

# Ryle's Own Category Mistake: A Philosophical Investigation

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Publication Date: 2025/02/18

**Abstract:** This paper critically will examine whether Gilbert Ryle himself committed a category mistake in his rejection of Cartesian dualism and his behaviorist interpretation of the mind. Ryle's concept of the category mistake, introduced in *The Concept of Mind* (1949), was a direct challenge to the Cartesian notion of the mind as a separate, immaterial entity. However, critics argue that in reducing mental states to behavioral dispositions, Ryle inadvertently misclassified consciousness and subjective experience, thereby committing a category mistake of his own.

The discussion will begin by outlining Ryle's concept of the category mistake and its application to Cartesian dualism. It then explores counter arguments suggesting that Ryle's behaviorist framework fails to account for subjective experience, qualia, and intentionality—elements central to consciousness. Philosophers such as Thomas Nagel and Frank Jackson have challenged reductionist approaches by emphasizing the irreducibility of subjective experience, which poses a significant problem for Ryle's thesis.

Furthermore, the paper will highlight functionalist and cognitive science rebuttals to Ryle's argument. Functionalism, as proposed by Hilary Putnam, and developments in cognitive science demonstrate that mental processes involve internal computations that Ryle's behaviorist model overlooks. Neuroscientific evidence also suggests a close correlation between mental states and brain activity, challenging the idea that mental phenomena can be fully explained through external behaviors.

The implications of Ryle's possible category mistake extend to contemporary debates in philosophy of mind, artificial intelligence, and neuroscience. While his critique of Cartesian dualism remains influential, acknowledging the limitations of his approach allows for a more comprehensive understanding of cognition and consciousness. By examining these critiques, this paper will contribute to ongoing discussions about the nature of mental states and the adequacy of behaviorist and functionalist frameworks.

**Keywords:** *Category Mistake, Myth, Consciousness, Ghost in the Machine, Disposition.*

**How to Cite:** Avijit Biswas (2025) Ryle's Own Category Mistake: A Philosophical Investigation. *International Journal of Innovative Science and Research Technology*, 10(2), 66-70. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14881345>

## I. INTRODUCTION

Gilbert Ryle's concept of "category mistakes" plays a crucial role in his critique of Cartesian dualism and his broader philosophy of mind. A category mistake happens when a concept is misused to a area where it actually does not belong, leading to confusion or logical errors. In *The Concept of Mind* (1949), Ryle famously uses this idea to challenge the Cartesian "ghost in the machine" view, arguing that mind and body are not distinct substances but different ways of describing human behavior.

Ryle's own category mistakes arise when he misattributes errors to others, mischaracterizes philosophical positions, or applies his own distinctions inconsistently. Critics argue that Ryle sometimes assumes that all mental language can be fully explained in behavioral terms, committing a category mistake by conflating dispositional and occurrent mental states. Additionally, some contend that Ryle misreads Descartes, imposing a behaviorist interpretation where one was not intended. Others claim that Ryle's critique of dualism presupposes a rigid and outdated understanding of metaphysical categories, limiting the scope of his analysis.

Despite these critiques, Ryle's theory remains influential in contemporary philosophy, particularly in discussions on linguistic analysis, metaphysics, and philosophy of mind. His arguments against the Cartesian framework paved the way for later developments in functionalism and eliminative materialism, even if his own position is sometimes seen as oversimplified. Ryle's category mistakes highlight the challenges of defining mental states and the risks of oversimplifying complex philosophical issues.

This paper will explore Ryle's category mistakes, examining both his critique of dualism and the missteps within his own framework. By analyzing key examples and responses from critics, it aims to clarify the strengths and weaknesses of Ryle's position. Ultimately, while Ryle's insights remain valuable, recognizing his own category mistakes helps refine our understanding of the relationship between language, thought, and reality.

