

RYLE'S ANALYSIS OF MIND AND MATTER

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"Descartes' Myth," the first chapter of "The Concept of Mind," is probably Gilbert Ryle's best known essay. In the essay, he begins to develop a concept of mind while attempting to refute Descartes' mind-matter dualism, and much of the rest of the book is a development of the concept. However, in fully explaining his own theory, Ryle fails to free himself totally from dualism. While apparently avoiding the mind-body problem, he falls victim to a dualism that is equally troublesome, a dualism separating different linguistic categories.

Ryle chides the dualists by referring to their theory as "Descartes' Myth" or the "Ghost in the Machine" idea. According to their view, mind and body are distinct entities characterized by qualities of entirely different types. Mind is considered to be immaterial and thus not describable spatially; it is, on the other hand, characterized by the capacity for thought, sensation, and emotion. Matter, a physical and therefore spatially describable stuff, is inanimate and is usually thought to be both extended and movable, though it may have other primary qualities in some theories. Mind is private—one only directly knows or experiences his own mind—but matter is publicly perceived. Neither entity can be explained by reduction to the qualities possessed by the other.

But this dualism, it seems, cannot avoid the mind-body interaction problem. No explanation of how mind can affect matter or how matter can affect mind is possible. The entities have entirely different qualities so a complete explanation of physical phenomena cannot include reference to the mental phenomena that are neither extended nor movable, and a complete explanation of the mind must not include any reference to spacial objects. Since neither entity is explainable by means of the other, no unified explanation of both is possible. Therefore, causal connections between mind and body cannot be understood except as mysterious interactions between wholly different systems.

According to Ryle, the interaction problem should disappear as soon as we accept his analysis and, in doing so, abandon dualism. Although this abandonment may seem unnatural at first, Ryle does not consider it so. He doubts that dualism is really a natural or intuitive position or that it is countenanced by ordinary language. He thinks that people only accept dualism when they attempt to be philosophical, and that when they accept dualism philosophically they make the "category mistake."

Ryle claims, somewhat unclearly, that mind and matter are concepts belonging to different categories and are therefore not of the same logical

type. In trying to explain this difference, he relies heavily on analogies. A university is not something other than its buildings, students, teachers, etc., but all of these things organized in a certain way; once the buildings, students, teachers, etc. are understood within that structure, the university is understood.¹ Likewise, the march-past of a division is not a unit like a battalion, a battery, or a squadron, but the collection of all such units in, it is hoped, some order.² Similarly, mind is not some entity that is always missing in any description of one's bodily parts or in any account of one's physical actions, but a concept that enables us to categorize certain bodily actions, dispositions, tendencies, etc., in a manner that we find somehow useful.

These analogies deserve some consideration. Ryle concludes, at the end of "Descartes' Myth," that he dissipates the contrast between mind and matter without absorbing either concept into the other and so implies that an explanation of neither can be reduced to an explanation of the other.³ But in the analogies given, some such reduction is possible. Anyone understanding the concept of a university could conclude "Columbia is a university" from "Columbia includes two library buildings, seven dormitories, numerous classrooms, a school of arts, a department of Russian, etc.," and anyone who knows what a march-past is can determine that one occurred from an account of all of the units. One cannot make inferences so successfully in the other direction, however; one could not deduce the existence of seven dormitories, two libraries and a Russian department from a school's status as a university, for example. In these analogies, one description, the more specific, which I will refer to as the physical description, is a sufficient condition for the inference of the other more general one, which I will call the conceptual description. Is this also the case with descriptions of mind and matter?

Ryle implies that it is not the case in his chapter on "The Will." Here he tries to dispel the "Bogey of Mechanism" or the elimination of the notion of voluntary action by a purely physical analysis of human actions. Here he introduces another analogy, comparing the way physical laws govern human actions with the way the rules of chess govern a chess game.⁴ One cannot infer the moves in the chess game from the rules, though the rules define the allowable moves and give the game structure. Likewise, while many writers scrupulously follow English grammar, none of their works are deducible from grammar rules.⁵ Ryle claims that, similarly, an act can be voluntary and not deducible from an initial physical state and the laws of physics, though the act does not break the laws.

Apparently, Ryle considers the notion of voluntary action to belong to a "mind" description and the concept of physical law to belong to the "matter" description. One cannot use a concept of one logical type to

explain or explain away a concept of another, so even if all matter is governed by physical laws, human actions may nevertheless be voluntary and responsible.

But these last analogies are significantly different from the university and march-past analogies. In these later cases, there is something in the conceptual description that cannot be inferred from the physical one. The chess analogy would not have worked so well in "Descartes' Myth" because in the chess analogy something is included in the more conceptual account that is not deducible from the other. Nothing in the rules of chess corresponds to the employment of a specific strategy at a specific time.

What then is the relation between the two "categories"? It seemed simple in "Descartes' Myth" because everything in the "mind" category, though not identical with the "body" category, could at least be inferred from something in it. The two accounts did not describe different entities but the same events in different ways and under different conceptual structures. Now, in order to save us from the "Bogey of Mechanism," Ryle has to include something in the mind category description—voluntary action—that cannot be correlated with or derived from anything in the matter or body description.

Thus, Ryle must make "mind-talk" and "body-talk" irreducible to each other, as he says he must. But if this is the case, Ryle has not avoided the mind-body problem but replaced it with another. If language has different mutually untranslatable systems, how can one analyze the relation between any two concepts in different systems? It would do no good to develop a third language with which to discuss any two ("behavior language" to analyze "mind language" and "body language," for example) because that third language would have to include in it those things that Ryle claims belong to different categories and therefore cannot be subsumed under one category (physical laws and voluntary actions, for example). Thus to say things like, "Through behavioral analysis we can explain both physical and mental phenomena" would be incoherent.⁶ Rather than eliminating mind-body dualism, Ryle only replaces it with a linguistic dualism or, what may be worse, a linguistic pluralism. How can Ryle analyze the relation of the concept of mind to the concept of body? How can he relate language describing voluntary action or knowledge or any other mind-category concept to a body-category concept like behavior?

Ryle chose his analogies carefully. To avoid dualism, he used comparisons suggesting that mind-talk could be analyzed as the subsuming of a physical state of affairs under a mentalistic category scheme; the university is, after all, a structuring of physical things as is the march-past. But to avoid physical determinism, he chose different kinds of analogies, suggesting that mind-talk contains within it elements that can in no way be

reduced to anything in a physical account. He thus dooms any attempt, including his own, to explain mental concepts as characterizations of physical behavior.

NOTES

¹ G. Ryle, *The Concept of Mind*, (New York and London), p. 16.

² *Ibid.*, p. 17.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 77-78.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

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