concept of Mind*, that an agent's motive for acting, and generally an agent's reason for acting, are not the causes of his action.¹¹

Anyone familiar with the debates on intentional action that have dominated the literature since the 1960s will, on reading Ryle's remarks above, think immediately of Davidson's arguments in his paper 'Actions, Reasons and Causes'. In that paper, Davidson famously

⁸ I am using 'the agent's reason' to mean the reason in light of which the agent acts, and not just any reason that could explain why the agent acted as she did. The former might be a premise in the agent's practical reasoning, and what she might give as part of her justification in answering the question why she acted (these may be what I have elsewhere called 'merely apparent reasons'). For a clarification of the issues involved in these distinctions, see Alvarez, 2010, ch.5.

⁹ I say 'sometimes implicitly' because the same reason may be compatible with different motives. Thus, if A's reason for giving B a lethal overdose is that B has a painful chronic condition, A's motive in so acting may be compassion (if his aim was to alleviate B's suffering) or greed (if A's aim was to ensure that her inheritance wasn't used up on B's care). I discuss these issues in Alvarez, 2010, §3.1.

¹⁰ As I say above, this suggestion is inspired by Kenny's discussion of motives in Kenny, 1989, 59ff.

¹¹ Ryle talks about motives while other participants in the debate about action explanations, e.g. Davidson, talk about the agent's reason. In the previous section I mentioned some differences between these concepts as well as some ways in which they are related. Nonetheless, those differences can be ignored for the purposes of the issues at hand – not least because, as Davidson notes (see fn. 7 above), talk of motives implies talk of (primary) reasons.

outlines and defends a causal doctrine about the relation between reasons and actions, namely:

C2. A primary reason for an action is its cause (692).

In his defence of this doctrine, Davidson considers several objections, one of which is worded in ways that closely echo Ryle's remark above.¹² The objection is that a primary reason 'consist of attitudes and beliefs, which are states or dispositions, not events; therefore they cannot be causes' (1963, 693. As we have seen, Ryle did not think that motives were states but he certainly thought they were dispositions and hence, he thought, not causes). Davidson's reply to the objection is well known:

It is easy to reply that states, dispositions, and conditions are frequently named as the causes of events: the bridge collapsed because of a structural defect; the plane crashed on takeoff because the air temperature was abnormally high; the plate broke because it had a crack (694).

One might object that, as a matter of fact, the statements Davidson gives in his reply do *not name* any state, disposition or condition as 'the cause' of an event: rather they are 'because'-statements that mention states, dispositions or conditions in order to explain of the occurrence of events. But Davidson's claim is, precisely, that these 'because'-statements are *causal*: the states, dispositions or conditions they mention are causes of events—or more accurately, since Davidson also thought that only events are causes, causal factors or conditions, and therefore the because-statements provide causal explanations of the events they explain. Davidson goes on to say that this reply works on the assumption that there was always a suitable triggering event which is 'the cause' event – a claim that some of the philosophers Davidson was arguing against denied, at least in relation to human behaviour but which, as we shall see, Ryle is happy to accept.

So it might seem that Ryle's views on whether motives are causes of actions is diametrically opposed to Davidson's and, moreover, that Ryle's grounds for saying that motives are not causes (cited at the beginning of this section) are defeated by Davidson's response. However, consideration of other things Ryle says in *The Concept of Mind* suggests, rather, that his picture of the explanation of action by motives is in fact not so very different from Davidson's. For, having said that motives explain actions as dispositions explain their manifestations, Ryle adds:

But the general fact that a person is disposed to act in such and such ways in such and such circumstances *does not by itself account for his doing a particular thing at a particular moment*; any more than the fact that the glass was brittle accounts for its fracture at 10 p.m. As the impact of the stone at 10 p.m. caused the glass to break, so some antecedent of an action causes or occasions the agent to perform it when and where he does so (113. My italics).