## II. CARTESIAN DUALISM: A PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVE

Cartesian dualism, also known as mind-body dualism, is a philosophical concept developed by René Descartes in the 17th century. This doctrine posits that reality consists of two fundamentally distinct substances: *res cogitans* (the mind, or thinking substance) and *res extensa* (the body, or extended substance)<sup>1</sup>. According to Descartes, the mind is non-physical, capable of thought, reason, and self-awareness, whereas the body is material and subject to mechanical laws.

One of the central arguments for Cartesian dualism is Descartes' famous dictum, "*Cogito, ergo sum*" (I think, therefore I am), which he presented in his *Meditations on First Philosophy*. He argued that while one could doubt the existence of the physical body, the act of doubting itself confirmed the existence of a thinking self.<sup>2</sup> Thus, the mind must be distinct from the body because its existence is certain, while the body's existence remains uncertain.<sup>3</sup>

Despite its historical significance, Cartesian dualism has faced several criticisms. One major issue is the "interaction problem" first raised by Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia<sup>4</sup>. She questioned how an immaterial mind could influence a material body if they were entirely separate substances. However, here I will highlight how Ryle criticizes Cartesian dualism.

### ➤ *Ryle's Critique of Cartesian Dualism*

Descartes' dualism suggests that mental states exist in a different ontological realm than physical states. This view implies that minds have distinct, non-physical properties that

<sup>1</sup> . R. Descartes, *Meditations of First Philosophy*, P-20.

<sup>2</sup> . R. Descartes, *Discourse on the Method*, P-18.

<sup>3</sup> . R. Descartes, *Meditations of First Philosophy*, P-54.

<sup>4</sup> . Elisabeth of Bohemia & R. Descartes, *Correspondence*, P-105.

can interact with the physical world. Ryle refuted this by asserting that mental states are not things existing in parallel to physical states but are better understood as descriptions of certain behaviors and dispositions. He famously referred to Cartesian dualism as the "**dogma of the ghost in the machine**," emphasizing that mental processes should not be seen as separate from bodily activities but as ways of describing how individuals behave and react<sup>5</sup>.

Ryle's critique of dualism is significant because it aligns with an approach that emphasizes empirical observation and logical clarity rather than speculative metaphysics. By treating the mind as a function of behavior rather than an immaterial substance, Ryle challenges the foundations of Cartesian philosophy.

### ➤ *Ryle's Critique of Cartesian Self-Knowledge*

Descartes posited that self-knowledge is immediate and infallible, arguing that the mind has privileged access to its own thoughts, independent of the external world. In *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641), Descartes notably acknowledged, "*Cogito, ergo sum*" ("**I think, therefore I am**"), emphasizing that self-awareness is the foundation of knowledge. He maintained that because the mind is distinct from the body, its operations are known directly and cannot be mistaken.

Ryle challenges this assumption by asserting that Descartes commits a "**category mistake**"<sup>6</sup>. A category mistake happens when things of one logical type are presented as if they actually belong to another. In Descartes' case, Ryle argues that treating the mind as a separate entity akin to a ghost controlling the mechanical functions of the body is a fundamental misunderstanding of how mental processes work.

Instead of conceiving of the mind as an isolated, self-contained entity, Ryle contends that mental states are best understood as behaviors or dispositions to act in certain ways. He denies that introspection provides infallible self-knowledge and argues that knowledge of mental states is often demonstrated through behavior rather than an internal, private examination. For example, one does not access one's own thinking through an internal mechanism but rather through engaging in reasoning and problem-solving activities.

### ➤ *The Category Mistake*

Ryle's primary critique of Cartesian dualism is that it commits a **category mistake**, meaning it erroneously treats mental states as if they belong to the same logical category as physical states. Ryle<sup>7</sup> explains that Descartes assumes that the mind is a separate entity that exists alongside the body, much like how a physical object exists in space. However, Ryle argues that mental states—such as thinking, believing, and desiring—do not belong to the same category

<sup>5</sup> . G. Ryle, *The Concept of Mind*, P-15.

<sup>6</sup> . *Ibid*, P-16.

<sup>7</sup> . *Ibid*, P-17.

as physical objects and processes. Instead, they should be understood in terms of **dispositions and behaviors**.

