Lecture 10

Against Dualism

About the Lecture: In this lecture we focus on the arguments that are developed by Gilbert Ryle and Pual Churchland against the notion of the Cartesian dualism. Ryle argues that the mind and body are not two categorically independent substances; rather both of them conceptually belong to one variety. To separate them conceptually is to commit the category mistake. The mind is not a ghost in the machine, rather can be located within activities of the body or bodily behaviours.

Keywords: Cartesian Dualism, Category Mistake, Behaviourism, the inner, Introspection, Official theory, ghost in the machine.

The Cartesian theorization of the mental has been immensely criticized. As it fails to show the connection between the mind and the body, the dualism remains open to further debates and criticisms. To talk about this causal relation between the mind and the body is indeed a formidable task. It is because the mind is conceived as *res cogitans* manifested in the form of thinking, willing, imagining, experiencing, etc. which are not determined by laws of nature. The principle of causality as laws of nature puts a closure to the very explanation of the physical phenomena. The body as a physical phenomenon exists independent of the activities of the mind. Thus, Descartes also does not deny the existence of *res extensa*. As Churchland puts it, “Descartes theorized the reality divides into two basic kinds of substance. The first is ordinary matter, and the essential feature of this kind of substance is that it is extended in space: any instance of it has length, breadth, height, and occupies a determinate position in space. Descartes did not attempt to play down the importance of this type of matter. On the contrary, he was one of the most imaginative physicists of his time, and he was an enthusiastic advocate of what was then called “the mechanical philosophy”. But there was one isolated corner of reality he thought could not be accounted for in terms of the mechanics of matter: the conscious reason of Man. This was his motive for proposing a second and radically different kind of substance, a substance that has no spatial extension or spatial position whatever, a substance whose essential feature is the activity of thinking. This view is known as Cartesian Dualism.” (Churchland 1988: 8)

One of the major criticisms against Descartes’ substance dualism has been expressed by Gilbert Ryle. Ryle an exponent of philosophical behaviourism argues that the mind and the body
are not two independent substances. As Descartes’ philosophical position on dualism, that is, ‘the human body is in space like any other physical bodies and hence the bodily processes can be explained by using the mechanical laws. Such an explanation of the body is always a public state of affairs. In other words, the study of the body as a scientific study could be demonstrated. There is nothing private or secret about body. On the other hand, the mind refers to thinking which is harnessed with the body. Thinking is attributed to the general human beings, rather than to any infant and insane. The notion of death and decay are ascribed to the body but not to the mind. The mind functions and continues to exist even after the death of the body.’ For Ryle, this thesis of Descartes could be stated as an official theory. In brief, the official theory upholds the doctrine of substance dualism. The mind and the body are two independent substances and hence their existence can be conceived independently.

However, a person is combination of the body and the mind. The bodily changes do influence the mind and the vice versa. The changes in the body that occurs as the events occur in the external world. These events are observable facts. For instance, the change in my appearance, look, etc. can be stated just by studying certain biological factors. The changes that occur in the level of thoughts are personal. The person only knows what is going on in his inner mental life. A person has direct knowledge about the thoughts or mental states. What a person desires to do or intending to perform could be only known to him. A person as thinking mind evaluates the desires or could deliberate on the desire. The possibility of knowing directly and immediately is called introspection or self-observation. That is to know ‘what is wanted or being felt.’ Ryle writes, “In consciousness, self-consciousness and introspection he is directly and authentically apprised of the present states and operations of his mind. He may have great or small uncertainties about concurrent and adjacent episodes in the physical world, but he can have none about at least part of what is momentarily occupying his mind.” (Ryle 2000: 14) He/she are perfect authority to express the thoughts and feelings in the form of autobiography. It is because one has direct access to his or her own mind. The realm of the mental in this sense involves a sense of privacy. This has further given birth to the notion of inner. Thinking about one’s own feeling, thoughts, and experience are very much part of the inner which is not accessibly to the other. The other is very much part of the outer world. For example, I am only conscious of things that are going on in my mind; planning to pursue a career in academics, the experience of the beautiful sight of my village, pain of the loss of my father, etc. All these are part of my thinking,
which people are not aware of, but if expressed to someone then he/she can write a biography of my personal life. In this regard, the very consciousness of one’s own life brings in the mental existence of thoughts, feelings, experience, etc. There is physical existence as well which would refer to how I live as a bodily being. The living here is not dissociated from the body, rather logically separable for the very engagement that I have with the other and the world. For instance, I may not like my neighbor, but do not ever express this feeling to him. We continue to live as good neighbors. The feeling of mine is personal and very much part of my thinking that constitutes me as a person. The things happening in the outer world are necessarily having physical existence which is explained with reference to space and time. Whereas, the inner mental life of a person is not exhibited to anyone else, it is only given to me – to my consciousness.

