

THINKING - A POLYMORPHOUS CONCEPT

SUMAN MEHTA

In this paper I wish to examine Ryle's characterization of the concept of thinking as a polymorphous concept, the characterization found in his paper¹ "Thinking and Language" (TL). I shall first see what Ryle means by speaking of *thinking*, that is, the concept of thinking, as a polymorphous concept and, then, how this view is similar to Wittgenstein's² characterization of the concept of game in terms of "family resemblance" rather than as an essence common to all the games. Ryle's position may be first elucidated by distinguishing polymorphous concept, as characterized by him, from (a) generic concepts, (b) concepts associated with adverbial verbs, and (c) some other non-polymorphous concepts. Towards the close of the paper I shall try to show that:

(i) Ryle overlooks a few important forms of thinking while elucidating a feature of polymorphous concepts.

(ii) Ryle's characterization of polymorphous concept in TL does not provide an adequate criterion for including a concept in, or excluding it from, the class of polymorphous concepts.

(iii) These observations pave the way for attempts to answer the question, which Ryle claims to be unanswerable, the question : What does *thinking* consist of?

To begin with, there are several processes to which the word 'thinking' is applied, e.g. dreaming, calculating, composing a poem, etc. Some psychologists, like Dewey³, classify the processes as follows.

1) The uncontrolled stream of consciousness is sometimes called

'thinking'. For example, in day-dreaming it is just the occurrence of several ideas without a specific subject-matter. Such thinking is automatic and uncontrolled.

2) The kind of thinking that consists in giving a serious consecutive consideration to the subject is called 'reflective thinking'. That is, it "involves not simply a sequence - a consecutive ordering in such a way that each determines the next as its proper outcome."⁴

3) Another application of 'thinking' limits it to things not sensed or directly perceived, as in imaginative stories.

4) 'Thinking' is sometimes taken to be practically synonymous with 'belief'. For example, 'I think she will come tomorrow'. There is, however, no indication in such a case that the belief is well founded.

It is reflective thinking in which we are actively involved. We give active, persistent and careful consideration to some idea.

However, reflective thinking is not the paradigm of thinking. Each one can independently be characterized. For example, believing is accepting a proposition as true, imagining usually involves forming images in mind, and so on. Here the following question crops up: what makes us apply the same word to different *kinds* of activities (or things) covered by a concept like *thinking*? Usually we look for an element, which may be common to various activities (or things). For, it is our natural tendency to classify things and identify them - even a child or a deaf and dumb adult can recognize some types of events/things encountered again. Similarly, we tend to look for an element, which may be common to various activities, covered by *thinking* and would provide the definiens for 'thinking'. Ryle cautions against this tendency. He points out that it may not be possible to formulate a simple definition of 'thinking', which would cover each one of various forms of thinking. For though one or more elements may be common to some forms, there is no element which is common to all. One form of thinking, say, imagining, may occur only in one's mind in the sense that it may occur in one's mind without thereby anything being manifested to others. Another may be performed outwardly and not merely in mind. An architect, for example, may be thinking of the design for a building by arranging and rearranging, say, cubes on the table. One form of thinking

may aim at truth and another may not: pondering usually does while writing a piece of fiction usually does not. Only a single step may be sufficient in some form whereas a number of steps may be required in another: for instance believing in the existence of something may sometimes require no more than a look at the object, whereas calculating or proving usually requires going through a number of steps.

Denying even a single element as something common to all the activities that constitute various forms of thinking is the very first point in Ryle's analysis of the concept of thinking.

There is no general answer to the question "What does thinking consist of?" There are hosts of widely different sorts of toilings and idlings, engaging in any one of which is thinking. Yet there need be nothing going on in one of them, such that something else of the same species or genus must be going on in another of them.⁵

The concept of thinking, according to Ryle, shares this feature with the concepts of gardening, working, etc.

Two men may both spend their leisure hours in gardening without one of them doing any of the things that the other does. Conversely, the professional footballer at work does a great number of things very similar to things done by the amateur footballer who is not working but playing. There are no ingredient activities common and peculiar to gardening or to working - or to thinking.⁶

Ryle regards this feature as a distinguishing feature of concepts like *thinking*, *working*, *farming*, *housekeeping* etc. which he calls polymorphous concept. He claims that it would be futile to find an element common to various activities covered by a polymorphous concept. For, it is not just a difficult task, but an impossible one, it would be like "isolating something which is not there to isolate"⁷.

