Today we’re gonna start a number of lectures on two thinkers who reject the idea of personhood and of personal identity. We’re gonna spend two lectures on each thinker. What I want to do today is I just sort of want to set things up. I want to talk a little bit about the direction from which this line of critique comes. I want to give a little bit of background on the first of the two thinkers that we’re gonna be talking about, and basically get us oriented so that we can dive right into the details next time.

Now, in order to set up this line of critique, it’s important that we look back at what we’ve done so far in terms of the similarities of the two thinkers we’ve already discussed rather than their differences. So we’ve talked about Rene Descartes’ view of the self, of what a person is, and we talked about John Locke’s views of personhood and personal identity. At least while we were talking about them, we were talking about them in terms of their differences. I emphasized the ways in which Locke’s views are different from Descartes. For one thing, that Locke’s views do not carry dualistic implications whereas Descartes’ do. Not that they don’t only carry dualistic implications; they are explicitly dualistic. Moreover, last time I talked about how they come to these two different views, how — the interest that they bring with them to the subject drive the direction in which they go.

But today I want to talk about the ways in which Locke and Descartes are similar, the ways in which they really belong to a single paradigm, a single way of thinking about persons and about the self in order to set up the line of critique that I’m going to talk about, that we’re going to talk about for the next few lectures. Because from the standpoint of the critics, Descartes and Locke commit essentially the same error. The critics that I’m going to be discussing, their criticisms apply to Descartes and to Locke’s views alike. And so we need to talk about the ways in which Descartes and Locke are similar in order to understand this particular line of critique. And it is a recent and powerful line of critique, one that cannot be ignored, whether or not we ultimately accept
The sense in which Descartes and Locke’s views are similar is that they are both what I will call mentalistic. They are both mentalistic approaches to our identity and to our behavior. Now, what do I mean by mentalistic? What is mentalism? Let’s define it. Let’s define it in terms of two ideas. So according to mentalism, first of all, our deliberate behavior — that is, our voluntary actions — are the direct result of conscious mental states. That is, the mentalist thinks that the primary cause of a deliberate behavior is a conscious thought. So that’s one aspect of mentalism.

The second is that our identities as persons are comprised of these mental states. That is, we are to be identified by some set of our conscious thoughts — our beliefs, desires, attitudes — those conscious thoughts that make up what I’m going to also call the interior self.

Descartes and Locke alike are mentalists in this sense. They both believe that what makes each person the person that he or she is is their conscious state of mind, their interior self. I call it the interior self because it’s interior in the sense that the self is defined in terms of mental states that are inside your mind. So Descartes and Locke are mentalists both in that they believe that personal identity is — that personhood or the self is to be identified with the interior self, with these conscious mental states. And secondly, that it’s these conscious mental states that are the direct proximate causes of our voluntary behavior.

Notice that mind/body dualism is a type of mentalism. That is, mentalism is a sort of an umbrella position of which dualism is one type. Locke’s theory, being non-dualistic, is another variety of mentalism. And there may be any number of mentalistic theories of persons, personal identity, and of behavior.

There are a number of very important twentieth century philosophers and scientists — psychologists in particular — who are anti-mentalism, who oppose the
mentalistic view both of persons and the mentalistic account of behavior, of our behavior. They believe, 1), that the idea of the interior self is a myth, that there is no such thing, and 2), that mentalism gives the wrong account of human behavior. That it presents a false picture of the ideology of human behavior. So these anti-mentalists, as I’ll them for the moment until we give them a proper name — these anti-mentalists believe both that there is literally no such thing as the person or as the self as distinct from the human being, and so they’re gonna reject any sort of Cartesian idea that there is literally an entity that corresponds to self or person. But they also are anti-Lockeians. They’re going to deny that the very — that the concept of a person or of a self as distinct from the concept of a human being has any useful explanatory role to play whatsoever in accounting for our behavior or for anything else, for that matter.

One of the thinkers we’re gonna talk about, the second of the thinkers we’re gonna talk about, B. F. Skinner, denies specifically the role in moral and legal affairs that Locke wants to assign the concept of a person. Indeed, the book that we’re gonna read by B. F. Skinner is called — is entitled *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*. Skinner believes that our basic moral and legal notions are as fictional as the conception of the self. That these are all sort of a family of fictions that arose up together and that are truly a scientific view of human nature and of human behavior is gonna sweep all of that away.