Indeed, in order to understand Ryle's claims about motives, causation and explanation, it is important to pay attention to a distinction he makes between two kinds of explanation. According to him, there are two different senses in which we explain why something occurred. First, there is the 'causal sense' in which we explain that the glass broke because a stone hit it. This 'because'-clause reports an event, the stone's striking of the window, which stands 'to the fracture of the glass as cause to effect' (88). But, he adds,

¹² Davidson mentions Ryle explicitly in connection not with this but with the objection to the causal theory that holds that 'a reason for an action is not logically distinct from the action; therefore, reasons are not causes of actions', about which, Davidson says: 'In one of its forms, the argument was of course inspired by Ryle's treatment of motives in *The Concept of Mind*' (1963, 695 & fn.6) though he does not specify where.

very frequently we look for and get explanations of occurrences in another sense of ‘explanation’. We ask why the glass shattered when struck by the stone and we get the answer that it was because the glass was brittle. Now ‘brittle’ is a dispositional adjective (...). So when we say that the glass broke when struck because it was brittle, the ‘because’ clause does not report a happening or a cause; it states a law-like proposition (88-9).

Davidson could reply to this by saying that what Ryle calls ‘two senses’ in which an event is explained (‘The glass broke because it was fragile’ and ‘The glass broke because the stone hit it’) are really two parts of the same *causal* explanation.¹³ One gives a causal condition for the occurrence of the breaking, while the other gives the (trigger) event that stands to the breaking in the extensional relation of cause-event to effect-event. But even so, he seems to agree with Ryle that *what* we explain when we cite a cause-event is why something happened *when it did*, or why someone did what they did *when they did it*, for he writes:

The signaling driver can answer the question ‘Why did you raise your arm *when you did?*’, and from the answer we learn the event that caused the action. But can an actor always answer such a question? Sometimes the answer will mention a mental event that does not give a reason: ‘Finally I made up my mind’.¹⁴ However, there also seem to be cases of intentional action *where we cannot explain at all why we acted when we did*. In such cases, explanation in terms of primary reasons parallels the explanation of the collapse of the bridge from a structural defect: *we are ignorant of the event or sequence of events that led up to (caused) the collapse*, but we are sure there was such an event or sequence of events (695. My italics).

So both Ryle and Davidson agree that explaining why something happened when it did requires citing the event (the ‘cause’ event) that triggered the causal process that culminated in the effect event, while explaining why something happened at all does not require mentioning the trigger, although it implies that there was such a trigger.

It may seem, then, that the difference between Ryle and Davidson on the question whether explanations of action that cite motives (or reasons generally) are causal is no more than presentational. After all, Davidson agrees with Ryle that only events (or occurrences) are causes; other things, such as states, dispositions or conditions are not properly speaking causes (for Davidson they are causal factors or causal conditions). And Ryle agrees with Davidson that when we explain why something happened by reference to a disposition, although we are not thereby citing a cause-event that explains why that thing happened when it did, we do nonetheless imply that there was such an event or sequence of events that was the cause of the happening and explains why it occurred then. Thus, Ryle says that ‘an action’s having a cause does not conflict with its having a motive, but is already prescribed for in the protasis of the hypothetical proposition which states the motive’ (114). To that extent, then, Ryle was *not* one of those philosophers who, in Davidson’s words, felt ‘a certain

¹³ But consider Davidson’s remark that

The most primitive explanation of an event gives its cause; more elaborate explanations may tell more of the story, or defend the singular causal claim by producing a relevant law or by giving reasons for believing such exists (698).

¹⁴ Note that, contrary to what Davidson implies, an explanation of why someone acted when he did does not give the agent’s reason *for doing what he did* but only either the reason why he did it, or his reason for doing it *then*: ‘I raised up my arm then because I noticed the turning coming up’ does not tell us the agent’s reason for raising his arm (presumably, that he was signaling), but the reason why he raised it when he did (that he noticed the turning). Likewise, ‘I signaled because I saw the turning’ does not tell us the agent’s reason for signaling but his reason for signaling *then*. Admittedly, in both cases we can easily infer the agent’s reason for acting.

uneasiness' in 'speaking of causes of actions at all' (700).