To illustrate this category mistake, Ryle provides an example of a foreigner to a university who is shown its various buildings, libraries, and lecture halls. If the foreigner then asks, “But where is the university?” they are making a **category mistake**—they assume that the university is a separate entity alongside its buildings, rather than an organizational structure that emerges from them<sup>8</sup>. Similarly, Ryle argues that Cartesian dualism falsely treats the mind as a separate entity, when in fact mental processes are better understood as ways of describing certain kinds of behavior.

#### ➤ *The ‘Ghost in the Machine’*

Ryle famously refers to Cartesian dualism as the “**ghost in the machine**”, a phrase that encapsulates the mistaken view that the mind is a non-physical entity residing within the physical body. He critiques this notion as an unnecessary metaphysical construct, arguing that it obscures rather than clarifies our understanding of human psychology<sup>9</sup>. Rather than treating the mind as an independent substance, Ryle proposes that mental concepts should be analyzed through **observable behavior and dispositions**. This concept emphasizes that what we call ‘mind’ is not an entity but a way of describing certain patterns of behavior, thereby challenging traditional metaphysical assumptions.

Ryle’s phrase “**ghost in the machine**” has since been widely used to criticize **dualistic and metaphysical explanations** of human consciousness. The term suggests that Descartes’ theory falsely posits an immaterial mind operating within a physical body like a ghost manipulating a machine. This perspective has influenced later **philosophical movements, particularly in cognitive science and artificial intelligence**, where the emphasis has shifted towards **functional and behavioral explanations of mental phenomena**<sup>10</sup>.

### III. THE CRITIQUE: DID RYLE COMMIT A CATEGORY MISTAKE?

Despite its influence, Ryle’s theory has been criticized on several grounds, with some critics arguing that he himself committed a category mistake. The central criticism is that in rejecting the mind as a distinct entity, Ryle may have mistakenly reduced mental phenomena to behavioral dispositions, overlooking the internal subjective experience that characterizes consciousness.

#### ➤ *The Reductionist Fallacy*

Ryle’s behaviorist approach suggests that mental states can be understood entirely in terms of observable behavior and dispositions. However, critics argue that this is a category mistake in itself—mental states are not merely behaviors but involve subjective experiences (qualia),

intentionality, and cognitive processes that are not reducible to outward expressions. Thomas Nagel’s *What Is It Like to Be a Bat?* (1974) and Frank Jackson’s *Knowledge Argument* (1982) highlight this problem by emphasizing the irreducibility of subjective experience. Nagel argues that Ryle’s reduction of mental concepts to behavioral dispositions (a hallmark of Ryle’s critique of dualism) fails to address the richness of conscious experience. For Nagel, Ryle’s category mistake oversimplifies the philosophical challenge posed by the mind-body problem.<sup>11</sup>

#### ➤ *Ryle’s Own Category Mistake in his Giving Example*

Ryle cannot understand the difference between University and person’s mind-body. A University is objecthood while person’s mind-body is personhood. A person is a subject who possessive as freedom, responsibility, actions, behaviour, volitions, will, and self-knowledge on the other hand Oxford University is not. Yet, Ryle declares that the will, volitions, freedom, self-knowledge are mythical. Here, Ryle has failed to realize the difference between person (personhood) and Oxford University (objecthood) which demonstrates **Ryle’s category mistake**. Putnam’s functionalism suggested that the mind is more like a computational system, rendering Ryle’s *university example* an inadequate explanation of cognition.<sup>12</sup>

#### ➤ *Functionalist and Cognitive Science Rebuttals*

Later developments in philosophy of mind, particularly functionalism, sought to address some of Ryle’s shortcomings. Functionalists like Hilary Putnam (1967) argue that mental states are best understood in terms of their functional roles in cognitive processes rather than as mere behaviors. The advent of cognitive science also demonstrated that mental processes involve internal computations, challenging Ryle’s dismissal of mental mechanisms.<sup>13</sup>

