A Buddhist Take on Gilbert Ryle's Theory of Mind

Abstract

Gilbert Ryle's *The Concept of Mind* is generally considered a landmark in the quest to refute Cartesian dualism. The work contains many inspirational ideas and mainly posits behavioral disposition as the referent of mind in order to refute mind-body dualism. In this paper, I show that the Buddhist theory of 'non-self' is also at odds with the belief that a substantial soul exists distinct from the physical body and further point out similarities between the Buddhist outlook and Ryle's ideas in three parts. Firstly, I illustrate that Ryle's 'category mistake' has certain points in common with the Buddhist refutation of 'self.' Within the Buddhist framework, referents such as 'mind' and 'self' are merely imputed terms. The presumed existence of an independent substance such as a 'soul', when considered in isolation from the expedient usage of the term 'mind', can therefore also be viewed as a 'category mistake.' Secondly, attempting to solve the questions of 'what mind is' and 'how mind operates' are two entirely different approaches to the study of mind. I argue that it is necessary to focus on 'knowing-how' rather than 'knowing-that', if we are to gain a more comprehensive understanding of mind and avoid any kind of category mistake such as those that follow from isolating the physical properties of brain or drawing inferences from a mystical soul . Thirdly, I aim to show why investigating mind from the perspective of 'dispositions' of behavior is a valid approach. The Buddhist concept of *karma-vāsanā* elucidates the habitual tendency to act or not act in various situations. Based on this theory, I argue that the workings of the human mind bears strong links to the formation of karma, and as such have important axiological implications that cannot be ignored. I conclude by pointing out that Ryle's insightful ideas could in certain ways be complemented by the Buddhist theory of mind. In my view, his philosophy is not only a mediator between Analytic Philosophy and Phenomenology, but could perhaps also be seen as a mediator between traditional Eastern systems of thought and contemporary philosophies of mind.

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1. Introduction

In the seventeen century, René Descartes suggested that the body operates like a machine and posited the mind as a non-material entity residing in the pineal gland. In order to reconcile his theory with the religious view of the day, Descartes advanced the view that the mind continues to exist beyond the physical death of the body. Cartesian dualism thus set the agenda for philosophical discussion of the mind–body problem and gradually became an 'official doctrine'.[1] Twentieth century British philosopher Gilbert Ryle however presented a serious challenge to substance dualism with his book *The Concept of Mind*, in which he argued that the positing of 'mind' as a substance constitutes a logical fallacy.

Ryle's ideas were very influential and are generally seen to have 'put the final nail in the coffin of Cartesian dualism.'[2] A number of academics have however pointed to the challenges inherent in interpreting his work.[3] Despite the inspirations that can be drawn from Ryle's literary style, the precise meaning of *The Concept of Mind* remains open to interpretation. Some scholars have attempted to reframe some of the ideas presented in Ryle's book, yet their focuses are divergent and the conclusions they arrive at often conflicting.[4] In the absence of an objective standard by which to appraise his work, we are forced to explore an array of possible interpretations. This paper is therefore an attempt to firstly shed light on some marked similarities between Ryle's arguments and the Buddhist perspective on the subject of mind and to thereupon show how his work may be complemented by certain aspects of Buddhist thought.[5]

Both Ryle and the Buddha attempted to demystify our understanding of mental phenomena by refuting the view of a 'soul' as a separate existential entity. Though indirect and perhaps more subtle than Ryle's attack, the Buddhist argument of 'non-self' (*anātman*) employs concepts such as impermanence (*anitya*) and emptiness (*śunya*) to systematically discredit the presumed existence of a 'soul', and can therefore perhaps be said to offer a more comprehensive refutation than Ryle's theory.

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[1] Ryle, 1949 (2002 edition), p11.
[2] Tanney (2009), p ix.
[3] William Lycan remarked that Ryle writes with literary fluency, yet he also writes with a deliberately allusive style that all too often renders his arguments and conclusions elusive. See Lyons (1980), p. xi. and also Guttenplan (1998), pp. 541~543.
[4] For an introduction and comments on Ryle's ideas by Daniel C. Dennett, see Ryle, 1949 (2002 edition), pp. vii~xvii. Julia Tanney's criticism of Dennett's views is outlined in 'Rethinking Ryle: A Critical Discussion of The Concept of Mind'. See Tanney (2009), pp. xxxix.
[5] In this paper, I take core Buddhist tenets as the basis for an investigation into the Buddhist concept of mind and thus try to employ views common to all Buddhist schools of thought.

This paper is presented in three sections. Firstly, I point out that Ryle's 'category mistake' is in line with the Buddhist argument of 'non-self" in that both attribute the presumed existence of a 'soul' to mistaken conceptualization. Secondly, I show that Ryle's emphasis of 'knowing how' over 'knowing that' agrees with the Buddhist emphasis on the soteriological and axiological implications of mind. Third, I show that Ryle's proposition of mind as a propensity or disposition of behavior is an existing Buddhist concept. The Buddhist concept of *karma-vāsanā,*' (literally 'tendency', 'conditioning' or 'subconscious inclination') points to the formation of habitual dispositions that stem from imprints left on a person's mental stream. I attempt to show that the axiological implications of mind, though largely neglected in contemporary academic discussion, are very significant to any investigation into the subject of mind. I conclude by suggesting that Ryle's insights may be complemented by certain aspects of Buddhist theory and further suggest that his refutation of Cartesian dualism in a way reconciles the traditional Eastern approach to mind with views often presented in contemporary academic discussion on the topic.

2. Ryle's 'Category-Mistake' and the Buddhist Argument of 'Non-Self'

2.1 Things of One Kind Presented as if They Belong to Another

In the early twentieth century, the focus of philosophical debate moved to linguistic aspects inherent in all philosophical problems. The driving argument of the 'linguistic turn' as it became known, was that a clarification of what we really mean when we employ everyday language reveals the illusory or even non-existent nature of philosophical perplexities. This reasoning could similarly be applied to the mind-body problem. Ryle's 'category mistake' argument suggests that in failing to grasp the functioning of ordinary language, we are led to logical fallacies which cause us to postulate substantial entities which do not in fact exist.