All this notwithstanding, an important difference remains – a difference about their respective conceptions of dispositions. For, although Ryle is happy to accept that actions have (event) causes, he would not accept Davidson's claim that reasons or motives are 'causal conditions' of actions, at least not in the sense Davidson intends that claim. This is because Ryle rejected the view that dispositions are causal conditions in the sense of being events or states or anything of the kind – that is, anything that can be said to happen or exist or obtain, to be overt or hidden, seen or unseen. According to him, dispositions are not of the right logical type to fit such attributes:

To possess a dispositional property is not to be in a particular state, or to undergo a particular change; it is to be bound or liable to be in a particular state, or to undergo a particular change, when a particular condition is realised (43).

Thus, one of the things that Ryle is at pains to deny in *The Concept of Mind* is that, when we explain an occurrence by reference to a disposition, we are explaining by citing some *thing* – some object, event, state, etc., some 'unobservable existence' – that is the disposition and that is 'causally efficacious' in bringing about that occurrence. Consider his remarks about the concept of a causal connection:

Now there is no objection to employing the familiar idiom 'causal connection'. Bacteriologists do discover causal connections between bacteria and diseases, since this is only another way of saying that they do establish laws and so provide themselves with inference tickets which enable them to infer from diseases to bacteria, explain diseases by assertions about bacteria, prevent and cure diseases by eliminating bacteria, and so forth. But to speak as if the discovery of a law were the finding of a third, unobservable existence is simply to fall back into the old habit of construing open hypothetical statements as singular categorical statements (122).

Similarly, he might add, there is no objection to saying that there is a causal connection between someone's motive (which, remember, Ryle thinks of as a disposition) and their action – but for Ryle that is just another way of saying that we have identified a law-like regularity and thus provided ourselves with an inference ticket that enables us to predict, explain, retrodict, prevent, etc. that person's actions.

Thus, Ryle's second ground for his anti-causal understanding of the relation between motives and actions is his conception of dispositions. For Ryle, motives, which fall under what he calls 'higher mental dispositional concepts' aren't causal conditions (in Davidson's sense) of the actions they explain, simply because they are dispositions.¹⁵ To be sure, they are dispositions of a special kind, but this is not because they are mental, it is because they are not 'single-track dispositions, but dispositions the exercises of which are indefinitely heterogeneous' (44). Motives are, Ryle thinks, not like the dispositional concept 'fragile', whose manifestation is single track (i.e. 'determinate'): shattering; but rather like the dispositional concept 'elastic' whose manifestation can take many forms (i.e. 'determinable' (118)): expanding, contracting, etc.).¹⁶

When Jane Austen wished to show the specific kind of pride which characterised the heroine of 'Pride and Prejudice', she had to represent her actions, words, thoughts and feelings in a thousand different situations. There is no one standard type of action or

¹⁵ By 'higher mental concepts' Ryle means concepts whose employment indicates the presence of intelligence.

¹⁶ For a criticism of this distinction of Ryle's see Lyons, 1973.

reaction such that Jane Austen could say ‘My heroine’s kind of pride was just the tendency to do this, whenever a situation of that sort arose’ (*ibid*).

In sum, what leads Ryle to reject the doctrine that motives are causal conditions in Davidson’s sense is not a behaviourist tendency to deny the reality of the mental, but rather his view that motives are a particular kind of disposition, and his general conception of dispositions.¹⁷ And this is an important issue on which he disagrees with Davidson, because for Ryle motives, being dispositions, are not things of any kind and hence not, for example, states that could play a causal role and have various descriptions. It is this view of dispositions, coupled with his belief that motives are dispositions, that makes motives ill-suited to play the role of causal factors, as Davidson suggests they do in ‘Actions, Reasons and Causes’. And it follows that Ryle could not accept Davidson’s view that explanations by reference to the agent’s reasons or motives are explanations that use psychological vocabulary to describe particular events and states that could also be picked out using the vocabulary of the physical sciences (see, for instance, *CoM*, 117).

