Debating the Break Between Consciousness and Behavior

Gilbert Ryle, Michael Scriven, and the Clash Between their Assumptions

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I pledge on my honor that I have not given or received any unauthorized (or unacknowledged) assistance on this assignment (or examination).

The contrast between consciousness and the way it is behaviorally manifested is a very fine one, so fine that Gilbert Ryle insists that it doesn't exist. He argues that the very essence of consciousness, what we mean by it, is only the collection of propensities and behavioral results that prove we are conscious and exhibit our statuses, such as "happy" or "talented". If one is happy, they will at some point in time show their happiness through their actions. Michael Scriven, on the other hand, argues that behavior is not representative of consciousness, because it is not a complete display. There are subtle aspects of consciousness that are not observed in behavior, and because of them there is a fundamental contradiction between consciousness and behavior.

Scriven argues that evidence of complex behavior is not evidence of consciousness by providing examples where behavior is observed but conscious is not. He brings up the analogy of a behaviorally complex anti-aircraft gun that is apparently not capable of being conscious. "The behavior of an anti-aircraft gun predictor system is more complex, organized and adaptive than that of seaweed, but it is certainly not more alive. The seaweed is biochemically, not behaviorally more complex"(233). Although the gun tracks its target's speed and distance, calculates where the target will be, and fires accordingly, the gun is obviously not conscious to Scriven. There is some aspect of consciousness that is not met by the "smart" gun's behavior. Although the seaweed is behaviorally inferior to the AA gun (it just sits there, really) it is closer to achieving consciousness because of all the biological action going on. Inherent in this point is one of Scriven's criterion for consciousness; something conscious must be alive. This criterion is not stated explicitly, but he seems to appeal to it in order to justify the complexity of seaweed as being superior to the AA gun.

He explains this "biological life" criterion by asserting that asking about consciousness of a machine straight away is an absurd question, because Scriven says it is improper to talk about a machine being conscious. Consciousness is a human attribute, and is applicable to a certain extent to other living things, but it absolutely not found in machines. Demonstrating a machine that responds as if it were conscious is pointless, because it is absurd to think of the machine as conscious:

> We know that the question of consciousness is proper with a man; what concerns us in the case of a machine is not this question, but the question whether this question can sensibly be asked. It is thus not appropriate to demonstrate that a machine is capable of passing tests that would establish its consciousness were it a man, we have not yet enquired whether a machine is essentially distinct from a man in *non-behavioral* respects, as far as they are relevant to the question of consciousness (231).

Asking about whether a machine is conscious based solely on behavioral observations is improper and invalid, because a machine is not alive, and by Scriven's definition, a being must be alive to be conscious.

However, Scriven does give other, more concrete reasons to explain why behavior is not an all-encompassing definition of consciousness, and is in fact only loosely related to it. He declares that the only way to determine all aspects of consciousness is through inner testing, or a "special" connection between one's public behaviors, like speech and body actions, and one's private mental behaviors:

> There can be no inner tests of *other* people's mental conditions and we must judge them from without, *if we can judge them at all*. We cannot always be certain [of a man's consciousness] from watching him or testing his behavior, he may be totally paralyzed and so never move, yet still be conscious; or he may walk and talk under radio control with an anesthetized brain, i.e. while really unconscious"(232).

Giving these examples of behaviors that are contradictory with consciousness seems to show that behavior does not necessarily prove consciousness. Scriven asserts that the relation between the two is one where consciousness is not necessitated, and therefore not always consistent with behavior. "Behavior is not attached to [the capability to be conscious] as thunder is to

lightening, nor as a sound to an echo… but only as pain is to torture. The one does not guarantee the other, but is guaranteed by it"(233).

To support his opinion that behavior is not everything that consciousness is, Scriven appeals to the special type of behavior known as acting. He reasons that although actors behave in one way, there must be something more going on because they do not act the way they really feel. There seems to be a conflict between the consciousness of an angry man and the consciousness of a happy man pretending to be angry. "There is no difference between the behavior of the robot and a conscious man, between that of the actor and an angry man. But the robot is not in fact conscious, just as the actor is not angry"(p. 236). He uses the conflict as a basis to show consciousness that is inconsistent with behavior, and uses it as grounds to disprove consciousness in a robot who would behaviorally be considered conscious.

Through these two points, it becomes clear that Scriven believes behavior to be an inadequate definition of consciousness; he says that there is more going on than behavior reveals. He feels justified by his life and actor arguments to say that observations of behavior that reflect consciousness are not actually observations of consciousness itself. We are not seeing consciousness; we only see a few of the many aspects and manifestations that consciousness makes up. Scriven argues that behavior is not the only aspect of consciousness; it is an incomplete representation of consciousness.

Ryle's response is not only that behavior is a wholesome representation of consciousness, but also that the aspects Scriven thinks are neglected are actually taken into account. He insists "It is simply the methodological question, how we establish, and how we apply, certain sorts of law-like propositions about the overt and the silent behavior of persons"(169). The interesting

portion of that, which Scriven seems to neglect and which is actually quite hard to grasp, is the silent portion of the behavior of persons. How can a person "behave" silently?