In order to understand this position, let us first consider the relatively simpler polymorphous concept of housekeeping before considering the concepts of working and thinking. There are various activities engaging in any one of which is housekeeping. For example, activities like cleaning, keeping things at proper places, etc. done at home are called forms of housekeeping but if done at, say, hospital, or college, are not called so. It

doesn't, however, mean that any activity done at home is a form of housekeeping. My reading at home, doing any professional work at home, and various other activities may not be counted as forms of housekeeping. That is, with regard to certain activities their being done at home is a necessary condition in order to be counted as housekeeping, but this does not suffice to make them housekeeping activities since they can be engaged elsewhere as much as at home.

Some polymorphous concepts, like *working* and *thinking*, not only cover an indefinitely large number of activities, but, what is even more important, the 'circumstances' in which these activities occur admit of enormous variations.

Some sorts of work are done with some sorts of tools. other with other sorts --- some sorts of work are done with special materials. like string or Carrara marble. But --- some work does not require materials at all --- Not all work is for pay, not all work is unpleasant. not all work is tiring -- There need be no action, inner or overt performed. by the policeman on his beat, which he may not also perform when strolling round the same street when his work is over.⁸

All these observations suggest that it is not even possible to lay down strict conditions about the 'circumstances' in which specifiable activities must occur in order to count as forms of a specified polymorphous concept. What is covered here by the blanket term 'circumstances' includes such widely different things as intention, experience, rules, etc. Ryle makes similar observations about the concept of thinking.

The verbal noun 'thinking' does not--- denote a special or proprietary activity in the way in which 'singing' does. Thinking is not one department in a department store, such that we can ask what line of goods it provides, and what lines of goods does it, ex officio, not provide? Its proper place is in all the departments ---⁹

Polymorphous concept may be contrasted with generic concept. A generic concept is similar to a polymorphous concept in so far as it is not confined to one species. Just as a polymorphous concept, say, *working* covers various activities like running, singing etc. as its forms, a generic concept, say, *perceiving* covers various species like seeing, hearing, smelling etc. However, as White points out :

a species necessarily implies its genus, whereas that (an activity) whose form a polymorphous concept takes on one occasion need not on another occasion be the form of this or, perhaps, of any other polymorphous concept.¹⁰

The relation between a genus, say, perceiving and its species is such that each species implies its genus. That is, not only does one usually perceive by seeing, hearing, etc. but one just cannot see, hear, etc. without thereby perceiving. But though a polymorphous concept covers a number of activities, none of them is always a 'form' or case of that concept. For instance, gardening when done for pay is a form of the polymorphous concept of working, but when it is done just for the sake of recreation or for spending leisure time is usually not counted as a form of working. Thus gardening does not imply working whereas seeing/hearing implies perceiving.

Generic concepts may be distinguished from some other non-polymorphous concept, which we may call specific-activity concepts. Unlike a generic concept a specific-activity concept does not have species. As mentioned earlier, one of the conditions for an activity, say X, to be a polymorphous activity is this: engaging in one or other of a number of heterogeneous activities can be engaging in the activity X. Consider for example, a polymorphous activity of farm-work

there are hundreds of widely differing operations, including apple-picking, to be occupied in any one of which is to be doing farm work.¹¹

Engaging in a specific activity, on the other hand, is engaging in an activity, e.g. giving a blow, or engaging in one (or more) of a few activities which are related in some way, e.g. boxing. One can make out as to what its ingredients are and how they are connected.

Let us now distinguish a polymorphous concept from a concept associated with an adverbial verb. Adverbial verbs include verbs like 'to hurry', 'to obey', 'to attend', 'to rehearse' etc. Adverbial verbs, according to Ryle, are verbs, which we could easily be tempted into mistakenly treating as verbs of *doing*. They may well be called pseudoverbs. The common feature of all these pseudoverbs is that there are no independently specifiable activities, which they could be said to stand for. Ryle observes that

there is and can be no such thing as, for example, just obeying *per se* ---
 Something positive or concrete must be being done ---¹²

This observation may be elaborated as follows :

(1) A pseudoverb may be said to stand for a pseudoactivity the occurrence of which requires some or other activity, which may well be called its co-activity. For example, in order that the pseudoactivity of obeying may occur one would have to indulge in some activity, to do something specific, even if in the negative sense of abstaining from doing something as in keeping silent.