We have seen, then, that Ryle denies that motives are causes of actions and that explanations citing motives are causal explanations on two grounds. One is that he thinks that causes proper are happenings (events or processes) and since motives are not happenings, they are not in the right category to be causes. The second is that he thinks that motives are dispositions and that dispositions are not causal conditions in the sense of being states that play a causal role. And we have seen that, although Davidson would agree with the first claim (for he also thought that causes, strictly speaking, are events), he would disagree with the second. And so it becomes clear that, in fact, the more significant disagreement between Davidson and Ryle on the relation between motives or reasons and actions does not depend on the doctrine, held by other anti-causalists among Davidson’s targets, that intentional actions do not have causes but rather on their different views about dispositions *in general*.

It should be noted that Ryle’s view of dispositions, though greatly influential, has been criticised on several grounds. First, he is associated with the view that dispositions can be analysed in terms of conditional statements. Whether he held that dispositional statements are susceptible to this sort of *analysis* may be debatable but it is clear that he thought that ‘to say that this lump of sugar is soluble is to say that it would dissolve, if submerged anywhere, at any time and in any parcel of water’ (124). However, the ‘simple conditional’ analysis of dispositional concepts came under sustained attack in the 1990s. Arguments that point to the possibilities of ‘finked’, ‘masked’ and ‘mimicked’ dispositions, developed by several philosophers, show that the simple conditional analysis provides neither necessary nor sufficient conditions for something to have a disposition.¹⁸ Since then, there have been different attempts to provide more complex conditional analyses of dispositions that avoid the problems faced by the simple view but there seems to be consensus that the simple

¹⁷ Julia Tanney argues that Ryle’s ‘anti-causalist’ position arises not from his views about the mind, e.g. from his alleged behaviourism, or from the ‘logical connection’ argument (which says that the alleged mental occurrences that are claimed to cause actions are ‘logically’ connected to actions and hence not suited to be their causes). Rather, according to her, Ryle’s argument is that

the existence of such [mental] occurrences is not required for the concepts of intention, motive, and reason, etc., to discharge their explanatory role, thus throwing into question the whole idea that this explanatory role is causal (Tanney, 2009, xx).

But as I argue above, it’s not clear that Ryle’s argument shows that the explanatory role of motives is not causal at all, as opposed to showing merely that their role is not that of a causal *trigger*.

¹⁸ See for example Martin, 1994 and Bird, 1998.

conditional analysis does not work.¹⁹

Moreover, in his treatment of dispositions Ryle says nothing about what is called ‘the categorical basis’ or underlying structure of dispositions.²⁰ As we have seen, he insists again and again that disposition statements should not be thought of as ‘categorical reports of particular but unwitnessable matters of fact’ (117). But, critics have said,

to speak of an object’s having a dispositional property entails that the object is in some non-dispositional state, or that it has some property (there exists a ‘categorical basis’) which is responsible for the object manifesting certain behavior in certain circumstances (Armstrong, 1968, 86).

Whether Armstrong is right that speaking of a disposition entails the existence of a ‘categorical basis’ seems debatable. For even if we agree with Armstrong that dispositions do in fact have categorical bases, and that such categorical bases are causally responsible for the manifestation of the disposition, we need not agree that that is *implied* by talk of dispositions. Indeed the fact that it is controversial whether all dispositions do in fact have a categorical basis surely suggests that talk about dispositions is not implicitly talk about non-dispositional properties or states.²¹ Furthermore, some philosophers who claim that dispositions *do* invariably have categorical bases also claim that dispositions play no causal role in their manifestation, since (i) this causal role is played by a disposition’s categorical basis, and (ii) dispositions are distinct from their categorical bases.²² If this view about the causal role of dispositions turned out to be right, then Ryle’s claim that explanations by reference to dispositions are not themselves causal would gain plausibility, even if it does not undermine the suggestion that a dispositional explanation of an event implies the possibility of supplying a corresponding causal explanation referring to underlying structures and trigger events.