In order to refute 'soul' as a separate non-material substance, Ryle used three examples to illustrate what he considered to be a 'category-mistake' on the part of Cartesian dualism.[6] The first is that of a visitor to Oxford University. After viewing the colleges, playing fields, museums, departments, administrative offices libraries and so forth, the visitor inquired "But where is the University?" Failing to recognize an abstract category referring to the conglomerations of institutions, facilities, buildings and so on, the visitor thus mistakenly took 'Oxford University' for an extra member of the class to which the other units belong. The second example is that of a child witnessing the marching past of a division. After having had battalions, batteries,

[6] Ryle, 1949 (2002 edition), pp.15-18.

squadrons and so forth pointed out to him, he asked where the division was. In this instance, the battalions, batteries and squadrons were in fact no different from the division he was attempting to identify. The child thus conceptually separated the division from the parade of battalions, batteries and squadrons he had seen. The third and last example is that of a foreigner watching his maiden game of cricket. After having been shown the batsmen, bowlers, fielders, umpires and so forth, the foreigner wanted to know who was left to make up the team spirit. Obviously, he was looking for the wrong type of thing, since the exhibition of team spirit is not in the same category as bowling, catching or batting, nor is it entirely independent from the collected performance of these particular activities.

Following from the above arguments, Ryle notes that the concepts 'Oxford University,' 'division' and 'team spirit' are not additional counterparts to their conglomerations, nor are they particular entities outside of their conglomerations. For instance, the division was no different from the battalions, batteries and squadron marching past. It was not a parade of battalions, batteries, squadrons *and* a division; but rather a parade of battalions, batteries and squadrons *of* a division.[7] Ryle's argument can be illustrated as follows:

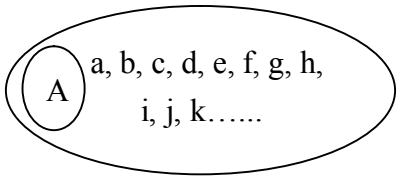
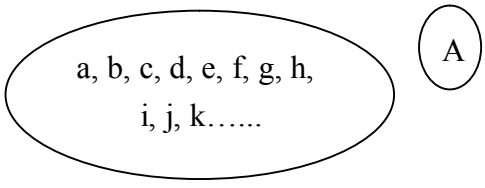


Figure 1: Mistakenly viewing a concept (A) as an additional counterpart to its conglomerations (a, b, c, d, e, f …)

In figure 1, A refers to the concept 'Oxford University' and the letters a, b, c, d, e, and so on refer to its conglomerations such as museums, departments, administrative offices, libraries, and so forth. Ryle argues that placing A in the same category as a, b, c, d, e, and so on constitutes a 'category mistake'. While the above illustrates the first kind of category mistake implied by Ryle's examples, the second kind of category mistake implicit in his argument is as follows:



[7] Italics presented as per Ryle's original text. See Ryle, 1949 (2002 edition), p.17.

Figure 2: Mistakenly viewing a concept (A) to be a substance separate from or external to its conglomerations (a, b, c, d, e, f …)

In figure 2, concept A is not an additional counterpart to its conglomerations but rather a separate entity over and above them. Ryle argues that the view that a 'soul' continues to exist apart from the body following death is similar to positing a separate entity that exists over and above the physical body. In his view, there is neither a 'ghost in the machine'[8] nor a 'ghost outside the machine' – in fact, there is 'no ghost at all.' Following from this logic, Ryle argues that the Cartesian dualist conception of mind and body is a 'category-mistake' because it "represents the facts of mental life as if they belonged to one logical type or category, when they actually belong to another."[9] In Ryle's view, mental processes are propensities or dispositions that demonstrate why certain behaviors occur. The mental state of 'wanting' is for example a manifestation of a certain set of behavioral dispositions. Once the associated behavior has manifested, no mental state such as 'wanting' continues to exist.

In sum, Ryle strongly objected to the existence of a separate substance inside or outside the physical body and his 'category mistake' argument was aimed at countering what he termed the 'Cartesian myth.'[10] To Ryle, Cartesian dualism is a conceptual illusion deriving from the misapplication of linguistic referents.[11] The presumption of a separate mental substance implied by the mind-body distinction, he argues, is a category mistake similar to the claim that 'my pain is green'[12] or the misconception that the 'average taxpayer' is somehow a bizarre ghostly entity that exits independently.[13]

2.2 The Buddhist 'Chariot' Analogy and the Theory of 'Non-Self'

While Ryle's 'category mistake' shows that mind or 'soul' should not be placed in the same logical category as the physical body, the Buddhist analogy of a 'chariot' similarly points to a type of conceptual category mistake to negate the existence of a

[8] Ibid, pp. 15-16.
[9] Ibid, p16.
[10] Ibid, p11.
[11] John Searle is another proponent of the view that the traditional mind-body distinction leads to 'conceptual confusion.' Searle views the dichotomies of mental/physical, mind/body, and soul/flesh as confused and obsolete and believes it needs to be overcome. See Searle (2002), p58.
[12] Ibid, p219-220.
[13] Ibid, p18.

soul (*ātman*).[14]

The Buddhist theory of non-self (*anātman*) appears in a text called *Questions of King Milinda*, in which the monk Nagāsena likens the 'self' to a chariot and then challenges the king to try and locate the essence of the 'chariot.'[15] After several failed attempts, Nagāsena finally explains to the king that 'chariot' refers to neither the axle, wheels, pole, reins, yoke, or any other individual part of the chariot, nor does it point to a combination of any or all of those parts. It also does not refer to an entity existing over and above the combination of its parts. Nagāsena then reveals that the term 'chariot' is merely a name imputed on the collection of a chariot's parts in order to facilitate conceptual understanding of the object of contemplation. Apart from performing this function, there is no essential being such as 'chariot' that can be found either within the parts or over and above them. The term can thus at best be viewed as a 'carrier' which is used to convey meaning on the conceptual level. As a linguistic tool, a designator such as 'chariot' only bears relevance on the level of facilitating communication, but ultimately no independently existing entity such as 'chariot' can be asserted.[16]

