

# Ryle and the Immediacy of First-Person Authority

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**Abstract** This paper is an endeavor to discuss Gilbert Ryle’s philosophy of mind in convergence with some contemporary debates, particularly the “immediacy” debate of first-person authority. An attempt has been made to show that Ryle’s thought when analyzed through the prism of immediacy debate of first-person authority also seems to claim and endorse first-person authority.

**Keywords** First-person authority · Self-knowledge · Self · Other · Immediacy

## Introduction

Self-knowledge has been an important concern to philosophers of various traditions ever since the Greek period. From the *know thyself* slogan of Socrates, through the Cartesian *cogito ergo sum* to the Husserlian notion of “subjectivity as the wonder of wonders,”<sup>1</sup> self-knowledge has been in one way or the other one of the main concerns of philosophy. The nature, scope, and extent of self-knowledge have been under philosophical scrutiny and consideration. What makes self-knowledge remarkable is that we, human beings, have an immediate and direct knowledge of our minds or mental states, which gives self-knowledge a privileged status over knowledge of external objects. For the immediacy in knowing one’s mental states without a subject–object bifurcation not only makes such knowledge epistemically “distinctive” but also privileged.

Gilbert Ryle’s philosophical thought has mainly been considered as denying first-person authority. The usual reading of Ryle is that he negates the conception of any special first-person authority by arguing that our access to the contents of our own minds has no special privilege over our access to the contents of others’ minds.<sup>2</sup> This

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<sup>1</sup>Mrinal Kanti Bhadra (2004) in his book *A Critical Survey of Phenomenology and Existentialism*, on page 29 claims that Husserl called consciousness by this name as it was for him a central mystery that a thing in the world exists as a being that is aware of its own being and other beings.

<sup>2</sup>One such reading can be found in the book, *The World Without, the Mind Within: An Essay on First-Person Authority* by Andre Gallois (2008). In the chapter titled Scepticism about first-person authority, Gallois considers Ryle as one of the main defenders of the position which states, “that we lack first-person authority over, and non-contingent privileged access to our propositional attitudes.” (on p.37)

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paper is an effort to argue that despite not holding first-person authority overtly, Ryle's philosophical thought can be seen as one endorsing a sort of first-person authority in similarity with some contemporary debates on the issue, particularly, the "immediacy" debate. The paper is thus an initiative to bring Ryle in dialogue with the contemporary philosophical narratives on first-person authority, while keeping the core of his thought intact. For this purpose, I will, in the first section of this paper, offer a brief overview of self-knowledge and first-person authority as has been held traditionally. I will then try to arrive at the immediacy view of first-person authority held by contemporary philosophers of mind, such as Donald Davidson. The next section of this paper will try to discuss Ryle's view on self-knowledge in opposition to the epistemic distinctiveness and introspective method held by Cartesian philosophy regarding self-knowledge. The final section will try to argue that Ryle's philosophy of mind, too, seems to be granting an ascendance to self-knowledge by holding the notion of "difference of a degree and not of a kind."

### Towards a Definition of First-Person Authority

Self-knowledge is the knowledge one possesses about their particular mental states such as desires, emotions, and pains. It has traditionally been held that self-knowledge is "infallible" and "incorrigible," since one can never be wrong about one's mental states. The Cartesian philosophy of mind states that we have a special and privileged access to our own minds. By infallibility and incorrigibility, the Cartesians emphasize the point that one can never be mistaken about the knowledge of one's mind (or its contents). Descartes, while employing methodological doubt to arrive at epistemic certainty, put forth the maxim of *cogito ergo sum*. From a first-person perspective, he argues that the only thing he cannot doubt is the act of his doubting. He argues that this not only makes him sure of his existence but also that he is a thinking being. Since doubting and thinking are two different types of mental states, Descartes, thus theorizes that one is necessarily certain about one's mental states. Descartes writes,

I have convinced myself that there is absolutely nothing in the world, no sky, no earth, no minds, no bodies. Does it now follow that I too do not exist? No.... But there is a deceiver of supreme power and cunning who is deliberately and constantly deceiving me...let him deceive me as much as he can, he will never bring it about that I am nothing so long as I think that I am something. So after considering everything very thoroughly, I must finally conclude that this proposition, *I am, I exist*, is necessarily true whenever it is put forward by me or conceived in my mind.<sup>3</sup>