These issues about the logic of dispositional statements, the nature of dispositions and the relation between them and their categorical bases (if any), as well as between dispositions and the causal powers of the objects whose dispositions they are, are complex and have been much debated recently.²³ It is not my aim here to make a contribution to those debates because the focus of my paper is to clarify Ryle’s understanding of explanations of actions by motives. And, although Ryle says that motives are dispositions, as I indicated in section 1, I believe that he was wrong to say this. So I shall leave here the issue whether Ryle was right that *in general* an explanation by reference to a disposition is not a causal explanation and turn instead, in the last section of this paper, to the more specific question of what Ryle says about explanations of action by reference to motives and character traits, respectively, when the two are properly distinguished.

3. Motives, Character Traits and the Explanation of Action

¹⁹ Mumford, 1998.

²⁰ For criticisms of this aspect of Ryle’s view of dispositions see Armstrong, 1968, and Lyons 1980.

²¹ On this see McKittrick, 2003 and Mumford, 2006.

²² See Prior, Pargetter and Jackson, who characterise categorical (or ‘causal’) bases as follows:

By a ‘causal basis’ we mean the property or property-complex of the object that, together with the first member of the pair –the antecedent circumstances– is the causally operative sufficient condition for the manifestation in the case of ‘surefire’ dispositions, and in the case of probabilistic dispositions is causally sufficient for the relevant chance of the manifestation (1982, 251).

See McKittrick, 2004, for a critical discussion of negative views about the causal relevance of dispositions.

²³ For a summary see Cross, 2012.

Consider the following passage, which is representative of many contemporary discussions of dispositions:

Disposition terms, such as ‘cowardice’, ‘fragility’ and ‘reactivity,’ often appear in explanations. Sometimes *we explain why a man ran away by saying that he was cowardly*, or we explain why something broke by saying it was fragile. Scientific explanations of certain phenomena feature dispositional properties like instability, reactivity, and conductivity. (McKittrick, 2004, 110. My italics).

The statement ‘The man ran away because he was cowardly’ could be taken as either of the two types of explanation mentioned in section 1: one that simply imputes a motive to the person on that occasion: (i) ‘He ran away out of cowardice’; and one that in addition imputes the corresponding character trait: (ii) ‘He ran away because he is a coward’. Now, it may be that both explanations involve reference to dispositions but if so, the dispositions in question would seem to be importantly different, because only the second involves a general disposition to have cowardly thoughts and feelings and to behave in cowardly ways. I shall start by examining this second type of explanation.

First, it seems that, as this passage suggests, explanations by reference to character traits are indeed explanations by reference to dispositions. For to say that someone’s action was a manifestation of a character trait is to say that it is a manifestation of a disposition the person has to think and feel and behave in certain ways: in the case of cowardice, a disposition *inter alia* to avoid danger or pain (physical or mental) when it behoves the person to face the danger or pain – either because the latter were not severe, or because it was the person’s duty to face them, regardless of their severity.

But although it is plausible that we explain both human action and the behaviour of inanimate things by reference to their dispositions, it is also plausible that (at least some of) the relevant dispositions should be different in important respects in each of those domains. Indeed, the concept of disposition at issue in each case may be quite different – after all, the term ‘disposition’ as encountered in recent philosophical literature is something of a term of art. I shall not here try to give anything like a detailed account of the differences. I shall, however, highlight some distinctive features of explanations of human behaviour by reference to dispositions that are character traits, such as that found in construal (ii) of the example in the passage above, and at the same time comment on what Ryle says about them (once this is separated from what he says about motives in general).