(2) Any activity can be a co-activity of a pseudoactivity. There is, for instance, no activity, which cannot be the co-activity of obeying. The fact that paradoxical commands may be incapable of being obeyed does not affect the relationship between obeying and its co-activities.

(3) Perhaps no activity is solely the co-activity of a specific pseudoactivity. The description of the occurrence of an activity does not, therefore, allow the inference of the occurrence of a specific pseudoactivity. An activity like opening a door may occur independently of any command and it would then not be a case of obeying, i.e., a co-activity of the pseudoactivity of obeying.

Ryle's explanation of the use of 'to think' at some place seems to be similar to his explanation of the use of 'adverbial verbs'. Since Ryle elsewhere speaks of the concept of thinking as a polymorphous concept, one may tend to assimilate polymorphous concept to the concepts associated with adverbial verbs. This tendency may be reinforced by Ryle's consideration of the concept of attending as a concept associated with an adverbial verb and also as a polymorphous concept. In the chapter "Adverbial Verbs and Verbs of Thinking" in his book *On Thinking* he includes 'to attend' in the class of adverbial verbs while in his article "Pleasure" he says:

the general point that I am trying to make is that the notion of 'attending' or 'giving one's mind to' is a polymorphous notion.¹³

Here we may cite a case where this tendency of assimilating two categories of concepts is clearly manifested. White in his book *Attention* considers concepts like *obeying*, *repeating*, etc. as polymorphous concept.

However, Ryle might not consider these concepts as polymorphous concept. For, he emphasizes that it is not possible to give an answer to the question: What does thinking (or working) consist of? But though a pseudoactivity concept covers a number of activities as its co-activities, each pseudoactivity does admit of an answer to the question: what does it consist of? For instance, to obey is to follow someone's command/s. These concepts may, therefore, be excluded from the class of polymorphous concept.

We may now compare Ryle's account of *thinking* with Wittgenstein's account of *game*. Wittgenstein, like Ryle, denies that there is, or must be, an element common to various forms of a general concept, common to all the cases to which a general word applies. That is, a general word, e.g. 'game' or 'language' does not justify a search for some common characteristic/s shared by all the things to which the word applies. The word 'game', for example, covers or applies to card games, ball games, games that require physical exercises, games that require mental exercises, etc. etc.

Look for example at board-games, with their multifarious relationships. Now pass to card games, here you find many correspondences with the first group, but many common features drop out and others appear. When we pass next to ball-games, much that is common is retained, but much is lost.¹⁴

It may be noted that Ryle himself draws an analogy between the concept of thinking and the concept of game in his article "Thinking".

To look for some common and peculiar ingredients of all thinking is like looking for an ingredient common and peculiar to cat's cradle, hide - and - seek, billiards, snap and all the other things which we call 'games'.¹⁵

So, if it is asked as to what is common to all these activities, the answer would be that there is no single quality, which is common to all.

However, Ryle nowhere suggests it, and indeed it could not possibly be suggested by anybody, that the absence of anything common to a collection of things or activities is all that is required by a polymorphous concept. For, the absence of anything common is merely a negative condition ruling out generic concepts without ensuring any polymorphous concept. But it is not easy to formulate what Ryle would take as the positive condition

for a concept being a polymorphous concept. Wittgenstein, unlike Ryle, does formulate a positive basis for the application of a general word to varied cases in the absence of anything common to all of them.

We see a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing sometimes overall similarities sometimes similarities of detail.¹⁶

Wittgenstein calls such complex network of relationships a case of "family resemblance". For,

the various resemblance between members of a family : build, features, colour of eyes, gait, temperament, etc. etc. overlap and criss-cross in the same way.¹⁷

Thus Wittgenstein rejects the view that there must be some common element in all the cases where we apply a general term. As mentioned above, the cases to which a general word like 'game' is applied cover a wide range of overlapping affinities, like the varied resemblances of nose, eyes, gait, etc. which are the characteristics of the members of a family and which link them all into one group, without having anything uniformly present in them all. Here we may recall a simile by which Wittgenstein used to elucidate the relation of 'family resemblance'.