Similarly, the concept of 'self' or the 'I' is merely an imputed name which should not be taken to point to an independently existent being apart from the provisional usage of the term. The Buddha explained the concept of a 'person' in terms of five 'heaps' or aggregates (Skt. *skandha*, Pali *khandha*)– form (*rūpa*), sensation/feeling (*vedanā*), conception (*saṃjñā*), volition (*saṃskāra*) and consciousness (*vijñāna*). Buddhist theory however holds that neither any individual aspect nor the sum total of all five aspects should be mistaken for the essence of a 'person'. Each aggregate is constantly undergoing change, hence there is no attribute that can be permanently identified with the 'soul' or 'self' of a person.[17] In Buddhist practice, clinging to the idea of 'self' is a conceptual error which is said to pose an obstacle on the path to liberation from

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[14] The Buddha formulated the chariot analogy to counter the concept of *ātman* as presented in Brahmanism, which can refer either the pervading universal principle (universal self) or the observer being (individual self).

[15] The complete dialogue can be found in T. W. Rhys Davids trans, *The Questions of King Milinda*, Oxford : The Clarendon Press (1890) (reprinted in Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1965).

[16] In Buddhism, designation or provisional naming (*prajñapti*) is seen as a practical means to facilitate communication of abstract concepts, however it is crucial to bear in mind that the relevance of the meaning carried by such signifiers is relative rather than absolute. In Buddhism, the use of linguistic designators remains on the level of conventional truth (*saṃvṛtti-satyatva*). The Sanskrit word *saṃvṛtti,* is usually translated as 'conventional,' but literally means 'that which is concealed.' So although linguistic designators serve as a convenient means through which concepts may be communicated, they also have the potential to conceal the true nature of reality and can therefore be somewhat of a double-edged sword. When used without awareness of their nominal function, linguistic designators can easily lead to a mistaken conception of the nature of phenomena, and therefore also the world around us. For more on the Buddhist distinction between the two levels of truth, see Thakchoe (2007)

[17] For a more detailed discussion of Buddhist views on the concept of 'non-self', see Hamilton (2000); and Siderits (2003); Siderits (2007), pp. 32-68.

suffering, while clinging to impermanent phenomena as inherently existent presents a hindrance to the direct perception of ultimate reality.[18]

Although the object of negation in the 'chariot' analogy is the conceptualization of 'self' (*ātman*) rather than 'mind', there is an obvious correlation between the two terms and a refutation of one has at least the following in common with a refutation of the other: First, neither referents may be taken to imply the existence of a substantial being; and second, in both cases the presumed existence of such a substantial being can be attributed to a conceptual error based on a misunderstanding of the linguistic functioning of a term. That is, both the separation of the 'I' from the experiential agent and the distinction between an indiscernible mind and a physical body, lead to the mistaken identification of a mystical entity or 'soul' behind referents such as 'mind' or 'self'. Though Ryle mainly discussed the concept of 'mind' in his book, he did note that despite being an elusive concept, the 'I' never implies a mystical being behind the use of this particular index word.[19]

We can thus see that Ryle's 'category mistake' argument strongly resonates with the Buddhist negation of an independently existent self. Both views assert that provisional use of linguistic terms does not point to some underlying existence of an entity. Since imputed names such as 'Oxford University' and 'I' are only provisionally employed on a conventional level, the function of such referents should not be confused with implied existence of a substance internal to, external to, or over and above such signifiers.[20] Once we become aware of this expedient functioning of linguistic terms, we are less likely to make the kind of category mistakes that lead to conceptual confusion.

3. The 'Know-How' Approach to the Study of Mind

3.1 Ryle's Distinction of 'Knowing-That' versus 'Knowing-How'

In support of his 'category mistake' argument, Ryle further distinguished between knowing-that (or knowing-what) and knowing-how. Knowing how to tie a reef-knot, he argues, is rather different from knowing that the German word for 'knife' is 'messer'.[21] According to Ryle, the difference lies in the fact that knowing-how cannot be defined in

[18] The Buddha's teachings were aimed precisely at eradicating the habitual attachment to hold on to conceptual formations as inherently existent phenomena. Seeing as attachment to concepts and discursive thought is one of the root causes why human beings remain in the cycle of suffering, skillful use of language has always been one of the main concerns of Buddhism. See Cheng (1991); and Streng (1967) for more on this topic.

[19] Ryle (1949) (2002 edition), p198.

[20] From this reason, Hamilton has opted to use the term 'conventional dualism' when referring to the Buddhist stance on the mind-body problem. Hamilton (1996), pp169~170.

[21] Ryle (1949) (2002 edition), p28.

terms of knowing-that. Moreover, he argued that knowing-how is logically prior to knowing-that.[22]

Ryle's argument was historically significant as it brought the distinction between these two types of knowledge to the forefront of philosophical discussion. Since then, the idea that a considerable degree of difference exists between knowing-how and knowing-that has become overwhelmingly accepted. Ryle noted that according to intellectualism, knowing how to do something is simply to know the right sort of facts. Practicing knowing-how therefore requires a prior implicit or explicit consideration of a proposition. Knowing-how thus consists in the knowledge that certain propositions are true. Ryle however contends that knowing-how is logically prior to knowing-that, which implies that knowing-that is not necessarily a prerequisite to knowing-how and therefore involves some sort of ability and disposition.[23]

This view can perhaps be illustrated by the two types of knowledge that an athlete and his coach can be said to possess in relation to swimming. A talented young swimmer does not necessarily require theoretical knowledge of stroke techniques to excel in races. The swimmer's practical ability is something which cannot be picked up intellectually by merely reading up on swimming technique or watching instructional videos and his skills may well outshine that of his coach. Without getting into a pool to acquire the know-how of swimming, talk of winning races will simply remain empty talk on dry land. In this example, there are obviously two different kinds of knowing involved: firstly, the practical ability to cover a certain distance in water within a short period of time; and secondly, the theoretical knowledge which could serve to develop or enhance that skill. When we say someone knows how to cook, swim or fish; we are referring primarily to the acquired practical skills of the subject in question. It is not a reference to their competence in explaining the rules of swimming or analyzing the laws of physics involved in staying afloat. Although the knowing-what of swimming can assist a swimmer to improve his technique and be more competitive in races, practical skill or knowing-how is the most crucial aspect of his ability to perform in the water. From this we can see that the knowing-how of swimming is obviously logically prior to the knowing-that of swimming.