An explanation such as ‘He ran away because he is a coward’ seems to be what Ryle calls a ‘semi-hypothetical’ or ‘mongrel categorical statement’, which he says is ‘just as much an explanatory report of an actual occurrence as a conditional prediction of further occurrences’ (141). These mongrel categorical statements describe what the object or person is actually doing in a way that is, as he puts it, ‘law impregnated’ (142): it makes it reasonable to expect, and allows us so predict, similar behaviour in relevantly similar circumstances. And Ryle says that such statements explain the action by placing it in a familiar pattern (that associated with the character trait) and sanction predictions about future behaviour in similar circumstances on the basis of a past regularity. And he adds

Statements of this type are not peculiar to descriptions of the higher level actions and reactions of people. When a sugar-lump is described as dissolving, something more episodic is being said than when it is described as soluble; but something more dispositional is being said than when it is described as moist (141-2).

That all seems right. But statements of this kind involving character traits seem to have other distinctive features.

First, character trait dispositions are what I shall call ‘manifestation-dependent dispositions’: dispositions that are attributed to the individual on the basis of the manifestation of the disposition. In the case of character traits, they are attributed on the basis of the fact that, in the relevant circumstances, the person to which they are attributed tends to behave, or tends to react emotionally, and have thoughts, etc. which are characteristic of the character trait. And this dependence of attribution on behaviour or reaction, etc. is not merely epistemic but is, rather, constitutive. Frequent or regular relevant behaviour or related thoughts, feelings, etc. in the relevant circumstances is constitutive of what it is to have the corresponding character trait.

So someone who tends to behave in a cowardly manner, that is, often or regularly behaves cowardly when facing danger, has the character trait of cowardice and the trait is attributed on the basis of that regularity of behaviour. But note that it is not necessary that someone *actually* behaves in a cowardly manner regularly, and that is why I say tends to having feelings, emotional reactions, in the relevant circumstances as well as ‘regularly behaves’. For a character trait may be attributed to someone in spite of the fact that the person does not actually behave in the relevant manner if, for example, the person has the relevant reactions and is inclined to act in the relevant manner but she does not, because the behaviour is *supressed* by forces external to the agent: that is by others or by circumstances. So, consider, for instance, someone who, in the relevant circumstances, feels the inclination to run away or eat excessively but is not allowed, or does not have the opportunity, to do so. This person is cowardly or greedy (that is, has those dispositions) because he regularly or frequently feels the inclination to do so – even though he does not often behave (perhaps even never behaves) in the relevant manner. So it may be enough that a person regularly or frequently has certain behavioural inclinations, emotional reactions, mental life, etc. for them to have this disposition even if they don’t act in the associated manner. In other words, such a disposition may be attributed on the basis of regular actual behaviour and/or of regular manifestation of the tendency to such behaviour and thoughts and emotional reactions typical of the character trait. However, in the absence of either the behaviour or the inclination, etc., a person cannot be said to have the disposition: someone who never behaves, nor has the inclination to behave in the relevant way, nor has the relevant emotions, thoughts, etc., does not have the relevant disposition, that is, the character trait.

I already anticipated this point in section 1, when I said that the attribution of a character trait to a person is conceptually dependent on the attribution of the corresponding motive to the person a sufficient number of times. That is, no person is generous who has never been motivated by generosity, or cowardly if she has not been motivated by cowardice. I am now refining that point by pointing out that a person may have a character trait even if she doesn’t display the relevant behaviour so long as she regularly has the relevant feelings, thoughts, emotions, etc.

Dispositions such as character traits are, in that sense, different from say, dispositions like fragility which can be attributed to an object despite the object’s never manifesting the disposition in any way: that is, never either breaking or otherwise manifesting the disposition. These dispositions may be attributed on the basis of knowledge of the kind an object is or the stuff it is made of, and may be so attributed even if they are never manifested by the particular object, and even if they are not manifested when the trigger conditions for the disposition obtain (or so it seems, since, as many have argued, dispositions can be finked or masked).²⁴

²⁴ Thus, Cross says:

But this is not true of character traits.