The strength of the thread does not reside in fact that some one fibre runs through its whole length, but in the overlapping of many fibers.¹⁸

It is interesting to note that Ryle's remarks on the polymorphous concept of thinking in his essay "Thinking" are parallel to Wittgenstein's, although in "Thinking and Language" he characterizes a polymorphous concept only negatively as a concept covering activities which have nothing in common.

There are, patently, lots of kinds of thinking which have something but not everything in common with computing, something else in common with computing, something else in common with philosophizing and so on and so on.¹⁹

It may appear from Ryle's similarity to Wittgenstein in the passages quoted above that the category of polymorphous concept can be fully explained by the notion of "family resemblance". Such an impression would, however, be incorrect.

The inadequacy of the analysis of the meaning of 'polymorphous

concept' in terms of "family resemblances", should be evident as soon as one recalls the very feature of polymorphous concept that distinguishes them from generic concepts - that the activities which a polymorphous concept covers can be performed without their belonging to that polymorphous concept. For instance, we may recall, though one works by writing, singing, etc. one can as well write or sing without thereby working. But, we never say that sometimes playing chess is not a 'form' of game.

Let us now see how far what Ryle says about polymorphous concept - that the activities which a polymorphous concept covers can be performed without their belonging to that polymorphous concept - is true. since according to Ryle the concept of thinking is a polymorphous concept, the activities covered by this concept, therefore, can be performed unthinkingly (or without a person's thinking). Immediately a question crops up : Can we say that a person can perform the activities like calculating, pondering, composing a poem, etc. without thereby thinking? Well, with regard to activities like calculating, composing of poem, etc. we can say that a computer, of which we do not say that it thinks, can carry out these activities.

But what about the activity of reflecting, which includes not only our thinking over what others say to us but also self-reflection (a distinctive character of man) utterly unrelated to the utterances and other actions of others? Can there be any occasion on which reflecting is not a case of thinking?

Lastly, it is worth noting that although one cannot find out an element which may be common to various activities which may be regarded as forms of a polymorphous concept, one can define a polymorphous concept in terms of something else, or one can at least identify an activity as a form of form of that polymorphous concept. Consider, for example, the case of an activity being a form of housekeeping (a polymorphous concept). It consists neither in some specific feature of the activity, nor merely in its being performed at home, but in its contribution to the management of the house and home-affairs. Perhaps it is possible to give a definition of some sort for expressions for other polymorphous concept, which may not be in terms of some element or the material content of the activities concerned.

If one refuses to admit such definitions then how can the concepts of pseudo activities be excluded from the class of polymorphous concept?

It seems then that thinking may well be regarded as belonging to the class of polymorphous concept in the sense that it covers many forms. But the concept of this category of concepts is itself far from clear. Ryle's characterization of this category does not provide a necessary and sufficient condition for deciding whether any given concept belongs to this category or not.

NOTES

1. Gilbert Ryle, "*Thinking and Language*" (hereafter referred to as TL), *Proc. Arist. Soc. Suppl. XXV* (1951), p.68.
2. Wittgenstein (L.) *Philosophical Investigations*, Basil Blackwell, 1976.
3. Dewey (J), *How We Think*, D.C. Heath, 1933.
4. *Ibid.* p.4
5. Ryle, TL, *op cit.* p. 68
6. Ryle, "Thinking", *Collected Papers* (hereafter referred to as CP), Vol. 2, London : Hutchinson, 1971, p. 296.
7. *Ibid.* p. 297.
8. Ryle, TL, *op. cit.* p. 68.
9. Ryle, "Thinking" *op cit.* p. 299.
Please also see Ryle, "Adverbial Verbs And Verbs of Thinking" *On Thinking* Basil Blackwell, 1979.
10. White (A), "Attending", *Attention*, Basil Blackwell, 1964, p.6, words in the brackets are my own
11. Ryle, TL, *op cit.* p. 69.
12. Ryle, "Adverbial Verbs and Verbs of Thinking", *op cit.*, p. 17.
13. Ryle, "Pleasure", *CP, op cit.*, p 332.
14. Wittgenstein, *op cit.*, Para 66.
15. Ryle, "Thinking", *op cit.*, p. 97-98.
16. Wittgenstein, *op cit.*, Para 66.
17. *Ibid*, Para 67.
18. *Ibid*, Para 67.
19. Ryle, "Thinking", *op cit.*, p. 299.