Both Ryle and Skinner belong to a school of thought — I call it a school. Don’t get the impression that this is an actual group of people. It’s rather a way of thinking about human nature and human behavior that these people have in common. They belong to the school of thought that’s known as behaviorism and, of course, there is a school of psychological thought that carries this name, a very influential one.

Behaviorism is a direct counterpart, an opponent to, an alternative to, if you will, mentalism. Just as we defined mentalism, let’s go ahead and define behaviorism. I’m
defining behaviorism in the sense that it’s going to be used in this course. If you were to take a psychology course or you were learning the history of psychological theories, the definition for behaviorism that you would get would be related but would be undoubtedly somewhat different from the one that I’m going to give. The one that I’m giving includes not only strictly speaking psychological theories but also philosophical theories like Ryle’s. So I’m gonna define behaviorism as the word will be used in this course. I’m also going to define it in terms of two ideas the same way I did for mentalism.

Behaviorists, first of all, think that all of our behavior is the result of environmental, not mental, causes. That is, the direct — the proximate immediate cause of behavior is not some mental state, some thought, but rather an environmental cause. Secondly, there is no interior self, no such thing as personhood, distinct from our biological humanity. Either, as a matter of fact or as a matter of description — in other words, there literally is no self or person in addition to human being and there is no useful purpose to having — in other words, no useful explanatory purpose is served by having a concept of persons. So this is not only a rejection of Descartes or a rejection of Locke, it’s a rejection even of the idea that it is useful to speak of individuals under both the description human being and the description person. What the behaviorist says is there is no useful explanatory role to be played by persons or by the mental states, the conscious states, that are thought to be the essence of persons.

To illustrate the differences between the mentalistic and behavioristic view, let’s take a very simple example. So I’m going to give an example of a behavior and I’m going to offer two different accounts of the behavior. The first will be a mentalistic account, the second will be a behavioristic account, in order to get a sense of the differences between these two views.

So let’s take a very simple example of a behavior. The behavior in question is
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John drinks a glass of water. Now, here would be the mentalistic account. It would go something like this. John drank a glass of water, which is the behavior, because he was thirsty, which is, of course, a mental state. In other words, because he had a certain mental state, the mental state of being thirsty, that caused him to engage in a certain behavior, to drink a glass of water. That is a mentalistic explanation of a behavior.

Now, here would be the behaviorist account of the same behavior. John drank a glass of water, the behavior, because he had been working out in the hot sun, which, of course, is an environmental cause. In this case, notice there’s no mention of a mental state. There’s no mention of a thought. There’s no mention of any internal process. What we’re told is John was outside working in the hot sun. This caused him to then drink a glass of water. That would be a behaviorist explanation of the behavior.

Now, as I indicated, we’re gonna discuss the views of two influential behaviorists. The first is the philosopher Gilbert Ryle who produced one of the most famous critiques not only of Cartesian dualism but of all forms of mentalistic explanation. In other words, Ryle’s critique strikes not only against dualistic views of mind and body but strikes against any mentalistic account of human nature and human activity.

The second person we’re going to read — whose views we’re gonna examine is the psychologist B. F. Skinner who, of course, is one of the founders of the behaviorist school in psychology. This is an interesting part. Skinner was an outspoken proponent of a radical reconfiguration of our moral, social, and political forms of life along behaviorist lines. Skinner argued passionately, both in writing and in speech, for a scientific reengineering of society. His famous two books of advocacy in this regard are the books Beyond Freedom and Dignity and the book Walden Two. And I highly recommend these. We will read parts of Beyond Freedom and Dignity in this class. We will not read Walden Two. But Skinner was a classic example of a social engineer.
That is, an individual who thought that society needed to be completely reconfigured along scientifically respected lines; that, in a sense, our social development has been retarded by the fact that we have not yet brought the scientist to bear upon the management of human life, even while we have brought to scientist to bear on the management of every other aspect of life.

So today what I’m gonna do — for the rest of this lecture I’m going to give a little introduction to Ryle and talk about the intellectual context out of which he’s coming, and the basic idea that he’s bringing to this question of self, person, personal identity, and more generally sort of the mentalist idea, the mentalist view of human nature and behavior. And then next time we’ll get into the details of Ryle’s view and then after that we’ll move on to B. F. Skinner.