Note however that, while frequently or regularly behaving in the relevant manner is sufficient for the attribution of the character trait (i.e. the disposition), frequently or regularly having *the inclination* etc. to behave in that manner is not sufficient for the person to have the character trait.²⁵ A person who has the inclination to behave in the relevant way and has the associated thoughts, emotions, etc. but who does not actually behave thus may not have the disposition *if* the reason for the absence of the associated behaviour is *the agent herself*. Thus, it is possible for someone to have a tendency to cowardice and yet not be cowardly if she has the tendency to behave in a cowardly manner, and has the associated emotional reactions, mental life, etc. but she does not allow such inclinations to prevail: she herself *checks* those inclinations. So someone who is inclined to act cowardly but stands firm in the face of fear and the inclination to run away, dismisses the associated thoughts and images, does not allow the emotional reactions to determine how she acts, etc. is not a cowardly person, although she has the same inclinations as a cowardly person does.²⁶ Such a person does not have the character trait, though they may have *a disposition to having the character trait*.

This suggests that although what Ryle says about the predictive power of these dispositional statements is right, it does not exhaust their explanatory power, for the attribution of a character trait to the agent, which underlies the licence to the predictions etc. Ryle talks about, appears to add at least one more element to his regularity claims: it brings with it the idea that a person with such a disposition is such that certain forms of behaviour are *easier* for her, i.e. they require less effort of will etc., than the contrary behaviour (if the disposition is a vice) or than it would be without the disposition (if the latter is a virtue):²⁷ a mean person finds it easier to behave meanly than not to do so, just as a methodical person finds it easier to do things in a methodical way than a chaotic person.²⁸ And, consequently, suppressing the corresponding behaviour (in the case of a vice) requires some kind of effort and attention, and engaging in the corresponding behaviour (in the case of virtue) requires less effort than if one does not have the disposition.

This feature of character traits is related to the fact that the agent whose traits they are can check them and can (try to) change them by acting or trying to act on particular occasions contrary to the inclination concomitant to the character trait.²⁹ And if the effort is successful, the disposition may be weakened, lost and even reversed: one may gain the opposite

It's important to note that neither the activation conditions nor the manifestation conditions need ever actually occur in order for an object to have the disposition in question, and this lends dispositions their "suspicious" quality, for they seem to be inherently modal; they are by nature about the merely possible (2005, 322).

Though he talks about this is true of all dispositions, I do not think this is right for things such as character traits.

²⁵ To have a disposition to be mean or noisy is not the same as being mean or noisy: the former is a kind of second-order disposition.

²⁶ The difference between the person who has the character trait of say, cowardice, the person who has the tendency to cowardice but not the character trait, and the person who has the opposite character trait, namely courage, seem to correspond to the difference between the vicious, the continent, and the virtuous agents drawn by Aristotle.

²⁷ See Kenny, 1989, 85. 'Effort of will' is my term not Kenny's and it is meant to have its ordinary meaning here.

²⁸ And this seems to be a difference between a person who endeavours and (frequently) succeeds to behave according to a virtue but does not have the virtue (Aristotle's 'continent man' *enkratês*) and a person who does have it (the virtuous person): only the latter finds it easier to act in a virtuous manner than not to do so. And the same seems true of vices.

²⁹ I do not mean to say that an agent's choices is the only way in which such dispositions may be changed: there are many other ways, such as drills, physiological changes, etc.

disposition. For instance, an untidy person may gain the disposition to tidiness, and an irascible person may become more mellow.³⁰

Whether dispositions that are character traits should be thought of as the causes of acts that are their manifestations is, then, a point that seems to depend on the notion of cause one is operating with. Character traits are certainly not causes in the sense of being occurrences that trigger behaviour; but they are, we have seen, more than terms that denote regularities of behaviour: they seem, *pace Ryle*, to be causes in the sense of being conditions that involve a tendency or inclination to certain forms of behaviour, emotional reactions, etc. On the other hand, if they are causal conditions, they seem to be importantly different from causal conditions for the occurrence of events that don't involve human actions, for whether the occurrence (action, etc.) for which they are conditions comes about seems to be, at least in some cases, up to the agent, *even* when the triggering conditions obtain (see footnote 32 below).

