Part 1: The Issue

A significant question arising from the discipline of philosophy concerns the nature of the mind. What constitutes the mind and whether the mind is something ontologically distinct from either brain or behavior are inquiries of an ongoing debate. In 1949, Gilbert Ryle challenged substance dualism (the view that there is an ontic distinction between body and mind) by claiming that dualism—what he labels the dogma of the “ghost in the machine”—commits a “category mistake.” The purpose of this essay is to show that Ryle’s argument against dualism is not fatal to dualism.

Part 2: Method and Presuppositions

In order to demonstrate that Ryle’s challenge to Cartesian dualism does not ultimately bury it, it will first be noted that some of the language of dualism can be updated in order to avoid one of the problems Ryle posits. It will also be shown that Ryle begs the question against the system he aims to criticize. Finally, it will be argued that Ryle’s claim necessarily presupposes philosophical behaviorism and is therefore problematic.

This essay presupposes that other arguments made against dualism besides Ryle’s are ultimately answerable. It also presupposes that dualism as a philosophical system, apart from the issues Ryle has raised, is sound and coherent. Likewise, it assumes for the sake of argument that Ryle’s reconstruction of the Cartesian theory is accurate, despite his caricature-label of “ghost in the machine.” Finally, it assumes that the reader possesses a basic knowledge of philosophical
terminology and a comprehension of the issues surrounding philosophy of mind.

Part 3: The Text’s Argument

Ryle’s aim in his essay is to prove that “the official doctrine” (Cartesian dualism) is “entirely false, and false not in detail but in principle” (Ryle 35). This is because it commits, he claims, a “category mistake” by representing “the facts of mental life as if they belonged to one logical type or category…when they actually belong to another” (35). To explain what he means by a “category mistake,” Ryle gives a series of illustrations of placing an item in the wrong logical category (e.g., assuming a university is on the same ontological plane as the things which make it up—libraries, classrooms, playing fields, offices, etc.). He then claims that dualism’s mind-body problem is a result of committing this same type of error. This is because, he argues, to maintain simultaneously the existence of both bodies and minds—both mental processes and physical processes—is no more intelligible than to say, “She came home in a flood of tears and a sedan-chair” (38). The two propositions, which make sense independently (“There are mental processes” is not unintelligible), become senseless when conjoined together because they belong to two different logical categories. Minds exist, and bodies exist, but they exist in two different senses of the term “existence.” This is because minds are not the unobservable Cartesian “ghost” substance inside of a body-machine but are rather dispositions that lead to observable behavior. Therefore, the mind-body problem arises only when thing-properties are mistakenly applied to minds as if they were something more than behavioral dispositions.

Part 4: Analysis of the Text’s Argument

A few angles of response are in order. It should first be noted that some of Ryle’s
criticism of the language of dualism is legitimate. For instance, it is indeed a category mistake to say that there is a soul “inside” of the body. Prepositions such as “in,” “out,” and “around” are unavoidably physical. If there is a Cartesian soul, it certainly is not “inside” of the body. Indeed, an immaterial soul would, in one sense, be “nowhere” because it would not be extended in space and thus would have no physical location. However, this language problem is not ultimately destructive for dualism; it just requires Cartesians to be more careful with their words. It is not necessary to describe dualism in prepositional terminology; like Descartes, one could simply say, I am essentially “a thing that thinks” (Descartes 16), or “I…can exist without [my body]” (19); or, like Ryle’s description, “every human being is both a body and a mind” (Ryle 32). Neither of these, on the grounds of language, commits a category mistake.

Nevertheless, Ryle’s charge against dualism is deeper than this, and yet it is more problematic. In his essay, he sets out to perform an internal critique; in other words, he seeks to demonstrate that dualism on its own terms is logically untenable because it necessitates committing a category mistake. However, the problem is that Ryle oscillates in and out of the internal critique because his charges against dualism are ultimately sustainable only when predicated on non-dualistic presuppositions. It is not an internal critique to make a claim based upon an ontology that is external to the system being analyzed. Category mistake indictments are not self-evident but are contingent on the ontology of the one making the claim. For instance, whether or not the proposition “both cats and the number six exist” is a category mistake depends on what ontic distinction should be attributed to numbers. Likewise, if God exists (or, more simply, if God is an ontologically possible being), it would not be illogical to assert, “both God and human beings exist.” In Ryle’s case, he begs the question against dualism when he asserts that “there are both mental processes and brain processes” is an illogical proposition. For
Ryle, this sentence is unintelligible because it cannot be the case. However, this certainly is not true of the Cartesian system. Ryle is begging the very question at hand when his charge of category mistake requires acceptance of a non-dualistic ontology. Of course, it would certainly be appropriate for Ryle to argue that dualism’s ontology is, in fact, wrong. However, because Ryle is engaging in an internal critique of dualism and attempting to show that the system is problematic on its own grounds, it is not permissible for him to build his case on assumptions external to dualism. In this way, Ryle fluctuates between an internal and an external critique.

Lastly, Ryle’s thesis necessarily presupposes philosophical behaviorism. Ultimately, the reason why, for Ryle, the mind cannot be an immaterial substance is because the mind is nothing more than behavior and behavioral dispositions. This position is not incidental to Ryle’s category mistake accusation but deeply embedded in it. Ryle disapproves of calling what goes on “inside” mental because he believes that the ‘mental’ realm must be observable in some sense. Therefore, when Descartes’ doctrine proposes that “mental happenings occur in insulated fields” (Ryle 33), Ryle calls a foul. However, there is nothing on the basis of the principles of dualism that makes such a proposition a “category mistake”; only Ryle’s behaviorism finds fault. It is not, after all, a very impressive argument to assert that Cartesianism and behaviorism disagree; such is not in dispute. Ryle may legitimately argue the case for behaviorism, but it is illegitimate to mount an internal critique of dualism laden with the presuppositions of behaviorism.

It might be objected that the defense given here commits the fallacy of reification—that is, attributing “thing properties” to abstract entities. Indeed, Ryle himself would probably respond so. This, nevertheless, once more begs the question against dualism. What is or is not reification depends upon the ontology criteria (Oxford Companion 871). For dualistic ontology, it is not reification to call the mind a thing that exists, or to deny that dualism commits a category
mistake in maintaining the coexistence of the mental and the physical. Nor is it reification to talk about “mental processes” with reference to an immaterial substance. Lack of physicality does not require lack of temporality, and thus the mind can experience a sequence of thoughts (one after the other) without possessing physical properties. To claim that “mental processes” commits reification is to assume that only material things can experience succession of time. This, however, presupposes a physicalist ontology which the dualist rejects.

Part 5: Conclusion

Questions concerning the nature of the mind did not begin with Descartes, and they did not end with him either. For those who hold that the mind is a substance that is distinct from the body, the mind-body problem is perpetually present. Dualists have proposed various solutions over the centuries, and many of them have been unsatisfactory. Gilbert Ryle aimed to show that this problem is rooted in a deeper error, namely, that dualism commits a “category mistake.” In making this claim, Ryle circumvents the debate by asserting that the question is fallacious to begin with. However, Ryle’s accusation is sustainable only by first declaring victory to the anti-dualist. Certainly, Ryle offers supporting arguments in the rest of his literature. However, his attempt to cut dualism off at the pass simply pushes the question back into the realm of the original debate, and the “category mistake” indictment simply begs the question. Thus, if the present reconstruction of Ryle’s argument is accurate, it appears that his challenge against dualism is not ultimately fatal to dualism. If dualism is to be proven untenable, it must be by other means.
References