For most silent behaviors, Ryle determines these law-like propositions through a methodological series of tests. For example, to determine whether a student is lazy or not, you could give him an assignment. If he is lazy he will neglect it, turning it in half completed or not at all. If he is studious and diligent, the paper will be marked by steady attention and effort. The only way for the student himself to know is not to ask himself in some abstract, mental way, as Scriven suggests, but instead to undergo the same tests that the teacher would require. If he finds himself staying up till all hours of the night hard at work writing paper after paper, he convinces himself that he is in fact a good student. However, if he gives up easily, he knows that he is not hard working. This is the way he figures out his status; there is no way for himself to figure out his status except through the actions he performs.

To Ryle, there is no way to discover information, capabilities or opinions about one's self except for these methodological series of tests. Even if someone reports a "click" of comprehension that would appear to access this special connection through inner testing, Ryle dismisses that connection by appealing to common sense and a more fundamental, observable definition of consciousness.

> Even if you claimed that you had experienced a flash or click of comprehension and had actually done so, you would still withdraw your other claim to have understood the argument, if you found that you could not paraphrase it, illustrate, expand or recast it; and you would allow someone else to have understood it who could meet all examination-questions about it, but reported no click of comprehension"(170-171).

A click that would initially point to an innate connection between one's consciousness and one's mind is irrelevant, because that click would be meaningless and void if one's behavior did not demonstrate that they understood. Behavior is the determining factor in consciousness, because without behavior consciousness cannot be demonstrated.

Since there can't logically be anything more than what gets manifested by tests, because that which is not manifested is irrelevant, he concludes that consciousness itself is measured and based solely on behavior. "In short it is part of the *meaning* of 'you understood it' that you could have done so and so and would have done it, if such and such, and the *test* of whether you understood it is a range of performances satisfying the apodoses of these general hypothetical statements"(171). Ryle defines 'you understood it' in terms of its observable effects, the speech and creative use of language to form new ideas or paraphrase old ones. No matter who's consciousness is being observed, he believes that if it can't be observed, than it really doesn't have any effect on the world and there's no reason to believe that it exists. Even the silent behaviors that seem to be hidden can be observed at some point or another.

Analysis:

Scriven's arguments appeal to common sense, but don't necessarily support his points. He applies the biological criterion of life without being able to justify it. Scriven doesn't even make it clear that biology is an innate part of his definition of behavior, and he doesn't specify that his criticism of behavior is based on his biologic assumption. In order to justify the biological life criteria, one would have to appeal to a cosmic order of things, or preference of god, or some greater law in the universe that says only things that are alive can be conscious. This claim is presumptuous about the uniqueness of biological life. Life, the argument would go, is blessed for some reason; it is the holder of certain rights and obligations, one of them being consciousness, that nothing else can possess. These assumptions are not only egotistical and biased, but they are not obvious or otherwise entailed or supported. There is no way to logically prove that life is a criterion for consciousness.

Scriven's only defense is an opinion, not an argument. "It would be extremely surprising if the production of a [behaviorally conscious machine] were supposed to endow it with life"(233). Inherent in this statement is the belief that only living things can be conscious, and all others can only pretend to be fully conscious. A robot, even if it responds to stimuli appropriately, uses language productively and creatively, and exhibits other behaviors characteristic of consciousness could never really be conscious because he doesn't think it could ever truly be alive. He asserts that simply making the machine act alive does not give us grounds to believe that it is alive, but that is not supported by anything except his definition.

He believes that behavior neglects *obvious* aspects of consciousness. He doesn't describe what those aspects are, but he does acknowledge that they are reserved for biological, living beings. The key here is that Scriven's definition of life is arbitrary. Why does "life" have to be biological? Scriven doesn't explain this. If the definition of life were changed to something more general, comprised only of a description of what living things do, and didn't make reference to biology, then a machine could very well be considered alive, and therefore capable of consciousness.

Scriven does offer other objections to behaviorism besides the biologic criteria. His examples of the inconsistency between consciousness and behavior bring up interesting points but are not logically valid. For example, Scriven claims there is a break between consciousness and its manifestation by giving the example of a paralyzed man. Even though his actions show he's unconscious, he claims, he may in fact be conscious and simply be unable to communicate that to the observer. This is suspect, because there is no reason to think a man would be conscious while completely paralyzed. The only valid reason to suspect that the paralyzed man was conscious would be if he wakes from his paralysis and behaviorally tells people about his

conscious self, or acts a certain way because of his consciousness. Scriven doesn't look at a long enough time period when evaluating the connection between consciousness and behavior; the bit of consciousness the man had is simply a silent disposition that will be manifested after he wakes up. The man will act differently when he wakes from the paralysis if he was conscious than he would act if he were unconscious, so Scriven's alleged inconsistency is proven false.