Contemporary debates on the problem of self-knowledge, however, do not necessarily rely on the infallibility or incorrigibility criterion. It has been argued that there is a possibility of failure in self-knowledge, as in the case of self-deception. Immediacy and transparency of self-knowledge have thus replaced this traditional view. The

<sup>3</sup> Descartes, Rene, (Med. 2, AT 7:25), quotation taken from "<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/descartes-epistemology/#4.1>" retrieved on 2012.03.11

immediacy view of self-knowledge holds that basic forms of self-knowledge are immediate in the sense that they are not based on inference, observation, or any sort of empirical evidence.<sup>4</sup> Donald Davidson, being one of the philosophers holding such a view, argues that this immediacy gives self-knowledge an epistemically distinctive character over other forms of knowledge. He argues that one does not need evidence or observation to find out one's thoughts or mental states. Evidence, even if present, is seldom used and a person usually knows what he or she is thinking about before acting or speaking. Davidson emphasizes that it is this feature of self-knowledge which makes it immune to the failings to which knowledge based on evidence or observation is subject. He holds that this also gives self-knowledge the "special weight" and authority which no other type of knowledge can have. He writes,

Because we usually know what we believe without needing or using evidence . . . our avowals concerning our present states of mind are not subject to failings of conclusions based on evidence. Thus sincere first-person present tenses claims about thoughts . . . have an authority no second or third person claim . . . can have. (Davidson 1987)

The authority, which Davidson talks about here is "the first-person authority" (FPA) regarding self-knowledge. FPA in simplest terms means that our self-attributions are not in any case open to challenge by others and that we have a sort of "default authority" over our mental states and self-ascriptions. The notion of first-person authority even holds that if one's self-ascription regarding their mental states is "in doubt, or a challenge is proper, the person with the attitude speaks about it with special weight (Davidson 2001)." While making asymmetry as the basis of first-person authority (in opposition to some philosophers like Ryle, Agassi etc.), Davidson argues that the asymmetry does not lie in the possession of a special way of knowing one's own mental states. The asymmetry, rather, lies in the concepts of meaning and interpretation. Arguing that a speaker can be wrong regarding the meaning of her spoken words (and that is one of the reasons why FPA is not infallible), Davidson asserts that the speaker would still have privileged access to the contents of her own mind because she would know the meaning of her own utterances in a way that she wouldn't know the meaning of others' utterances. On the other hand, an interpreter of a speaker's sentences has to take the sentence of the speaker as "his best way" to ascertain the meaning of the sentence. Thus, while shifting the focus on meaning and interpretation, Davidson gleans the concept of first-person authority in terms of the immediate accessibility that a speaker has with regard to her beliefs and desires which a person interpreting her does not possess. "The asymmetry," Davidson writes, "rests on the fact that the interpreter must, while the speaker doesn't, rely on what, if it were made explicit, would be a difficult inference in interpreting the speaker."<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> This type of shift in the views about self-knowledge has been held by Quassim Cassam (1994) in his book, *Self-knowledge* in which he talks about the epistemological distinctiveness of self-knowledge in contemporary debates.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. p. 13

