

Ryle as a critique of Descartes' Mind-Body Dualism

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Abstract- The problem of mind-body relation is a central problem in the history of philosophy. From the very ancient period there have been discussions on this issue but it could not get prominent position. In modern period it is Descartes who brought the old problem in a new way. He holds the view that mind and body are two dependent substances and thereby he is called a dualist philosopher. He is the most influential dualistic philosopher in modern philosophy. His analysis of mind body relation is accepted by most of the philosophers, psychologists, religious teachers and even by the common people. But in spite of this, his theory has to face a lot of criticisms from different stand points. Gilbert Ryle criticized Descartes' dualism on different ground. He develops his theory of logical behaviourism by rejecting Descartes' dualistic theory of mind. Designating Descartes' dualism as 'official Theory', Ryle says that this theory committed a special kind of mistake called 'category Mistake'. So in this paper I shall try to explore Descartes' dualistic theory from the stand point of Ryle and subsequently try to explain the ground for which Ryle rejects this theory. And finally effort will be made to give a picture of Ryle's own view on the concept of mind and its acceptability.

Index Terms- Mind, Body, Category Mistake, Myth, Metaphor

I. INTRODUCTION

In modern philosophy Descartes' dualistic theory of mind is prevalent not only among philosophers but even among layman. Ryle calls this dualistic theory of mind as official theory. He writes,

"There is a doctrine about the nature and place of mind which is so prevalent among theorists and even among layman that it deserves to be described as the official theory."¹

Ryle admits that this official theory occupies an important place in the minds of philosophers, psychologists and religious teachers. This theory has its own difficulties but they never think of it to be major difficulties and believe that these minor difficulties can be overcome without modification of the basic concepts of the theory. But Ryle maintains that the central principles of the dualistic theory are unsound and full of conflicts.

According to Ryle, Descartes believes that every human being possesses a body and mind. But it is doubtful whether idiots or infants have minds. Human bodies, though it is subject to destruction, occupies an important place while the man is alive. It governs all other bodies in space because it is superior to other bodies. It occupies space and is subject to mechanical laws. As it is externally perceivable, so its states and processes can be

observed by other persons. So like the lives of animals, reptiles, trees, crystals and planets man's bodily life is publicly observable and is subject to public affairs. But minds are not publicly observable as it does not occupy space and not subject to mechanical laws. One cannot know what is going on in other's mind. One's mental states and processes are wholly and directly perceivable by one who possesses them.

Whether a person is aware of the happenings of his own mind, either fully or in parts, is a matter of dispute. Official theory maintains that one's own mental occurrences can be cognized by him alone, though not whole of it but at least some of it, directly without any doubt. In introspection one can be authentically aware of the present occurring of one's mind. A person may be wholly ignorant about the occurrences of the physical world but he is fully aware of, at least in parts, occurrences of his mind.

Thus Ryle observes that Descartes bifurcates a person's life into two halves, one is external and the other is internal. All the physical things including human bodies belong to the external world while the states and processes of one's own mind are internal. But Ryle maintains that this antithesis of outer and inner world is nothing but metaphor because if the spatial existence of mind is denied then it is not possible to speak of the mind as being spatially "inside" something.

But though Ryle interpreted the official theory as metaphor, he is very much conscious about the theoretical difficulties of the influence of the mind and body to each other. It is true that there is some kind of influence of mind on body and vice versa but it remains mysterious how these two can influence each other. This kind of knowledge cannot be described by one's autobiography of inner life. Ryle says,

"They can be inspected neither by introspection nor by laboratory experiment. They are theoretical shuttlecocks which are forever being bandied from the physiologist back to the psychologist and from the psychologist back to the physiologist."²

In addition to this metaphorical bifurcation of person's two lives there is another philosophical assumption. The official theory believes that there are two kinds of existences or states, one is physical existence and another is mental existence. Thus whatever exists must have either physical or mental status. It is like the faces of the coin which must be either heads or tails, or it is like the living creatures which must be either male or female. Thus what has physical existence occupies space and time and what has mental existence is found not in space but only in time. The physical existence consists of matter where as the mental existence consists of consciousness.

Thus we find that in the 'official theory' there is a polar opposition between mind and matter. This opposition can be

¹ . G. Ryle, The Concept of Mind, p-13

² . Ibid, p- 14.

explained in this way: space is the common field where material objects are situated. Thus being spatially related, there is a causal connection between one material object and another which is not possible in the case of mind. It is publicly observable physical body through which one person's mind is distinguished from another. The mind exists in our inner life which is the place and each of us possesses this ghostly thing. One person can see, hear and touch other person's body, but it is totally impossible for anyone to see or hear the workings of another's mind.

This official theory maintains that the working processes of one's own mind are best known by the person himself. There is no doubt or illusion in the process of knowing one's own mind because mental states and processes are normally conscious states and processes. So it is absurd to say that one is unaware of what is going on in his mind because the inner life of persons is a stream of consciousness.