So let me say a few things about Gilbert Ryle. He was born in 1900 and died in 1976. Ryle was an Intelligence Officer in the Second World War. He was the Waynefleet Professor of Philosophy at Oxford University, a very distinguished position, and named Chair — I believe the Waynefleet Lecturer. The lecturer is named after that chair still go on to this day and it’s considered a great honor to be invited to give the Waynefleet lectures. Ryle was for 25 years the editor of the journal *Mind* which is the — arguably the top journal of philosophy in the world. I do believe — I want to say this also — it was the oldest journal of philosophy in the world, but I’m not absolutely certain about that. It is certainly one of the oldest.

He’s also one of the founding members of what’s called the Ordinary Language School of Philosophy. Again, when we talk of a school we don’t literally mean a school as in an institution with people in it, but we mean sort of a way of thinking that was shared by a number of people who did work together and worked on sort of common projects towards a common end. This school is called the ordinary language school and Ryle was one of the founding members of this distinctive way of doing philosophy,
the distinctive approach to philosophical subjects.

So let me just say now a few words about the ordinary language school because it will be very difficult to understand Ryle’s critique of mentalism if we don’t have a more general understanding of ordinary language philosophy and the sort of ideas — the notions and conceptions of critical analysis that come out of the ordinary language school of philosophy. So I’m gonna talk a little bit about ordinary language philosophy now.

It was a mid-20th century philosophical movement centered around Oxford University. That is, the ordinary language school — ordinary language philosophy is sometimes referred to in the literature as Oxford philosophy. Now, today it’s not often called that, only because there’ve been so many other philosophical movements that have come out of that great ancient University. But certainly in the mid-20th century Oxford was most famous for this product, this school of thought, and at least the word Oxford philosophy indicates that. The chief architects of the ordinary language school of thought were Gilbert Ryle, as already mentioned, and the philosophy J. L. Austin, who was born in 1911 and died in 1960.

The overarching idea of ordinary language philosophy was that there are no genuine philosophical problems. That philosophical problems arise because of confusions about language. Now, let me say that again. The overriding idea of ordinary language philosophy is that there are no genuine philosophical problems, but that rather philosophical problems arise out of the confusions in language. Typically, the confusions are confusions of oversimplification. So the idea is something like this. Philosophers tend to address problems or dilemmas which have two sides. So there’s one position on a subject, another position on a subject, and they’re in opposition to each other. The philosopher is trying to solve the dilemma, to break the confrontation.

The ordinary language philosophers thought that this paradigm of dilemmas,
problems, paradoxes reflected a too simple view of language and its use. In other words, it’s the result of treating words too simply. So to just take an example. One of the great perennial philosophical subjects that goes back to ancient Greece — it’s thousands of years old — is the question of the ultimate nature of reality. This is a subject of which there are numerous sides, but there tend to be two gigantic, titanic schools of thought in opposition to each other. On the one hand, you have what are called the nominalists who believe that reality ultimate consists of individual things. On the other side, you have what’s generally called the Platonists who believe that reality ultimately consists of abstract universals, of abstract ideas. These two ways of thinking have been in conflict for millennia and are still in conflict to this day, incidentally. When I was in graduate school, there was one very famous nominalist and one very famous Platonist who would battle on all sorts of issues.

But now the ordinary language philosophers would say that the entire struggle, the entire battle between these two sides, stems from an overly simplistic conception of the meaning of the word reality. The ordinary language philosopher might point out that the words reality and real are used in numerous different ways with different connotations. And that the idea that there is sort of one single thing reality about which we could take one position or the other is at odds with what we ordinarily mean when we use the word reality. That we use the word reality in many, many different ways with many, many different senses, depending on the context. But what philosophers do is they kind of conflate all of these together as if they’re simply one word, reality, which has one meaning over which we can then have an argument.

And ordinary language philosophers thought that virtually every philosophical problem arises from this kind of confusion over meanings of words, this kind of oversimplification of the meanings of words. To quote — and that the way out of philosophical problems was in a sense to reacquaint ourselves with the multiplicity of
ways in which words are used and to remind ourselves of that sort of — that messy diversity of uses which makes the articulation of very simple black and white kinds of problems impossible.