## Ryle on Self-knowledge

Ryle, while questioning the Cartesian concept of mind, argued that the dichotomy of mind and body as two different entities is redundant and illusive. He asserted that Cartesian metaphysics, while taking mind to be a sort of “ghost in machine” slips into a “category mistake”; in that it ascribes properties to mind (as an entity which it does not possess) and “represents the facts of mental life as if they belonged to one logical type or category . . . when they actually belong to other (Ryle 1955a).” Ryle, while challenging this Cartesian notion, argues that such kind of entity-ism has given mind a “twofold privileged” place over the body. One is that mental states reside in the mind which is a “private stage” different from the body—which is a part of the physical world. The other is that one’s access to this private stage is immune to error as the method one uses to know these states is a special non-sensuous inner perception called “introspection.” Ryle argues that it is this method which has made self-knowledge superior in quality than the knowledge about bodily states and the physical world. By taking a behavioristic stance,<sup>6</sup> Ryle attempted to decentralize the superiority and privilege enjoyed by the mind. He argued that the functions of mind and body are not distinct from each other and that knowledge about the inner states is not attained by some special method. Ryle notes, “[t]he sorts of things that I can find about myself are the same as the sort of things that I can find about other people and the method of finding them out are much the same.”<sup>7</sup> Dubbing the traditional introspective method as a muddle, he goes on to argue that knowing our minds is in turn knowing the outer world and thus the privileged access to our mental states does not carry any weight. What has been named as introspection is originally retrospection, and there is nothing private or secretive about this retrospective method of knowing. This brings about a demolition of mind/body dualism which has its roots in Cartesian substance metaphysics, thus, in turn, reducing the mental and the physical to a single entity. Ryle writes, “[i]n the same way that I can catch myself daydreaming, I can catch myself scratching; in the same way that I can catch myself engaged in a piece of silent soliloquy, I can catch myself saying something loud.”<sup>8</sup>

Ryle thus (if we recall Davidson’s arguments for first-person authority) negates the existence of any kind of asymmetry between the knowing of one’s public acts and mental states. Instead, he approaches the problem by arguing that the privileged access notion regarding self-knowledge is based on the fact that we are generally better placed to know or “catch” our mental states than the others around us. He argues that the difference between the data required for knowing one’s own mental states and the data

<sup>6</sup> Though Ryle has been dubbed as a behaviorist, contemporary philosophers hold that he was not one. For he does not subscribe to any of the main tenets associated with that doctrine as it is known today and that he does not like the radical behaviorists (e.g., Skinner) deny the existence of mental processes of this kind. Julia Taney in an essay on Ryle in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy suggests that Ryle cannot be dubbed as a radical Behaviorist. He writes that A.J. Ayer in a critical essay on Ryle’s *The Concept of Mind* goes against the traditional reading of Ryle as behaviorist by showing that Ryle at various places in his book “allows the existence of inner mental life.” Taney, however, comments that whether or not Ryle was a behaviorist is an ongoing debate (Source Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, retrieved on 2012.03.12). Taney repeats this position in an article titled “Rethinking Ryle: A Critical Discussion on The Concept of Mind” (see page x–xi) in the 60th anniversary edition of Ryle’s *The Concept of Mind*.

<sup>7</sup> Ryle, G. (1955). *The concept of mind* (p. 155). London: Hutchinson’s University Library.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. p.166

required for knowing other's mental states forms the foundation of one's being "in a very good position to know" one's mental states. It is the difference between the requirement of such data that creates "a difference of a degree" and "not of a kind" as has been asserted by tradition philosophers. Ryle calls this difference in data access a "residual difference." In this context, he writes:

But the differences are differences of a degree, not of a kind. The superiority of the speaker's knowledge of what he is doing over that of listener does not indicate that he has a privileged access to facts of a type inevitably inaccessible to the listener, but only that he is in a very good position to know what the listener is often in a very position to know.<sup>9</sup>

### Finding First-Person Authority in Ryle

From the preceding sections, it can be inferred that Ryle is not conforming to any sort of privileged access for first-person authority in terms of epistemic distinctiveness and specialty of method. Ryle just criticizes such accounts, and in the process, ends up formulating a new theory regarding the concept of mind. While negating the traditional accounts in a rather different manner, he privileges self-knowledge from the knowledge of the other which can well be considered under the frame of immediacy of self-knowledge. Similar to him, Davidson also does not base his arguments regarding first-person authority on some special method; they stand on the same plane. The main difference between the two is that while Davidson grounds first-person authority on asymmetry, Ryle outright negates any such viewpoint.