Official theory maintains that in addition to ordinary perception, a person may possess a special kind of perception in different occasions, which is called inner perception or introspection. Through this kind of perception a person can look into his own mind and can see what is going on in his own mind. A person not only can see or scrutinize an extended thing through his eyes or hear something and discriminate the notes of a bell through his ear but he can see the inner life of his own not through any bodily sense organ but through reflection and introspection. It is commonly supposed that this kind of self-observation is free from illusion, confusion or doubt. The reports of one's own mind regarding the occurring of his mental processes is more reliable than that of the report based on sense experience. Thus sense perception can give us mistaken or confused knowledge but introspection and consciousness cannot do so. Hence the best way to know the working processes of one's own mind is introspection.

This theory further maintains that there is no direct way to know the inner life of other persons. It is from the behavior of others that we can make analogy with our own and then we infer the occurrences of another's mind. The direct awareness of the workings of mind is possible by the person himself. But Ryle maintains that the official theory fails to prove the existence of other minds than one's own. Because according to him, analogical argument is very weak. Ryle says that even if the official theory believes that the existence of other minds is like one's own, it cannot rightly claim to discover that the other minds possess individual characteristics. Thus Ryle says, "Absolute solitude is on this showing the ineluctable destiny of the soul. Only our bodies can meet."³

II. CATEGORY MISTAKE

This is how Ryle analyses the official theory which he calls 'Descartes' Myth'. This analysis is often called by Ryle as "the dogma of the ghost in the Machine."⁴ Ryle's main aim is to prove the above theory as totally false. He says that the entire theory is false in principle. It is not the fact that this theory suffers from different kinds of particular mistakes combined together but from one big mistake which is named by Ryle as a

³ . ibid: p-16

⁴ . ibid: p-17

'Category Mistake.' This is a special kind of mistake according to him. He says, "Category mistakes are those made by people who are perfectly competent to apply concepts, at least in the situations with which they are familiar, but are still liable in their abstract thinking to allocate those concepts to logical types to which they do not belong."⁵

This mistake arises in the theory of mind when the mental life is assumed to belong to one category when it really belongs to another category. The philosopher's myth is therefore called by Ryle as 'dogma.' Ryle's aim is to prove the falsity of the myth. But he anticipates that his effort of doing so may be taken by the critics as denying the mental life of human beings. He says that his aim is just to rectify the mental-conduct concept which is falsely described by the official theory.

The concept of 'category mistake' is enumerated by Ryle in a very funny way by giving a series of examples. One of them is that- a foreigner when for the first time visits Oxford or Cambridge to see the university and he is shown all the colleges, libraries, playgrounds, museum, scientific departments and administrative offices. But after seeing all these he assumes that he has not seen the university. He admits that he has seen all these shown but asks whereabouts of the university. He forgets that the university is nothing but the organized whole of all the things shown to him. Understanding the co-ordination of all the things shown is the seeing university. If the foreigner assumes that like other institutions such as, the Christ Church or the Bodleian Library or the Ashmolean Museum, university stood for an extra member of the class then it is an innocent but mistaken assumption. He mistakenly believes that the university is like other institutions and thus he allocates it to the category to which other institutions belong.

The destructive purpose of Ryle is to show that the source of double life theory is a family of category mistakes. The official theory tries to prove that the ghost of a person is somehow embodied in a machine. He says that a person's thinking, feeling and purposive doing is impossible to describe in an idioms of physics, chemistry and physiology alone and so they must be described in a different way. Like the human body, the human mind is complex organized unit though these two differ in stuff and structure. He says, "as the human body, like any other parcel of matter, is a field of causes and effects, so the mind must be another field of causes and effects, though not (Heaven be praised) mechanical causes and effects."⁶

III. ORIGIN OF THE CATEGORY MISTAKE

Ryle thinks that in official category mistake arises because this theory believes mind and body as two different sorts of things. Mental and bodily processes are different sorts of causes and effects. It is like the foreigner's visiting the university who thinks the university to be an extra building like what has been seen. This theory maintains that within the common frame-work of the categories of thing, stuff, process, state, change, attribute, cause and effect there is differences between physical states and

⁵ . ibid: p-19

⁶ . ibid: 20.

mental states. Ryle says that this theory is a Para-mechanical hypothesis.

Ryle says that from the very beginning the official theory suffers from a major difficulty in explaining the problem of influence of mind upon bodies and vice versa. 'Willing' is a mental process which causes spatial movements in our physical body like the movements of the tongue. Similarly, a physical change in the optic nerve has effects in mind's perception. Now question arises how can these happen? These complex questions compel Descartes to mould his theory of mind logically. Ryle calls this mould as self-same mould.