It is this same shortsighted view that invalidates Scriven's argument of the actor. He is quite satisfied to show that at any given time, a person may not be depicting exactly what they are feeling or thinking in their actions. An actor, we'll call her Alice, may portray an aggravated, frustrated character on stage, but she may actually be exhilarated and fulfilled to be on stage, receiving attention and applause. Scriven argues that consciousness cannot be the same thing as behavior because Alice's behaviors have departed from her true, inner feelings. Although it is true that at any given moment, there may be a break between Alice's speech and the inner monologue going on in her head, there is a greater perspective that is lost by Scriven. After the show has ended and Alice is relaxing backstage, she will likely still be exhilarated and will act satisfied with her performance. She will give away her true position, again through her words and actions. The action of portraying an angry man will carry over to the behaviors of the person after the curtain comes down. Scriven concentrates only on the immediate discrepancy, and disregards that the actor will depict his true consciousness in an observable, behavioristic way, given enough time.

Ryle's counter arguments use the larger perspective that Scriven neglects, as well as using a logical criterion of tests to justify consciousness, as opposed to Scriven's biology. Ryle's denial of the connection between one's mind and behavior (the "click") is nicely supported, as it shows that behavior is the determining aspect of a person's status. If they claim something, their

claims must be supported by their behavior, not their special clicks. Even if, like Scriven suggests, a man is unconscious while he is physiologically unresponsive, he is still for all intents and purposes unconscious until he regains consciousness and begins acting as if he had been conscious while he was not responding.

The support of silent behavior manifesting itself is carried successfully to the actor. It shows just how much Ryle's belief in the behavior definition of consciousness is based on induction. He says that the way a person learns what "angry" entails is by seeing it around himself and seeing it within himself in the same way. People see "angry" so often that they know what it entails and how it makes them act. They don't observe the mystical aspects of consciousness that Scriven puts forth, so when they refer to consciousness there is no way to refer to them if the definition is based on induction. Therefore, one knows how an actor acts, or at least the general types of things an actor does, such as not saying what they truly feel, by acting oneself or by being around actors. Ryle argues that is all one needs to figure out who is acting or not, at least in the greater perspective of things and over a long period of time. An actor betrays his emotions in later behavioristic actions, and one knows that is true of actors. If he isn't inconsistent and doesn't betray those emotions, he might as well not be acting.

> So sometimes we can, and sometimes we cannot, detect hypocrisies; but even when we cannot, we know what sorts of extra clues, if we could secure them, would betray the hypocrite. To establish hypocrisy… is an inductive task which differs from the ordinary inductive tasks of assessing motives and capacities only in being a second order induction (174).

This effectively denies Scriven's accusation that we can never know about actors or hypocrisies, because we know what to look for and how to detect them. We know how to test a person's true consciousness, even if they're acting, by this second order induction. With the actor successfully defended, Ryle has made a good, logical case, even though he has not completely assured his audience that all of Scriven's criteria are covered by behavior.

Response:

The biggest contrast between the two is the question of knowing the mental capabilities of another person. Scriven says that it's not possible, "there can be no inner tests of *other* people's mental conditions and we must judge them from without"(232). However, this is unsubstantiated and not supported. Why can't there be tests? Scriven doesn't tell us. He seems to assume that other people's mental conditions are the sorts that just can't be tested, but he doesn't explain that in detail. In contrast, Ryle's opinion that tests be performed to determine all kinds of information, whether it be about oneself or not, is much more logical. I can see how that information would be obtained, which seems to disprove Scriven. In the end, the argument between Scriven and Ryle comes down to definitions.

Scriven has pre-defined his notion of consciousness as one that extends beyond behavior. He disagrees with Ryle not because Ryle asserts an incorrect statement, but because Ryle's statements are incomplete. Ryle, conversely, considers both the behavioristic and non-behavioristic properties of consciousness and concludes, thorough a series of well argued points, that everything involved with consciousness has a behavioristic manifestation in the real world. Behavior is all that is meant by consciousness and nothing more. He goes about showing the virtue of behavioristic consciousness, really by induction. He says "it is enough" to look at the behavioristic side of things, because everything that is a deeper aspect of consciousness, whether or not it is mental like Scriven suggests, still gets incorporated into behavioristic actions. He doesn't deny Scriven's point, but he shows that it is irrelevant to the question of consciousness. If a machine acts conscious, it can be conscious, because there are no aspects of consciousness that aren't manifested in consciousness.

I tend to agree more with Ryle, if only because his argument of a methodological series of tests seem to be a critical blow to Scriven's special connection. However, I don't really see how Ryle protects himself from Scriven's claim that he is limiting consciousness too severely. Unfortunately for Scriven, he doesn't explain any hidden aspects of consciousness besides biological life, and I don't agree with him on the biological criterion for life, so I tend to lean, though not completely, with Ryle in believing that consciousness is shown through behavior.

Ryle, Gilbert. The Concept of Mind London: Hutchinson & Co. 1949

Scriven, Michael. "The Mechanical Concept of a Mind" Mind, New Series, 62 (246) (April, 1953)