While knowing-that usually facilitates propositional description, there needs to be an activity, state of affairs or phenomenon waiting to be described (or explained) so that the description can be formulated. The description or explanation of 'what is' can help

[22] Ryle, 1971b (1990 edition), p215.
[23] For more detailed discussions on 'knowing-how' versus 'knowing-that', see Fantl (2012). Also see Bengson and Moffett (eds.) (2012) for more on the topic of 'knowing-how'.

to perfect the ability to engage in a particular type of activity, yet it mainly serves the purpose of increasing cognitive understanding. For this reason, Ryle suggested that knowledge of 'how' or 'knowing-how' should be approached with a greater amount of urgency. He used the instance of 'surgery' to illustrate his point: while a man with limited knowledge of medical science cannot be a good surgeon, excellence at surgery is not the same as merely having good knowledge of medical science; nor is it a simple product of it. The surgeon must indeed have learned from instructions to know a great number of facts; but he must also have learned by practice a great number of aptitudes. Even where efficient practice is the deliberate application of considered prescriptions, the intelligence involved in putting the prescriptions into practice is not identical with that involved in intellectually grasping the prescriptions.[24] 'Knowing-that' is therefore mainly a useful means of improving acquired skill or 'knowing-how,' but should not be mistaken to be the fundamental principle underlying a person's ability to perform a certain type of activity.

In sum, Ryle's distinction between 'knowing *what* mind is' and 'knowing *how* mind operates' was a significant contribution to the inquiry into mind. He believed that because the study of mind could be explained in terms of 'know-how,' it implied that our inquiry is not into causes but rather into capacities.[25] A person's functional competence should not be confused with his cognitive repertoire, and the previous should take precedence over the latter in investigations into the subject of mind. Although Ryle's know-how approach to mind is in line with the Buddhist outlook, Buddhist practice goes a step further in highlighting important soteriological and axiological implications of mind which I will elaborate on in subsequent sections.

3.2 The Buddhist Distinction between 'Knowing-How' and 'Knowing-That'

The distinction between know-how and know-that (or know-what) is another view common to both Ryle's philosophy and Buddhist theory. The focus on know-how is an obvious characteristic of early Buddhist teachings and the early Buddhist approach to the study of mind is predominantly soteriological, emphasizing the pragmatic advantages of skillfully employing the mind over the pursuit of purely theoretical knowledge. Early Buddhist teachings are therefore not preoccupied with clarifying what mind is, but concerned rather with how the mind works.

In her research on the theories of Early Buddhism Sue Hamilton pointed out that the

[24] Ryle (1949) (2002 edition), p49.
[25] In Ryle's own words: "We are considering his abilities and propensities of which his performance was an actualization. Our inquiry is not into causes (and a fortiori not into occult causes), but into capacities..." Ryle (1949) (2002 edition), p45.

Buddha's teaching emphasizes not what things are but how they operate. The Buddha didn't ask '*what* is a man?' but rather inquired into the question of '*how* is a man?'[26] Rather than trying to locate some underlying substance with which to define a person, the Buddhist teachings place more emphasis on explaining mental processes and look into the functioning of various human attributes and the manner in which they contribute to the complexity of the human condition. The Buddhist theory of the five aggregates (*skandha*) is precisely an analysis of a person, not in terms of what he or she consists of, but in terms of how he or she operates.[27]

Richard Gombrich endorsed this view when he referred to a person as a 'bundle of experience.'[28] In Buddhism, a person's observation of his own experience takes priority over the quest to assert a particular kind of substance or being. By substituting the question of 'what exists' with 'what can we experience,' the Buddhist theory of mind is more of an epistemological concern than an ontological one.[29] Being mainly epistemological in its approach, the Buddhist theory of mind further carries strong soteriological relevance.

According to the twelve causal links (Skt. *dvādaśaṅga pratītyasamutpāda*), the primary factor which causes beings to experience suffering in cyclic existence is ignorance (*avidyā*). Seeing as the elimination of ignorance is necessary to attaining the state of cessation (ie. freedom from suffering), the cultivation of wisdom occupies a central place in Buddhist theory and practice. The Buddhist investigation into mind is therefore particularly geared towards achieving a correct view of the experiential process in order to enable the subject to work towards achieving a state beyond suffering.

Because experiential states such as suffering or freedom-from-suffering are intimately linked to the operations of the mind, the Buddha elaborated on the state of the human condition and urged practitioners to make efforts to gain insight into the know-how aspect of mind. In Buddhist practice, the goal of mental training is to render the mind serviceable so as to be able to progress towards achieving a state beyond sorrow and pain. As to the know-what aspect of mental functioning, the question of what exactly an experiential state is like can be likened to the question of what an apple tastes like. Knowledge of experiential states is very much dependent on knowing-how, which means that one who knows the taste of an apple would be limited in describing his or her experience to another who has never tasted the fruit. Propositional

[26] Hamilton (1996), p. xxiv.
[27] Ibid., p. xxix.
[28] Richard Gombrich's 'Foreword', Hamilton (1996), p.viiii
[29] Gombrich (2009), pp. 144-145.

descriptions which rely on knowing-that therefore naturally fall short in conveying the exact state of affairs as it would appear to a first-person observer. In Buddhist theory and practice therefore, it is more important for a practitioner to pursue the experience of *nirvana*, than it is for him or her to merely formulate a theoretical or conceptual understanding of such a state. Researching mind from a third-person point of view mainly yields theoretical knowledge which is language-concept based, and as such it can be communicated to others. The know-how of skilful activity on the other hand, is perception-action based and therefore needs to take into consideration the participation and practical endeavours of a conscious subject. Because know-how can never be imparted in its entirety by means of theoretical knowledge, the Buddhist soteriologocal approach gives precedence to the question of 'how' over questions of 'what.'