What of the other type of explanation I mentioned at the beginning, which imputes a motive to an agent without imputing the corresponding character trait, such as (ii) above?

I suggested in section 1 that motive explanations bring an agent's reasons, aims and actions under a familiar pattern in a way that makes the action intelligible. Something like this idea is in fact to be found in *The Concept of Mind*, in, for example, the following passage:

The two statements 'the bird is flying south' and 'the bird is migrating' are both episodic reports. The question 'Why is the bird flying south?' could be answered quite properly by saying 'Because it is migrating'. Yet the process of migrating is not a different process from that of flying south; so it is not the cause of the bird's flying south. Nor, since it reports an episode, does the sentence 'because it is migrating' say the same sort of thing as is said in 'because it is a migrant' (142).

In a similar way we might say that to explain why John ran away by saying that he was being cowardly, or that Jill betrayed James because she was avenging the humiliation of her father, we are explaining an episode (running way, betraying) by re-describing it as an episode of another kind (cowardice, revenge). In other words, explanations by motives are, effectively, explanations by re-description. That is why Ryle says that the episode reported in the *explanans* (he was being a coward) is not the cause of the one reported in the *explanandum* (he ran away), since these are not distinct episodes but the same episode differently described.³¹

This, it seems, is consistent with Davidson's claim that explanations by motives point to, or imply, explanations by reasons and goals, or as he would put it, beliefs and desires, and that such explanations are causal in the ways he suggested in 'Actions, Reasons and Causes'. Whether Davidson is right about that is an issue that has been hotly debated for decades and it is interesting to note that opposition to that view of Davidson's has been growing in the twenty-first century. With that in mind, consider this passage of Ryle's:

we are perfectly familiar with the sorts of happenings which induce or occasion people

³⁰ The extent of, and limits to, the possibility for changing one's character traits is a complex issue well beyond the scope of this discussion.

³¹ This presumably is the passage Davidson had in mind when he says that the logical connection argument, in one of its forms, was inspired by Ryle's treatment of motives in the *Concept of Mind*. If so, it should be noted that Ryle's argument is not that the alleged cause and effect are not 'logically distinct' so they cannot be causally connected: his point is that they are not *ontologically* distinct as they are the same event or process differently described, and so could not be related as cause and effect.

to do things. If we were not, we could not get them to do what we wish, and the ordinary dealings between people could not exist. Customers could not purchase, officers could not command, friends could not converse, or children play, unless they knew how to get other people and themselves to do things at particular junctures (114).

This seems just another passage where Ryle accepts that actions can have ‘triggering’ events as causes. But it should be noted that the view Ryle expresses in this passage is consistent with the thought that the word ‘cause’ used to identify a triggering event given certain dispositions in people, though rightly applied there as is in cases of inanimate occurrences, has importantly different connotations in each case. For in the case of human actions, causing someone to act is often persuading, requesting, commanding, etc. them to act, while causing an inanimate object to do something (e.g. explode, bend, break, etc.) is never persuading, commanding, etc. it to do it. The reason for this is a central distinction between inanimate and human action: namely, that the latter but not the former can be the result of the agent’s *choice*.³²

Be that as it may, it seems that Ryle was right in holding that motive explanations are not causal explanations – even if, as Davidson claimed, they imply the existence of related causal explanations, and even if some of the reasons Ryle gives in defence of this claim are unconvincing because they depend, as I have tried to show, on a mistaken assimilation of motives to dispositions such as character traits.

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³² It is of course a hotly contested issue, at the heart of some aspects of the controversy about the compatibilism of freewill and determinism, whether choice can really make the difference that those who advocate a radical difference between explanations of human action and those of inanimate phenomena claim it does. That is beyond the scope of this paper: the point I am making is that, *prima facie*, the possibility of choice is a distinctive phenomenon characteristic of intentional action.

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