#### ➤ *The Problem of Consciousness*

Ryle highlights consciousness or awareness with disposition of bodily behaviour but it is not possible as Descartes proved in his **cogito ergo-sum** that we can doubt everything without thinking things because it suggests our own existence or consciousness. Here it is difficult to understand why Ryle denies accepting what is fundamental to his own existence. To deny the existence of consciousness indicates our unconscious. Chihara and Fodor (1965) argue that consciousness is not simply a set of behaviors or dispositions; it involves first-person subjective experiences. If Ryle’s behaviorism cannot account for this, then his own

<sup>11</sup> . T. Nagel, “What Is It Like to Be a Bat?” *The Philosophical Review* 83, no.4, Pp-435-450.

<sup>12</sup> . H. Putnam, “Psychological Predicates.” In W.H. Capitan & D.D. Merrill (Eds.), *Art, Mind, and Religion*, Pp-37-48.

<sup>13</sup> . Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> . Ibid, P-16.

<sup>9</sup> . Ibid, P-22.

<sup>10</sup> . Ibid, P-23.

framework may be guilty of miscategorizing mental phenomena.<sup>14</sup>

➤ *Ryle's Own Category Mistake in his using phrase "Ghost in the Machine"*

Antony Flew highlights in his essay "*An Introduction to Western Philosophy: Ideas and Argument from Plato to Sartre*" that Ryle's dictum 'ghost-in-the machine' cannot demonstrate, Descartes committed category mistake to accepting mind-body dualism. If anyone is a victim of category-mistake here it must be Ryle himself as Ryle wrongly assumed that the "ghost" and the "mind" belong to the same category but both are different categories. Because "ghost" is a creation of our "mind"; it is an imagination of a physical body without reality. On the other hand, mind is the creator of the ghost and it is realized through our immediate experience. So, Ryle himself is made an own category mistake by supposing both of them to be in the same logical types. Flew suggested that Ryle's interpretation of Descartes as promoting a "ghostly" entity inside the body was a misrepresentation. Flew believed that Descartes' dualism was more sophisticated than Ryle acknowledged.<sup>15</sup>

➤ *W.V.O. Quine*

Quine does not directly address Ryle's concept of a category mistake, but his broader critique of linguistic analysis and the analytic-synthetic distinction indirectly challenges Ryle's methodology. Quine's arguments in *Word and Object* (1960) and "Two Dogmas of Empiricism" suggest that Ryle's reliance on linguistic distinctions (e.g., between categories of terms) may rest on unstable foundations. If the very idea of clear-cut linguistic categories is questionable, then Ryle's diagnosis of Cartesian dualism as a category mistake may lack a firm basis.<sup>16</sup>

#### IV. PHILOSOPHICAL IMPLICATIONS

Gilbert Ryle introduced the concept of a **category mistake** in *The Concept of Mind* (1949) to challenge Cartesian dualism. He argued that treating the mind as a separate entity from the body (as Descartes did) was a conceptual error, akin to asking "Where is the university?" after being shown individual buildings. The implications of this idea extend to multiple areas of philosophy, including metaphysics, philosophy of mind, cognitive science, and linguistic analysis.

➤ *Critique of Cartesian Dualism*

Ryle's primary application of category mistakes is in refuting Cartesian dualism, which posits a strict separation between mind and body. He argues that treating the mind as

<sup>14</sup> . C.S. Chihara & J.A. Fodor, "Operationalism and Ordinary Language: A Critique of Ryle." *The Journal of Philosophy*, Pp-354-361.

<sup>15</sup> . A. Flew, *An Introduction to Western Philosophy: Ideas and Argument from Plato to Sartre*.