Buddhist theory is also decidedly axiological in its approach, which means that developing comprehensive systems of knowledge to define various aspects of human existence is not considered a prerequisite to pursuing a life of value and happiness. The emphasis is rather on the need for the conscious agent to generate virtuous states of mind in order to avoid creating unfavourable karma which would perpetuate the cycle of suffering. So rather than asking 'What is mind/self/person?' and 'Why does mind/self/person exist?' the Buddhist practitioner focuses on understanding the workings of mind with the aim to increase and enhance the quality of his conscious experience. Mental training – that is, the cultivation of wholesome states of mind and elimination of unwholesome states of mind – therefore plays a crucial role in the quest to eliminate obstacles to increased awareness and the experience of bliss. While the axiological approach to mind has been largely neglected in modern philosophical discussions on the subject, the capacity of the mind to shape our experience of reality is a particularly meaningful topic and very much worthy of further investigation.

3.3 A Fresh Perspective on Inquiry into the Subject of Mind

Redirecting our focus from knowing-that to knowing-how when investigating the human mind means we are less likely to take knowledge of certain objective facts as the foundation of our inquiries into the subject of mind. As Ryle noted, investigating mind through knowing-that leads to the mistaken assumption that there is a certain 'place' where thoughts emerge.[30] This premise is what causes the Cartesian dualist to posit two separate substances: the first being the location where thoughts arise and the second being that which is presumed to underlie the thoughts themselves. Failure to distinguish between knowing-how and knowing-that can similarly be described as a 'category

[30] Ryle (1949) (2002 edition), p27.

mistake'. Ryle's distinction between the two types of knowledge is therefore an auxiliary argument to his original criticism of substance dualism.[31]

As noted above, when no differentiation is made between 'what mind is' and 'how mind functions,' there is the tendency to want to discover a particular 'thing.' One extreme to this approach is to advance the idea of a 'mystical' soul as a substance with no observable attributes that exists separately from the body. The other extreme is a view popularly held in modern neuroscience, namely that mental processes can be defined exclusively in terms of neurological processes. The Buddhist interpretation of mind agrees with Ryle's view in suggesting that both views are extreme, and therefore problematic. The former was primarily designed to accord with theistic assumptions, while the latter is an overly simplified materialistic approach which disregards crucial aspects of mind.

Besides, Ryle notes that mental processes are intelligent acts that should not be confused with some obscure processes distinct from those acts. Acts such as remembering, imagining, knowing, or willing are not clues to hidden mental processes; rather, they are the way in which those mental processes or intellectual operations are defined.[32] Since mental operations are acts of intelligence, knowing how to perform an act requires us to throw ourselves into certain interactions with our environment. For this reason, mental processes are not necessarily produced purely through theoretical or conceptual reasoning, but for the most part also entail an experiential component. This agrees with the phenomenological approach which emphasizes the significance of embodied experience. The 'know-how' approach to mind may thus allow for a more comprehensive understanding of mind by incorporating crucial aspects of mental processes that may not be accessible via a theoretical enquiry alone.

In brief, Ryle's approach to the study of mind not only resonates with the Buddhist point of view, but also shares certain perspectives with the continental tradition of phenomenology. [33] Both the Buddhist contemplative tradition and the phenomenological approach offer alternatives to the Cartesian dualist outlook which

[31] Put differently, Ryle's emphasis on 'know-how' (ie. the propensity of mental functioning) does not seek to explain mind in terms a substantial entity or object. Once we don't exclusively pursue 'knowing-that' when investigating mind, there is no presumed entity awaiting discovery. Hence, we are able to avoid the entrappings of the 'Cartesian myth'. The Buddhist emphasis on the operation of the human mind over concerns of what the human mind consists of, is similarly aimed at overcoming the flaws of the Brahmanistic belief in a constant soul.

[32] Ibid, p297.

[33] For Ryle's discussion on phenomenology versus *The Concept of Mind*, see Ryle, 1971a (1990 edition), pp179-196.

underline the advantages of investigating structures of experience from a first-person point of view over predominantly third-person inquiries.

4. Mind as Behavioral Propensities

4.1 Ryle's Dispositional Account of Mind

Ryle's 'know-how' approach to mind offers a dispositional account of mental concepts whereby mind is presented as an ability, tendency, liability or proneness to act or react in a certain way. Ryle explains that when saying that someone is stupid or silly, the description imputed upon the subject is not knowledge or ignorance of a certain truth, but rather the ability or inability, to do certain sorts of things.[34] Mental processes such as believing or knowing are similarly explained as behavioral dispositions. Ryle's approach thus seeks an understanding of mind in terms of our capacity to perform a certain act or behave in a certain manner. This implies that mental states do not arise from enigmatic causes. When explaining an action done from a specified motive or inclination, Ryle believes the action should not be viewed as the effect of a specified root, or even some occult root, but rather subsumed under a propensity or behavioral trend. More simply put, mind *is* behavior but is not the *cause* of behavior.[35] Ryle's theory is therefore often presented as a type of behaviorism.[36]

Ryle further remarks that because motives are not happenings, they do not fall in the same class as causes.[37] To explain an act as done from a certain motive, is not the same type of statement as saying "the glass broke because a stone hit it", but rather analogous to saying "the glass broke when the stone hit it, because the glass was brittle." Similarly, when sugar dissolves in water, instead of ascribing the cause of the dissolution to water, we say that the sugar dissolved by virtue of being soluble or being disposed to dissolve.[38]

Since mental concepts are putative terms which explain our propensities to have certain modes of behavior, they are 'inference-tickets' which enable us to predict how

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[34] Ryle (1949) (2002 edition), p27.

