Welcome back. We’re talking today about Gilbert Ryle’s critique of not just Descartes’ mind by dualism, but of mentalistic accounts of human nature and human behavior, mentalistic accounts of personhood taken more generally. Ryle, remember, comes from what’s called the ordinary language school of philosophy according to which philosophical problems are nothing more than the fruit of linguistic confusion. That is, that ordinary language philosophers believe there are no genuine philosophical problems. That philosophical problems aren’t, for example, like problems in science where the problems are real and there are solutions for those problems. Rather, the ordinary language philosophers thought that philosophical problems are the result of misunderstanding the many different ways in which words can be used and the many different meanings that words have depending upon their use. That is, the ordinary language philosophers believe that what philosophy traditionally has done is impose dilemmas, paradoxes, black and white scenarios on what really is sort of a multicolored palette of different possible ways of speaking and different possible meanings and understandings. So for the ordinary language philosophers, philosophy is not a genuine subject area. It is a subject area whose content is the result of linguistic misunderstanding.

What we’re talking about specifically here is the mind/body problem. The mind/body problem, remember, is simply the name for all of those philosophical problems that arise out of dualistic and mentalistic views of persons and of behavior. So whether we’re talking about the problem of other minds, how do we know whether we know anyone else is thinking, whether we’re talking about the problem of mind/body interaction — these are all problems that Ryle thinks have no solution because they’re not genuine problems. They’re problems that arise out of linguistic confusion. Specifically, linguistic confusion over the way in which mentalistic words function in ordinary speech, in ordinary language.
The specific kind of linguistic confusion that Ryle thinks is involved in the mind/body problem is what Ryle calls a category mistake. A category mistake is defined as a linguistic error in which one mistakes one type of word for another. And typically, category mistakes occur when the superficial grammar of a word or of a sentence betrays actually a radically different kind of logical form. So, for example, you might have two sentences, each of subject/predicate form, but in one sentence the verb plays a very different kind of role from the role that the verb plays in another sentence. But on the surface they look similar and so one can mistakenly interpret the sentences as being of essentially the same kind. I know this is very abstract, but it will become clear in a moment when we give examples. Ryle thinks that the mind/body problem — this cluster of problems that arise in response — as a result of mentalistic and dualistic views of persons and of human behavior — that the kind of linguistic mistake that underlies all of these philosophical problems is the category mistake.

Now, Ryle gives some very nice examples of category mistakes. What’s nice about them is they’re not only examples of category mistakes per se, but they’re examples that are illustrative of the type of category mistake that occurs with the mind/body problem, that underlies the mind/body problem. So the examples that I’m gonna discuss are on pages 16 to 17 of your readings from Ryle. He gives two examples of illustrations of the kind of category mistake he’s talking about. The first is what I’m gonna call the university example and the second I’m gonna call the military parade example. And so let’s just sort of — we’ll just walk through each of these examples. I’ll read here bits and pieces from the examples and we’ll talk about their relevance to the category mistake that underlies the mind/body problem.

So first the university example on page 16. Quote: “A foreigner visiting Oxford or Cambridge” — of course these are the great English universities, ancient English universities — “for the first time is shown a number of colleges, libraries, playing fields,
museums, scientific departments and administrative offices.” All right. So you can imagine somebody’s on a tour of the university. If you don’t like Oxford or Cambridge, imagine someone’s on a tour of Missouri State and you show them Strong Hall, and you show them Carrington, and you show them Plaster Student Union, and so on and so forth. “He then asks — the persons were then asked, ‘But where is the university? I have seen where the members of the colleges live, where the registrar works, where the scientists experiment and the rest, but I have not yet seen the university in which reside and work the members of your university.’”

All right. So you imagine that you’re taking someone on a tour of Missouri State and you show them all the buildings, you show them the playing fields, you show them the classrooms, and then they say, “That’s great that you showed me all these things, but you haven’t shown me the university yet.” Ryle goes on to say, “It has then to be explained to them that the university is not another collateral institution, some ulterior counterpart to the colleges, laboratories, and offices which he has seen. The university is just the way in which all that he has seen is organized. When they are seen and when their coordination is understood, the university has been seen. He was mistakenly allocating the university to the same category as that to which the other institutions belong.”

So here we have a classic example of a category mistake, of a person who doesn’t understand the way that the way university is used, as opposed to words like Strong Hall, words like Carrington Hall, words like Plaster Student Union. Words like Plaster Student Union and Strong Hall refer to concrete entities. These are nouns that refer to actual objects, things. The word university, though also a noun, has a very different kind of meaning. It doesn’t refer to a concrete object, to an individual thing. It refers to a specific type of relationship between objects. The university, in a sense, is the relationship between the various buildings, institutions, etc., etc., etc.
And so someone who wasn’t properly attuned to the way that the noun, university, is used in contrast to nouns like Strong Hall and such would commit this sort of category mistake. And might — if we want to now sort of anticipate the way that Ryle is gonna use this concept with respect to the mind/body problem — a person might think that, “Well, because I can’t see the university the way I can see Strong Hall, the university must be a non-physical entity.” So in addition to there being buildings, playing fields and dormitories, there are also these non-physical entities called universities.