Gilbert Ryle poses a serious doubt concerning the very existence of the inner. The inner as locus of the self is doubted seriously as it is not accessibly to the public/ the other. To assert on the existence of the self that resides in the inner mental life is dogma – that is, the ‘dogma of the ghost in the machine.’ One can offer a systematic explanation of the various parts of the machine – that is, how does a machine function? The machine represents a mechanical system constituted of various subsystems. Each subsystem is causally connected to one another as our bodily parts are assembled and constitute the whole organic system – the body. To say that the mind constitutes a separate category and is different from the body is a grave mistake. According to Ryle, this mistake is committed by Rene Descartes while separating the mind from the body and postulating the fact that they are categorically two different independent substances. While talking about the self, we generally refer to various voluntary actions, expressions or behaviour of the person which are indeed bodily, but to say that the mind is hidden inside these bodily expressions is to commit the mistake. What Ryle intends to suggest here is that the failure of providing an ostensive reference is not really a failure, because it happens in most of the cases such as the notion of University, team spirit, and the like? For example, he writes if a foreigner visits to Oxford University, goes to different departments, library, gymnasium, laboratories, hostels, etc. and then asks where the university that is a rediculus question is. He also cannot say pointing to a department that ‘this is Oxford University.’ Thus it is important to note that what kind of terms are sought to have reference. Ryle writes, “My destructive purpose is to show that a family of radical category-mistakes is the source of the double-life theory. The representation
of a person as a ghost mysteriously ensconced in a machine derives from this argument. Because, as is true, a person’s thinking, feeling, and purposive doing cannot be described solely in the idioms of physics, chemistry and physiology, therefore they must be described in counterpart idioms. As the human body is a complex organized unit, so the human mind must be another complex organized unit, though one made of a different sort of stuff and with a different sort of structure. Or, again, as the human body, like any other parcel of matter, is field of causes and effects, so the mind must be another field of causes and effects, though not (Haven be praised) mechanical causes and effects.” (Ryle 2000: 19-20) The acceptance of the mind and the body as two different substances is the cause of the category mistake. According to Ryle, these substances are not categorically independent from each other as it has been conceived by Descartes. The mind as substance has only a ghostly presence in the entire organic system of the body. The bodily activities can be causally explained and so also the mental activities. The mind and the body are not separable entities. Since Descartes did not accept the so called mechanical theory which explained the movements of the body existing in space, he assumed that there could be a non-mechanical cause responsible for explaining the non-spatial activities. The mind has been entirely conceived as a different sort of things. Along with this point of view, Ryle assumed another factor which contributed to ‘category-mistake’ is the notion of the moral. He writes, “Since, according to the doctrine, minds belong to the same category as bodies and since bodies are rigidly governed by mechanical laws, it seemed to many theorists to follow that minds must be similarly governed by rigid non-mechanical laws. The physical world is a deterministic system, so the mental world must be a deterministic system. Bodies cannot help the modifications that they undergo, so minds cannot help pursuing the careers fixed for them. Responsibility, choice, merit and demerit are therefore inapplicable concepts – unless the compromise solution is adopted of saying that the laws governing mental processes, unlike those governing physical processes, have the congenial attribute of being only rather rigid. The problem of Freedom of Will was the problem how to reconcile the hypothesis that minds are to be described in terms drawn from the categories of mechanics with the knowledge that higher grade human conduct is not of a piece with the behaviour of machines.” (Ryle 2000: 21-22) Descartes argument in favour of the non-mechanical explanation of human mind is something that retains the problem of dualism. Science accepts that law of causation can explain everything existing in nature. Thus determinism holds an extreme point of view that everything is causally
determined. Ryle maintains that unless we leave the language in which the two substances are explained, dualism cannot be overcome. According to him, the mental and the physical belong to one category. And, we need to formulate expression that conjoins the mind with the body. He writes, “When two terms belong to same category, it is proper to construct conjunctive propositions embodying them. Thus 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.” (Ryle 2000: 23) This is analogous to the notion that there exist no two processes: the mental process and physical process, rather they belong to one category of processes. To emphasize that there are only physical processes that cause mental actives and behaviour is to support the theoretical points of views of materialism. On the other hand, to say that mind is real and the bodily activities are known and construed through the mind is to adhere to idealism. In some sense, Ryle shows, if these two theses are uphold then we would commit reductionism. (Ryle 2000: 24) If this is true then to accept one among the two is not a simple method of outing from the framework of dualism, as it has been thought by Churchland. (Churchland 1998: 18) The materialistic approach can only show us ‘the explanatory advantage’ of neuroscience, so far as the various complex mental activities are concerned. It has been known that brain is central to all the neurophysiological activities and its relevance is found in the area of medicine and brain pathology. (Churchland 1998: 19) Showing the strength of the argument of dualism, Churchland writes, “The dualist can admit that the brain plays a major role in the administration of both perception and behaviour – on his view the brain is the mediator between the mind and the body – but he may attempt to argue that the materialist’s current successes and future explanatory prospects concern only the meditative functions of the brain, not the central capacities of the nonphysical mind, capacities such as reason, emotion, and consciousness itself. On these latter topics, he may argue, both dualism and materialism currently draw a blank.” (Churchland 1998: 19)