[35] According to Ryle, the two statements 'the bird is flying south' and 'the bird is migrating' are both episodic reports. Although the reason why is the bird is flying south could be given as 'because the bird is migrating,' the process of migrating is not a process separate from that of flying south, hence migration is not the actual cause of the bird's flying south. Ibid, p142.

[36] Ryle notes: "The general trend of this book will undoubtedly, and harmlessly be stigmatised as 'behaviourist.'" Ryle, 1949 (2002 edition), p327. His theory is however seen as philosophical (or analytical) behaviorism, rather than psychological behaviorism.

[37] In Ryle's own words: "I have argued that to explain an action as done from a specified motive or inclination is not to describe the action as the effect of a specified cause. Motives are not happenings and are not therefore of the right type to be causes." Ryle (1949) (2002 edition), p113.

[38] Ibid, p43, 50.

someone will act or react, or fail to act or react, in certain situations. Ryle therefore believes that a mental concept is an expression that sums up a person's past history of behavior in certain conditions in a law-like way.[39] Dispositions are related to one's occurrences or episodes in the relevant circumstances, hence the disposition is not a reference to a specific state of affairs or act. It is not like saying that one is tall one engages in the act of walking or eating. A disposition is a 'behavior pattern,' and this behavior pattern is not a fixed possession but possible or plausible ways of displaying of a number of pieces of behavior.[40] Mental concepts thus shed light on propensity or disposition to engage in observable action and function much like statements such as '*X* is a cigarette-smoker'. According to Ryle, saying that someone a smoker doesn't mean that the person being referred to is smoking at present or all the time, but rather implies that he or she has a disposition to buy cigarettes, or accept them when offered.[41] Similarly, mental terms such as 'believe', 'aspire', 'clever' and 'humor' are dispositional words signifying our ability or proneness to engage in certain types of actions.[42]

While it may yet prove difficult to subsume all facets of 'mind' under a single overarching concept, Ryle's dispositional exposition of mind was successful in steering explorations of mind away from the Cartesian dualist idea of some hidden internal state or entity in the brain. Rather than trying to locate a causal agent, thereby his views introduced a new direction for explorations into the subject of mind that hints instead at behavioral propensities.

4.2 Mind and Karma-Vāsanā in Buddhism

The connection of mind with behavioral propensities is a familiar concept in Buddhism. In fact, most spiritual traditions in the East assert that a person's behavior undeniably linked to his or her mental state. Buddhist morality underlines the role of virtuous and non-virtuous mental states in the process of karmic formation, hence the purpose of Buddhist meditation is to not only eliminate unwholesome states of mind,

[39] Ryle, 1949 (2002 edition), p121.
[40] Lyons (1980), p47.
[41] Ryle explains that being a cigarette smoker is a 'determinate' disposition as it is a tendency to do that particular thing. By contrast, being greedy is a 'determinable' disposition which is mainly to draw attention to the sort of thing that one is liable to do, describing a person's proneness to a wide variety of acts describable as greedy. Beside the distinction between 'determinate' and 'determinable,' Ryle also draws a line between 'capacity' and 'tendency.' Some dispositions are abilities or capacities for they are not just tendencies or pronenesses to do certain things but do them successfully. For a more detailed introduction to Ryle's theory of dispositions, see Ryle, 1949 (2002 edition), p116-135. and Ryle, 1971a (1990 edition), p188-193.
[42] Ibid, pp.117-118.

but to furthermore familiarize it with positive thoughts that bring about beneficial results.

An important aspect of the Buddhist concept of mind (*citta*) is *karma-vāsanā*, a which refers to resultant behavioral tendencies stemming from an individual's karmic imprint. In the Yogācāra tradition, where the functions and attributes of human consciousness is explored in great detail, the term *vāsanā* is often used synonymously with 'seed' (*bīja*). As Keown points out, *vāsanā* occurs in Pāli texts and early Sanskrit writings, but really came to prominence with Yogācāra Buddhism, for whom it denotes the latent energy resulting from actions which are thought to become 'imprinted' in the subject's storehouse-consciousness (*ālaya-vijñāna*). The accumulation of such habitual tendencies is believed to predispose a subject to particular patterns of behavior in the future.[43] In the case of Ryle's cigarette-smoker, the compulsion to smoke is not merely a physical addiction stemming from chemical reactions in the brain, it is also an ingrained habitual tendency that urges him or her to engage in the activity of smoking time and time again. The Buddhist concept of *vāsanā* can be used to explain the behavior of chain smoker in terms of a continuous loop of conditioning that becomes increasingly difficult to break. That is, the very desire to smoke comes from the thought that smoking is a pleasurable activity, which in itself is a seed previously implanted in his mental stream through a past act of smoking, during which his experience was conditioned by the projection that a pleasurable experience was being had. The thought that smoking is pleasurable then again propels the subject to once more engage in the act of smoking, which again implants and reinforces the idea that smoking is enjoyable. Pending favorable conditions in future, such as the sight of a cigarette or being offered a cigarette by a friend, this 'thought-seed' will once more compel the subject to engage in the act of smoking, and so on.

The Buddhist concept of 'mind' is used in reference to the five aggregates (*skandha*) of feeling (*vedanā*), conception (*saṃjñā*), volition (*saṃskāra)* and consciousness (*vijñāna*). While 'mind' in Buddhism also encapsulates a variety of related mental functions or processes such as perception, cognition, imagination and so forth; all mental activity is considered to leave a karmic imprint. The term *karma* refers to actions of body, speech and mind; however the Buddha highlighted the particular significance of willful intent (or volition) in relation to actions of body and speech.[44] Since each occurrence of willful intent leaves an imprint on a person's mental stream,

[43] Keown (2008), p323.