And I’m going to quote now — it’s a very short quote — from J. L. Austin who, as I said, was one of the founders of the ordinary language school from his book, Sense and Sensibilia, which was actually published posthumously on this very question — or on this very issue. Quote — so he’s talking here about the general state of philosophy and the general mistake that philosophers make. Quote: “The fact is that our ordinary words are much subtler in their uses and mark many more distinctions than philosophers have realized. It is essential to abandon the deeply ingrained worship of tidy looking dichotomies.” Unquote. And that last statement is a direct jab at philosophy as it’s been traditionally practiced. Philosophy has always been about tidy dichotomies, this way or that way, pro or con, for or against, black or white. What Austin wants to say is if we are careful and examine the way that we actually use words, we’ll realize that there’s virtually no issue that breaks down this way.

Now, Ryle blamed the mind/body problem precisely on this kind of linguistic confusion. Now, let me say what I mean by the mind/body problem. Because ordinary language of philosophy was concentrated on the dissolution, the dissolving of philosophical problems by way of a careful analysis of the way that we use certain words, Ryle is going to address the subject that we’ve been talking about in this part of the course, this issue of persons, self, personal identity, mentalism — he’s going to address this from the perspective of a perennial philosophical problem. That problem is the mind/body problem and it’s a problem that, in a sense, arises out of what Ryle thinks are linguistic confusions having to do with the words that we employ to talk about minds and bodies, to talk about persons and human beings, and so on and so forth.

So I’m just gonna define the mind/body problem as that cluster of problems that
arise from a dualistic view of mind and body — i.e., the problem of mental/physical causation, the problem of other minds, etc. But we have to be aware that as we read Ryle's critique, as we go through Ryle's critique, we're gonna see that its implications carry far beyond merely the dualistic version of mentalism. That is, while Ryle takes himself to be addressing the mind/body problem, those cluster of problems that we talked about at the end of our discussion of Descartes that arise from the belief that mind and body consist of separate substances, as we will see, Ryle's critique is going to include all mentalistic conceptions of human nature and of human behavior.

Specifically, just to give you sort of an advance notice of the general tenor of Ryle's critique, Ryle's critique is basically going to go as follows. He's gonna say, "Look. We systematically miss" — we meaning philosophers. He doesn't think that ordinary people suffer from these mistakes because ordinary people don't contemplate philosophical problems, as a general rule. It's philosophers who make this mistake. He's gonna say, "Philosophers systematically misinterpret and misunderstand the role played by mentalistic words in ordinary speech." So we're talking about words like believe, think, want, hope, hate — all these words that belong to our mentalistic vocabulary, these words that ostensibly refer to mental states, Ryle says that philosophers systematically have misunderstood the way that these words are used, the role that they play in our writing and speech.

And they've misunderstood them in such a way as to have intended the illusion that these words actually indicate the existence of minds and thought as internal entities and processes. That is, it's because philosophers misunderstand the way mentalistic vocabulary functions in language that they have mistakenly concluded that there are such things as minds and thoughts. That once we understand the role that these words — that mentalistic words really play in our writing and speech, we will no longer be tempted to think that there are minds or thoughts or any other internal mental
processes. That’s going to be — that’s essentially the tenor — that’s the logic of Ryle’s critique.

What we’re gonna do next time — and we’re on next time now — next time we’re going to go into the details. Okay. What is the mistake that philosophers have made with respect to mentalistic vocabulary? How has that mistake led to the mistaken belief that there are minds and thoughts? And moreover, what is the correct way of understanding our mentalistic vocabulary and what does that correct understanding indicate about minds, bodies, persons versus human beings?

So next time we’re gonna go into the details of Ryle’s critique and let me leave you with two things to think about while you’re reading. First of all, what does Ryle mean by a category mistake? Ryle is gonna accuse mentalists of committing a category mistake. Well, what does he mean by a category mistake and in what sense is one’s belief that one exists as a discrete self the result of a category mistake, according to Ryle? So what is a category mistake and in what sense does the mentalist commit a category mistake?

Two, is it plausible to you — and I mean you the reader, you the student — is it plausible to you that the very notion that you exist as a discrete self simply the result of the confusion about language? Is it plausible too — if you believe that you exist as a person as distinct from you as a human being, is it plausible to you to suggest that that belief is the result of confusions that you have about the meanings of mentalistic words? Those are the two things I want you to think about while you’re reading and we will pick this up again next time. Thank you very much. See you then.