However, a close reading of Ryle suggests that he too, while not conforming to the Davidsonian thesis of asymmetry, ascribes some sort of superiority to the knowledge of one's own mental states. Since Ryle does not negate the existence of mental states and their privacy, he resists the label of a behaviorist (see note 10). However, while calling the difference *a difference of degree than of a kind*, he also seems to assign *"a privilege of degree than of a kind"* to self-knowledge. Ryle writes, "[a] person's knowledge about himself and others may be distributed between many roughly distinguishable grades yielding correspondingly numerous roughly distinguishable senses of 'knowledge'."<sup>10</sup> It is in the light of this distinction between the senses of knowledge regarding oneself and the other that demands a holding of self-knowledge as superior and authoritative. Knowing my mental states in a more immediate manner or in a more specified manner than the others is what Davidson and other contemporary philosophers hold as essential for FPA. The difference of a degree, argued by Ryle under the "residual difference" can be said to arise from an immediacy that other persons do not have with regard to my mental states. One's "good position" to know their mental states in opposition to the "very

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. p.179

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. p. 180

poor position” of others to know them can well accommodate “immediacy of a degree” rather “of a kind” to allow for the authority and weight which self-knowledge carries. After all, it is superiority or privilege that designates self-knowledge as authoritative, and, various perspectives have granted this superiority to self-knowledge. For the traditionalist, this superiority was granted by the specialty of method; for Ryle, from a difference of a degree and for Davidson, from the asymmetry arising out of meaning and interpretation. All of these views seem to be right in what they assert but wrong in what they deny.

Ryle also supports the distinctiveness of self from the other by holding to the concept of non-parallelism between the notions of “I” and “you.” This non-parallelism not only helps him to explain the differences between “I” and “you” but also throws light on the immediacy one has with respect to one’s mental states. While bringing the concept of “higher order actions,” Ryle argues that in our normal behavior, some sort of actions are directed towards (both directly and indirectly) other actions so that, “the performance of the former involves the thought of the latter.”<sup>11</sup> The actions that are thus directed towards other actions are called “higher order actions” and the actions towards which they are directed as “lower order actions.”<sup>12</sup> They are related in such a way that any mention of higher order actions incorporates the description of its corresponding lower order act, while any mention of the lower act is free from any such incorporation with the higher order action. Thus, the higher order action of an agent involves, but is not itself involved in, the corresponding lower order action with which it is concerned. An agent can perform a higher order act by commenting on what she has done or what she is currently doing. But in no way can her commenting be the higher order action of itself. “A higher order action cannot be the action upon which it is performed,”<sup>13</sup> writes Ryle. This precisely is the difference. My current mental states (or the higher order action that I am currently performing) cannot themselves be lower order actions towards which they themselves are directed. For they really are what I am doing now, writing this paper, looking out from the window, thinking about FPA, etc. I am too near or “immediate” to them that any attempt to comment upon them takes me to the next rung of the ladder. It is this next rung of the ladder which becomes the higher order act directed towards the previous one. This specifically is the reason that one can easily describe one’s “yesterday’s self” but not “today’s,” and this explains the non-parallelism between “I” and “you” too. According to Ryle,

[M]y last year’s self, or my yesterday’s self could in principle be exhaustively described and accounted for, and that your past or present self could be

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. p.191

<sup>12</sup> Ryle also talks about higher order and lower order actions in his article “*Courses of Action or the Uncatchableness of Mental Acts*” published by Philosophy journal in July 2000. Ryle also calls lower order actions as *infra*-actions and higher order actions as *supra*-project.

<sup>13</sup> Ryle, G. (1955). *The concept of mind* (p. 195). London: Hutchinson’s University Library.

exhaustively described and accounted for by me, but that my today's self perpetually slips out of any hold of it that I try to take.<sup>14</sup>

This specifically is the “systematic elusiveness” of self according to Ryle.<sup>15</sup> The systemic illusiveness of the self is directly focused on negating the privileged access doctrines of traditional theories. For Ryle, one's present self is elusive because any attempt to introspect upon one's present mental states is bound to change the nature of actions itself—from higher order actions to lower order actions. Let me give an example: While writing this paper, I am continuously thinking about my pet's bad health. Here then my act of thinking is a higher order action directed towards my pet (lower order action). According to Ryle, the moment I introspect upon my thinking, it transforms into a lower order action while my present act of introspective thinking becomes a higher order action. This is one of the reasons why Ryle argues that introspection is actually an authentic process of retrospection.<sup>16</sup> However, this is not the whole story. Ryle does not elaborate the role of higher order actions and lower order actions and keeps them limited to his critique of introspection. One needs to ask the reasons for the systemic elusiveness of self while inquiring into its relation with immediacy. My present “I” eludes my descriptive/introspective act because any attempt to describe or give an account of it will distance me from the immediacy that “I” and my current mental states enjoy. The situation is similar to that of a person and her shadow, where she is unable to jump upon the shadow. Just as I cannot separate myself from my shadow, I cannot separate myself from my present states. Any attempt to describe my mental states will lead to a break in the immediacy which my mental states and present self enjoy. I simultaneously maintain this immediacy, and I am never ahead or behind my current mental states or (in other words) my today's/present self. I never succeed in jumping on my shadow for it is always with me though I am never a jump behind. It is this immediacy—and not any immediacy via epistemic distinctiveness—which becomes essential for the first-person authority regarding self-knowledge, for which I am arguing in this paper.