[44] The Buddha says: "It is volition (*cetanā*), O monks, that I call karma; having willed, one acts through body, speech or mind." (*Anguttara-Nikaya-Sūtra*, III, 415)

the role that mental processes play in the accumulation of karma is a matter of considerable import in Buddhist practice. Karmic imprints may manifest as tendencies or dispositions in the present moment, yet they are also latent potentials (or 'seeds') which are carried over into the future. Buddhist meditation is therefore aimed at training the mind to focus on objects that generate the kind of positive potential which not only helps the practitioner experience a better quality of awareness in the present moment, but also creates conditions conducive to making progress on the path to being liberated from suffering in the future.[45]

In brief, Ryle's dispositional account of mind clearly recognized the role of the mind in predisposing a conscious agent to engage in certain types of behavior. Buddhist theory however goes a step further by elucidating the karmic aspects of mind, and explains the role of latent potentials in propelling an agent towards certain types of behavior through the concept of *karma-vāsanā*. In what follows, I will explore the link between karma and the axiological implications of mind.

4.3 Axiological Implications of Mind

Similar to Ryle's view that the nature of a person's mind may be understood through actions and reactions exhibited in various circumstances, modern cognitive science also follows the approaches of pragmatism and phenomenology in asserting that perception and cognition may be understood in terms of experiences that derive from physical interaction with the environment.[46] The Buddhist standpoint agrees with the enactionist point of view in asserting that perception or mental cognition arises from an agent's conscious interaction with his or her physical environment. In Buddhist theory, it is said that the six sensory faculties (*ṣaḍ indriyāṇi*)[47] interact with

[45] According to the Buddhist theory of *karma-vāsanā*, the effect of wholesome deeds may ripen into conditions which reinforce a person's inclination towards virtuous activity, while the fruition of unwholesome deeds on the other hand brings potential obstacles which may propel the subject into further unwholesome action and thus perpetuate the experience of suffering. Hence, while the quality of a person's mental state strongly influences the type of karma created through deeds of body, speech or mind; the karmic imprints stemming from those mental states again manifest as tendencies to engage in similar types of behavior in future. For instance, one who allows him or herself to manifest anger under certain conditions, will create a karmic potential which predisposes him or her to again manifest anger in similar circumstances in future. The purpose of Buddhist practice is thus to firstly become aware of this process of habituation, and then to try and gain control over one's karmic conditioning so as to free oneself from the continuous loop of negative behavior patterns.

[46] In *Supersizing the Mind*, Andy Clark argues that our thinking doesn't happen only in our heads but that 'certain forms of human cognizing include inextricable tangles of feedback, feed-forward and feed-around loops: loops that promiscuously criss-cross the boundaries of brain, body and world.' He thus advances of the idea that mind is extended rather than 'brain-bound.' Clark (2008) p. xxviii. For developments related to the theory of enactionism, see Stewart (2010); Rowlands (2010); and Chemero (2009).

[47] These are: the eye sense-faculty (*cakṣurindriya*); the ear sense-faculty (*śrotrendriya*); the nose sense-faculty (*ghrāṇendriya*); the tongue sense-faculty (*jihvendriya*); the body sense-faculty

the corresponding six types of sensory objects (*ṣaḍ-āyatana*)[48] to give rise to the six types of consciousness (*ṣaḍ- vijñāna*).[49] Yet apart from merely giving rise to certain types of consciousness, Buddhist theory furthermore highlights the process of karmic accumulation which takes place whenever the six roots of a conscious subject come into contact with the six sensory objects in his or her environment. Since the mental activities are understood through the interactions between six sensory faculties and six types of sensory objects, the mind can perhaps be said to function as the 'behavioral field' of the brain, the body and the world, as W. Teed Rockwell suggested in his book *Neither Brain Nor Ghost.*[50] While the mind functions as the 'behavioral field' of the brain, the body, and the world; karmic accumulation lies low in the course. All conscious experience is believed to leave an imprint on the subject's mental stream, therefore the quality of a person's mental operation is considered a matter of great significance in Buddhism.[51]

Buddhist theory distinguishes between good, bad and neutral karma arising from wholesome, unwholesome and neutral states of mind respectively. The three poisons (*triviṣa*) of greediness (*rāga*), hatefulness (*dveṣa*), and ignorance (*moha*) are also known as the three unwholesome roots (*trīṇy akuśala-mūlāni*). It is said that the presence of these three roots bear a strong correlation to a person's disposition to engage in the acts of greed, hatred and ignorance and the habitual tendency to allow negative states of mind to arise in the face of adversity is believed to keep a person from making spiritual progress. Seeing as mental training is required to transform negative tendencies, it perhaps comes as no surprise that the core teachings of many Buddhist traditions revolve around the practice of mindfulness. Renowned Buddhist master Thich Nhat Hanh placed much emphasis on precisely this practice and the Buddha likewise encouraged his students to tame their minds, truly live in the present

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(*kāyendriya*); and the mind sense-faculty (*manaīndriya*).

[48] These are: visible forms (*rūpam*); sounds (*śhābdaḥ*); odors (*gandhaḥ*); tastes (*rasaḥ*); tangible objects (*sparśhaḥ*); and phenomena (*dharma*).

[49] These are: eye-consciousness (*cakṣur-vijñāna)*; ear-consciousness (*śrotra-vijñāna)*; nose-consciousness (*ghrāna-vijñāna)*; tongue-consciousness (*jihva-vijñāna)*; body-consciousness (*kāya-vijñāna)*; and mind-consciousness (*mano-vijñāna)*.

[50] In the book *Neither Brain Nor Ghost*, W. Teed Rockwell applies the insights of pragmatism to argue that the human mind is not reducible to the brain, nor to the nervous system, nor even to the human body. He argues that understanding the mind as an interacting nexus - or 'behavioral field'- of the nervous system, the body, and the world supports the new cognitive science paradigm of dynamic systems theory. He claims that the physical base of the mind is not the brain but in fact the brain-body-world nexus. For more, see Rockwell (2007).