In describing the nature of mind Descartes says that it is opposite to body. In this connection Ryle writes, "The workings of minds had to be described by the mere negatives of the specific descriptions given bodies; they are not in space, they are not motions, they are not modifications of matter, they are not accessible to public observation. Minds are not bits of clockwork, they are just bits of not-clockwork."⁷

Ryle denies the fact that minds are merely ghosts put into the machines of bodies rather he believes that minds are themselves ghost-machines. He admits to treat the human body as engine but at the same time warns us to treat it as an ordinary engine. Because some of the workings of this body-engine are governed by another engine which resides within this body-engine and this is a very special sort of engine. This interior governor-engine is not able to be seen or heard. Again, it has neither shape nor weight. This very particular engine cannot be broken into parts and it is not possible to know the laws which it obeys. Thus how the bodily engine is governed by it is totally unknown.

Again, the official theory believes that minds and bodies belong to the same category. It is the assumption of many theorists that minds are obviously governed by the rigid non-mechanical laws because bodies are governed by rigid mechanical laws. They further believe that like the physical world the mental world must be a deterministic system. But Ryle says that if both minds and bodies are governed by the deterministic laws, then the modification of mind and body is not possible. Similarly, the concepts of responsibility, choice, merit and demerit are inapplicable to the minds because there is no chance for its modifications. Ryle says that we can construct a conjunctive proposition between two terms belonging to the same category but it is absurd to conjoin two terms belonging to different categories. In this connection he cites examples – "a purchaser may say that he bought a left-hand glove and a right-hand glove, but not that he bought a left-hand glove, a right-hand glove and a pair of gloves. 'she came home in a flood of tears and a sedan-chair' is a well known joke based on the absurdity of conjoining terms of different types." He further says that like the conjunctive propositions, the disjunctive propositions are equally absurd. "She came home either in a flood of tears or else in a sedan-chair."⁸ Ryle says that the official theory makes such type of conjunctions. This theory believes the existence of both minds and bodies and admits the occurrence of both physical and mental processes. But such types of conjunctions are absurd. But from this it cannot be said that Ryle denies the occurrences of mental processes. He says that the two phrases, viz., 'there

occurs mental process' and 'there occurs physical process' do not mean the same sort of thing and thus it is meaningless either to conjoin or to disjoin these two phrases. Hence Ryle says,

"It is perfectly proper to say, in one logical tone of voice, that there exist minds, and to say, in another logical tone of voice, that there exist bodies. But these expressions do not indicate two different species of existence, for 'existence' is not a generic word like 'coloured' or 'sexed'. They indicate two different senses of 'exist', somewhat as 'rising' has different sense in 'the tide is rising', 'hopes are rising', and 'the average age of death is rising.'⁹

In analyzing the mental conduct concept Ryle's main intention is to prove that the official theory wrongly refers to something as private entity when there is nothing of such type. Thus he proves that the Cartesian dualism is a futile doctrine and thus this theory is eliminated by him from the field of the philosophy of mind. The supposition of existence of two collateral worlds, of inner and outer, of private and public, of physical and psychical is strongly criticized by him and thus he rectifies the logical geography about the functions of mind. He says that mental operations such as, 'skillful', 'cunning' etc. are not occult occasions or ghostly happenings, they are rather dispositions or complex of dispositions. Thus in order to explain mental operations there is no need to admit any occult entity. He asks that an agent possesses thousands of maxims within him but what makes him to decide the one, among the thousands of maxims appropriate for particular act rather than others?

Thus after refuting Descartes dualism, Ryle puts forwards his own concept of mind. He reduces mind to a set of dispositions, behavior and acts of habit. He says that to have the knowledge of something is the product of practice. It is through practice that we become able to apply rules in different occasions. When we say that someone is skilled in doing something we understand that he acquired this skill after continuous practices. But Ryle never says that this skill is acquired only through habits. He makes a distinction between habitual actions and intelligent capacities. When a boy intends to learn the game of chess, he should have to learn the rules of the game. Receiving the continuous theoretical instructions he becomes aware of the rules of the chess and can apply them when he plays the game. This kind of knowledge is acquired through habits. But there are other actions or performances which are not habitual but are reflective of intelligent capacities. In this connection he cites the example of a mountaineer who climbs over the ice-covered rock not with blind habit but with some degree of intelligences. Thus Ryle says that habit can be built up by drill or practice but intelligent is acquired through training.

Describing the place of mind some theorists say that 'the mind is in its own place'. But Ryle refutes such conception and says that the place of mind cannot be described metaphorically. There are some places, such as, the platform, the judge's bench, the lorry driver's seat etc. where people perform their actions either intelligently or stupidly. But mind cannot be placed in a particular place.

There is a traditional dogma that mind has three parts, viz., thinking, feeling and willing and the function of one part cannot be reduced to another. It believes volition or will as a special act

⁷. *ibid*: p-21.