<sup>16</sup> . W.V.O. Quine, "Two Dogmas of Empiricism." *The Philosophical Preview* 60, no.1, Pp-20-43.

a "thing" or an object, like the body, misrepresents mental phenomena. Instead, mental activities should be understood as dispositions and behaviors, rather than as existing in a separate ontological realm. Ryle famously describes this as the "**Ghost in the Machine**" fallacy, highlighting the mistaken assumption that mental and physical processes belong to the same category.<sup>17</sup>

➤ *Linguistic and Conceptual Analysis*

Ryle's argument highlights the importance of linguistic and conceptual clarity in philosophy. Many philosophical problems, he suggests, arise from the misuse of language, where words are applied inappropriately across different conceptual categories. His work influenced **ordinary language philosophy**, which aims to resolve philosophical puzzles by analyzing how language is used in everyday contexts.<sup>18</sup>

➤ *Behaviorism and Philosophy of Mind*

Ryle's rejection of Cartesian dualism aligns with **behaviorist** approaches in philosophy of mind. By arguing that mental states are best understood in terms of behavioral tendencies rather than as inner entities, he challenges introspection-based views of consciousness. However, his perspective has also been criticized by later philosophers who argue for the existence of internal mental states beyond mere behavior.<sup>19</sup>

➤ *Impact on Analytic Philosophy*

Ryle's category mistake concept has broad applications beyond philosophy of mind. It has been used to critique metaphysical and epistemological errors, such as treating abstract concepts like "justice" or "democracy" as if they were physical objects. His approach has shaped discussions in metaphysics, epistemology, and even philosophy of science.<sup>20</sup>

➤ *Ethical and Psychological Considerations*

Ryle's work also has implications for ethics and psychology. Understanding human cognition in terms of dispositions and behaviors rather than as an isolated mental realm shifts perspectives on moral responsibility, free will, and mental health treatment. Psychological therapy, for example, benefits from behaviorist and functionalist insights inspired by Ryle's critique of dualism. By focusing on behavioral patterns rather than hypothesizing an immaterial mind, therapy can become more grounded in empirical observations.

➤ *Education and Pedagogy*

The category mistake has pedagogical implications as well. Misconceptions in education often arise from incorrect categorical assumptions about learning and intelligence.

<sup>17</sup> . G. Ryle, *The Concept of Mind*, P-15.

<sup>18</sup> . P.M.S. Hacker, *Wittgenstein's Place in Twentieth-Century Analytic Philosophy*, P-78.

<sup>19</sup> . N. Chomsky, Review of Skinner's Verbal Behavior. *Language*, 35(1), P-28.

<sup>20</sup> . P.F. Strawson, *On Referring*. *Mind*, 59(235), P-322.

Ryle's work can help refine educational models by ensuring that concepts like "intelligence" and "understanding" are framed within the correct functional and behavioral contexts rather than being treated as abstract, immaterial entities.

## V. CONCLUSION

Gilbert Ryle's concept of the category mistake serves as a powerful critique of Cartesian dualism and has broader implications for philosophy, linguistics, and cognitive science. By demonstrating how Descartes mistakenly treated the mind as a separate entity rather than as a function of behavior, Ryle dismantled the "ghost in the machine" metaphor and paved the way for behaviorist and later functionalist approaches to understanding human cognition. His argument underscores the importance of conceptual clarity in philosophy, warning against the dangers of misapplying categories to explain complex phenomena.

Beyond metaphysics, the idea of category mistakes continues to be relevant in contemporary discourse. In artificial intelligence, for example, debates about whether machines can "think" often hinge on misunderstandings of what thinking entails. Similarly, discussions in ethics, politics, and science frequently suffer from misclassification errors that obscure rather than illuminate the issues at hand. Recognizing and correcting these mistakes is essential for productive reasoning and meaningful communication.

However, Ryle's critique is not without its challengers. Some philosophers argue that his behaviorist leanings fail to fully account for subjective experience, while others suggest that dualism need not be guilty of a category mistake. Despite these objections, Ryle's analysis remains influential, reminding us that philosophical problems often arise not from the complexity of the world but from the misapplication of language.

Ultimately, Ryle's work highlights the necessity of precision in thought and expression. His identification of the category mistake serves as both a methodological tool and a cautionary lesson, urging us to critically examine our conceptual frameworks. Whether in philosophy, science, or everyday reasoning, his insights continue to shape our understanding of the mind and the language we use to describe it.

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