[51] The quality of conscious experience which arises from a particular cognitive event, is also to some degree dependent on the subject's dispositional schema. This means that two subjects employing the same six senses to cognize a similar set of sensory input from their environment might give rise to very different experiences. One who has had a number of fearful interactions with snakes in the past and has subsequently developed a phobia for such creatures, might for example be overcome with fear upon mistaking a rope on the path ahead for a snake.

and always remain mindful of their thoughts and conduct. Buddhist contemplation and meditational practice is aimed at eliminating the three poisons from one's mental stream so as to increasingly give rise to positive states of mind. Compassion and wisdom are seen to allow the practitioner to create the type of karma which is conducive to making progress on the path. Giving rise to a positive mental state once or twice is however not sufficient to reach the final goal of enlightenment, hence various methods were taught to both refine mental discernment through the practice of analytical meditative contemplation (*vipaśyanā*) and increase serenity through calm abiding (*śamatha*).

Owen Flanagan has noted that virtues or vices are dispositions in ways that are appropriate to the situations.[52] Ryle's examples of sugar and glass similarly show that the dissolution of sugar in water is not due to the properties of water alone, and the breaking of glass not merely the fault of a flying stone. In both instances, certain dispositions (ie. being soluble and brittle) contributed to the change that took place when the sugar and glass came into contact with an external object. The presence of dispositions such as greed or anger in a person's character, can likewise not be ascribed solely to external factors or circumstance. Without the habitual tendency to be greedy or angry, such factors would remain impotent and the mentality of the subject would remain unaffected by external conditions. Positive mental states such as compassion similarly require certain dispositions in order to arise in a person's mind. All actions, be they positive or negative, leave an imprint on a person's mental stream, which again predisposes him or her to act in certain ways.[53]

Ryle's view of mind as the propensity to engage in certain patterns of behavior highlights the role of the conscious subject in determining the type of mental state that arises from interaction with the physical environment. The Buddhist theory of *karma-vāsanā* on a whole agrees with Ryle's dispositional account of mind, yet it also emphasizes the importance of mental training to purify and enhance the quality of everyday conscious experience. The axiological implications of mental activity may have been overlooked for the most part in recent explorations into the subject of mind and consciousness, yet I believe that these implications offer significant insights into aspects of mind which are very much in need of being addressed. Chemical reactions and the firing of neurons in the brain certainly shed some light on mental processes,

[52] Flanagan (2011), pp. 147-153.

[53] It is for this reason that the Buddha advocated moral discipline as the foundation of all spiritual development. Upholding the Buddhist precepts is a practical means by which a practitioner may discipline his or her mind from generating unwholesome thoughts and thus abstain from engaging in unwholesome deeds. A natural outcome of such moral discipline is that the agent is able to purify his or her negative karma and enhance the quality of his or her conscious experience.

yet investigating mind from the perspective of physical properties or observable behaviors alone are rather limited approaches which neglect important axiological and soteriological implications of our mental reality.[54]

5. Conclusion

The ideas presented in Gilbert Ryle's *The Concept of Mind* are inspirational yet somewhat opaque. I have therefore attempted to offer possible interpretations to his philosophy by augmenting his views with certain facets of the Buddhist theory of mind. Buddhist theory and Ryle's writings both contain features that are incompatible with the theistic presupposition of a constant individual entity or 'soul.' While the Buddha attempted to refute the views of Brahmanism, Ryle was intent on overthrowing the assumptions of Cartesian dualism. Both negated mind as a distinct substance or 'thing' awaiting discovery.

In order to posit a more plausible theory of mind, Ryle advanced three key arguments which I have shown to accord with the main standpoints of Buddhism: First, the use of imputed names such as 'Oxford University' or 'team spirit' should not be taken to imply substantial being. Functional usage of linguistic terms or referents is very different to the affirmation of certain types of being. The argument for an independent substance called 'soul' can therefore indeed be seen as a 'category mistake'. Second, 'knowing what mind is' and 'knowing how mind operates' are two divergent approaches to the study of mind. By investigating mind from the exclusive perspective of 'knowing-that' we not only risk being led to the extremes of Cartesian dualism and scientific materialism, but also risk neglecting some very significant aspects of mind. Third, Ryle's dispositional account of mind bears certain resemblance to the Buddhist idea of *karma-vāsanā* and also connotes that the concept of mind carries axiological and soteriological significance.

Though commonly considered a philosopher of ordinary language, Ryle himself acceded that *The Concept of Mind* could be called a work in phenomenology.[55] While

[54] The following remark by the 14th Dalai Lama Tenzin Gyatso adequately sums up the Buddhist approach to mind: "There are two reasons why it is important to understand the nature of mind. One is because there is an intimate connection between mind and karma. The other is that our state of mind plays a crucial role in our experience of happiness and suffering." See Goleman and Thurman (eds) (1991), p16. While concepts such as karma and its subtle relation to mental phenomena have been treated extensively in Buddhist writings, the import of such theories and its relevance to modern cognitive science still await further exploration. These questions bear relevance to the search for ultimate meaning and are in many ways interlinked with what Owen Flanagan called 'the really hard problem' . See Flanagan, (2007).

[55] Ryle himself suggested that his *The Concept of Mind* could be "described as a sustained essay in phenomenology". See Ryle, 1971a (1990 edition), p188.

he made great contributions to the philosophy of mind during his lifetime, Ryle's work also injected new life into the post-cognitivist age with theories of embodied and situated cognition coming to the fore.[56] Ryle's approach not only mediated the gap between Analytic Philosophy and Phenomenology,[57] but his views also opened up fresh perspectives for cross-cultural exploration and dialogue on the topic of mind.[58] His approach could therefore be said to in a sense have reconciled certain ideas commonly held in East and West. This paper is a rudimentary comparison between certain aspects of Ryle's ideas and Buddhist theory and much remains to be explored. What is clear however, is that a more integrated approach to the study of mind could be particularly beneficial in eliminating various limitations posed by cultural-specific cognitive schemas and that much can be gained from comparative approaches to mind-related study and research.

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[56] See Daniel C. Dennett's introduction and comments, in Ryle, 1949 (2002 edition), px.
[57] Brandl (2002), p143-151.
[58] Ryle's ideas may have been implicitly influenced by Asian philosophy due to his affinity for the works of German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer, who had a deep interest in Indian philosophy. See Magee (1997), p298.

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