⁸. *ibid*: p-23.

⁹. *ibid*: p-24

of mind. It is through this volition that mind actualizes its ideas or plans. It also believes the existence of two separate entities like mental and physical and there is no identity in their occurrences. It asserts mental act of volition as cause and bodily act as effects of such volition. Ryle says that this type of thought is nothing but an extension of the Descartes myth. It is based on confusion and false inferences and thereby he suggests us to giving up any attempt to refashion it. He further says that this volitional theory leads to the fallacy of 'regress ad infinitum'.

Ryle also argues against the theory of emotion which is supposed by Descartes to be a sort of individual private experience and as such it is internal. It is said that emotions are the turbulences in the stream of consciousness. These cannot be publicly observed. Ryle says that emotion is used to designate three or four different kinds of things. These are called by him 'inclinations', 'moods', 'agitations', and 'feelings'. Among these the first three are not acts or states. They are rather inclinations. As these are not acts so these cannot be publicly or privately observed. But he believes that feelings are occurrences.

Ryle explains all the mental phenomena in terms of processes and dispositions. He mentions certain dispositional words such as, know, believe, aspire and humorous which signify the abilities, tendencies or prone nesses to do.

The official theory believes that other than the physical world there exists a world of mind. This theory also believes that as we can ascertain the happenings of the events in space through sense perception, so the happenings of the mind are also ascertained through perception but of different and refined sort. For this purpose the bodily organ is not required. Only through introspection such kind of knowledge is possible. In the case of knowing the happenings of the external world there is a possibility of mistakes but in knowing one's own mind there is little chance of error. Thus apprehension of operations of one's own mind is superior to that of the apprehension of external world. This theory is strongly accepted by philosophers, psychologists and even by layman. This theory also believes that a man can have the knowledge of his own mental states and processes directly through consciousness or introspection which is not possible in knowing other minds directly but by inferences from his bodily activities. But this description about self-knowledge through introspection or consciousness is called by Ryle as 'Myths'. The words 'introspection' and 'consciousness' used by the official theory is called by Ryle as 'logical muddles'. But this does not mean that Ryle negates the possibilities of self-knowledge. He admits it but in a different way. He believes that the method of self-knowledge and that of the knowledge of other minds are same.

Ryle points out that there are certain states of mind which cannot be known by introspection. When we try to scrutinize these states in a cool mind, we fail to remain in these states and when we are in these states we fail to remain cool. The states of panic or fury, a convulsion, the enjoyment of a joke are among these states of mind. He says that these states of mind can be examined only in retrospection. He further says that if some states of mind can be known by retrospection then all states of mind can be known by the same method. For Ryle self-knowledge has no privileged access. We can have the knowledge of ourselves as well as others only through the conduct of everyday activities – sociable and unsociable behaviours.

IV. RYLE'S CONCEPT OF MIND

Ryle says that by a person's mind he does not mean the existence of any incident of special status, but of different ways in which the different incidents of his life are ordered. Thus he says that it is not proper to ask the question about the relation between a person and his mind or the relation between a person's body and his mind. He further says that the activities of knowing or choosing is not done by some one's mind but by the person himself though these actions can be classified as mental acts. Similarly, he says that instead of saying that my eyes see this or my nose smells that, we say I see this or I smell that. But in these activities my eyes and my nose have contributions because these are organs of senses. But he denies treating 'mind' as an organ of sense like the eyes or the nose. He says that it is logically improper to make conjunctions, disjunctions and cause-effect relation about mind and body.

Thus after rejecting Descartes mind body dualism Ryle says that when we talk about a person's mind we actually talk about person's abilities, liabilities and inclinations to do. Mind is composed of sensations, feelings and images which are the stuff of mind. Thus Ryle's analysis of mind is very much close to Hume's and Russell's analysis of mind.

Ryle says that to talk about mind or consciousness as some counterpart of human behavior or some world behind or beyond the activities is a mistake. The meaningful referent of the concept of mind is a description of how people behave. The words like 'intelligence' or 'stupidity' that express mental concepts do not name occult, private entities that are spiritual.

V. CONCLUSION

From the above analysis we find that in explaining the nature of mind Ryle accepts the fundamental notions of the behaviouristic psychology and thus his theory is called the theory of Logical Behaviourism. He does not deny the existence of mind rather he criticized the way in which Descartes explains it. But in spite of this, his theory of mind has many defects as it could not explain higher processes of mind like creative thinking, integral vision of things and artistic imagination because he confined the sphere of mind to abilities and behavior. There are certain prejudices in his theory and it does not give full justice to the realm of mental life. He stopped his analysis at disposition and did not proceed further. This is because of the fact that influenced by behaviourism and much prejudices against the dualistic philosophy of mind he forgets many truths of experiences and makes hasty generalizations.

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