A Rylean might oppose my position and argue that to use immediacy as the ground to claim Ryle's implicit acceptance of first-person authority would be to misread his position on self-knowledge. He might (for example) argue that Ryle calls the self as elusive only to show that self-knowledge is impossible. However, this is where the Rylean misses the point. I am not developing the idea of “difference of a degree, not of a kind” and the “elusiveness of self” into an account/interpretation of self-knowledge by deconstructing Ryle's view. Rather, my main aim is to argue that even within a Rylean framework, his position can be re-read from the vantage point of the immediacy thesis of self-knowledge. Second, Ryle's view has not been against self-knowledge in toto. Rather, his whole

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. p.196.

<sup>15</sup> I am following I. T. Ramsey while dealing with the systematic elusiveness of “I” and “self” here. He ventures to describe the systematic elusiveness of self from Ryle's view on elusiveness of “I” and almost uses “I” and “self” synonymously. He writes, “‘I’ is elusive, but as systematically elusive the elusiveness of I is no more than the elusiveness of an infinite series to a term by term enumeration. There is no more to it than that. The elusiveness of the self is just the point that we have never completed our self-description....” For more, see Ramsey (1955). Let me mention that in response to Ryle, Ramsey argues that the elusiveness is “nothing but a temporal delay” which is problematic as Ryle is concerned with an epistemological (and not any temporal) delay. A philosophical dissection of Ramsey's response is outside the scope of this paper.

<sup>16</sup> Ryle, G. (1955). *The concept of mind* (p. 166). London: Hutchinson's University Library.



philosophical enterprise including the notion of systemic elusiveness of one's present self was to forward a critique of a particular notion of self-knowledge, which he calls "the official doctrine." His main aim was to challenge the theories endorsing epistemic distinctiveness and specialty of method regarding self-knowledge. As he writes;

I am not, of course, trying to establish that we do not or cannot know what there is to know about ourselves. On the contrary, I shall try to show how we attain such knowledge, but only after I have proved that this knowledge is not attained by consciousness or introspection, as these supposed Privileged Accesses are normally described.<sup>17</sup>

Ryle, thus, calls the self elusive only to show that a particular view regarding self-knowledge is a muddle. My position is that Ryle's position—while being critical of the "hallowed para-optical model"—can also be (re)interpreted as privileging self-knowledge from the knowledge of the other. It is for this reason that Ryle, throughout the section on self-knowledge, keeps bringing and introducing concepts such as "residual difference," "difference of a degree, not of a kind," and "elusiveness" of my present self.<sup>18</sup> However, Ryle does not attempt any elaboration on the need to bring in these concepts. The paper attempts to move further from the traditional reading of Ryle—as a behaviorist and an opponent of first-person authority—and endeavors to view him in the light of some contemporary philosophical debates. Ryle and the contemporary philosophers of mind seem to be toeing the same line regarding the question of self-knowledge. I have just endeavored to offer one such correspondence between the two.

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid. p. 155.

<sup>18</sup> Apart from these concepts, Ryle offers some nuanced examples—apart from those mentioned in the main text of this paper—to pinpoint (without any further critical exploration) the superiority of self-knowledge in comparison to the knowledge of other. He offers the example of catching "myself swearing" which is not the same as catching "you swearing." He also offers the example of a boy performing a mathematical sum and a boy checking his sum, where the boy performing the sum "differs only in degree of alertness, caution and sophistication from the boy who checks his results." The problem is that Ryle instead of elaborating these examples remains committed to his critique of official doctrine.