So what we have here is an example of the way that a linguistic error, a misinterpretation of a word, because of its superficial grammatical similarity to other kinds of words, can lead a person to create a philosophical problem where none exists. As opposed to — you know, with the mind/body part we might talk about the university buildings problem. “Well, how does this non-physical entity, the university, interact with these physical buildings, playing fields and dormitories?”

So the idea here is to illustrate kinds of category mistakes that reveal the kind of category mistake that’s being committed in the case of the mind/body problem. And when I finish talking about the examples, we’ll talk explicitly about the way that the mind/body problem commits exactly the same kind of category mistake as those we’re representing in the examples.

Let’s take the second example which is the military parade example. So continuing on. “The same mistake would be made by a child witnessing the march past of a division” — imagine, you know, you’re a kid — with a kid at a military parade — “who, having had pointed out to him such-and-such battalions, batteries, squadrons, etc., asked when the division was going to appear.” All right. So you imagine you’re watching a parade and this company walks by and that battalion walks by and this regiment walks by, and then the person asks you, “Well, where’s the division? When’s
the division coming?" He would be supposing that a division was a counterpart to the units already seen, partly similar to them and partly unlike them. He would be shown his mistake by being told that in watching the battalions, batteries, and squadrons marching past, he had been watching the division marching past. The march past was not a parade of battalions, batteries, squadrons, and a division; it was a parade of the battalions, batteries, and squadrons of a division.

And, once again, notice how this sort of linguistic error could produce a philosophical problem where there really is none. So the person who thinks that the word *division* must refer to a concrete thing, just like the word squadron A refers to a concrete thing, that person might be inclined to become a dualist about divisions versus squadrons or divisions versus individual soldiers. We have here an example of a category mistake. A person who thinks that because the word *division* grammatically superficially resembles other nouns, that it must be the same kind of noun and must have the same kind of reference.

Now, Ryle’s argument is that we commit exactly this kind of category mistake with respect to mentalistic words, to our mentalistic vocabulary. We think that mentalistic words refer to mental entities and processes, refer to thoughts and minds, when in fact they do not. As he says on page 16, “The dualist and, by extension, the mentalist represent the facts of mental life as if they belonged to one logical type or category when they actually belong to another. The dogma is therefore a philosopher’s myth.” So what he wants to say is we commit exactly the same kind of category mistake with respect to our mentalistic vocabulary as is committed in both the university example and in the military parade example.

So let’s go now directly to the examples of the use of mentalistic words in order to see how this mistake is made. So consider the following example. I’m gonna give you two sentences. One describes a behavior and one allegedly describes a thought.
So the first sentence is, “John hit Bill.” The second sentence is, “John hates Bill.” Now, in the first sentence, the verb refers to a physical action, the action of hitting someone. So what the sentence is telling me is that one person struck another. Now, the second sentence has an identical grammatical structure and the word *hates* looks like it plays exactly the same role in the sentence as the word *hit* plays in the first. The idea is that since *hit* describes a physical action of John’s, we assume that the word *hates* describes a mental action of John’s, a thought.

So what I’m describing to you is the way that the category mistake is committed, right? We see a sentence like “John hit Bill” and we understand what that means. We understand how to interpret the word *hit*. When you see a sentence like “John hates Bill,” we think that it’s to be interpreted in precisely the same way. That since the word *hit* refers to a physical action, the word *hates* must refer to a mental action — to a thought.

Let’s consider some more examples just to sort of make this clear. I’m gonna pair a sentence that describes a physical action with a sentence that purports to describe a mental action, and I will label the first type of sentence a behavioral sentence and the second type of sentence a mentalistic sentence. So here’s the first behavioral sentence: “John kissed Jill.” Here’s the first mentalistic sentence: “John loves Jill.” Here’s the second behavioral sentence: “John drank a glass of water.” Here’s the second mentalistic sentence: “John is thirsty.” Here’s the third behavioral sentence: “John voted against George Bush.” Here’s the third mentalistic sentence: “John thinks George Bush is the worst president ever.” If you like, you can substitute any president you want. I just picked on George Bush because he’s the current one.

Now, in each case there is a temptation to think of the sentence in the second column along the same lines as the sentence in the first. In other words, because of the grammatical similarity between a sentence like “John kissed Jill” and a sentence like
“John loves Jill,” there is the temptation to interpret both sentences the same way. And since the verbs in the behavioral sentences denote physical activities of various kinds, we assume that the verbs in the mentalistic sentences refer to mental activities of various kinds. And this leads us to imagine two separate realms: the realm of behavior on the one hand, the realm of physics on the one hand, and the realm of thought on the other, the mental realm on the other.

And we may interpret these two realms dualistically as Descartes does or simply as two dual aspects of the same thing as John Locke does. But in either case, because we see these types of sentences as having the same grammatical structure, we assume that they have the same meaning, the same logical structure, and this leads us to the view that there are, in a sense, behavioral actions on the one hand and mental actions on the other.

And Ryle is — one of the nice things about Ryle is how clear he is and how clearly he writes. If you look on page 19, he says exactly this in a very, very pithy short sentence. Top of page 19 he says, “Since mental conduct words are not to be construed as signifying the occurrence of mechanical processes, they must be construed as signifying the occurrence of non-mechanical processes.” So there he very neatly sums up the mistake that we make. We see two words playing a very similar role grammatically in a sentence and we assume that they must play the same logical role in the sentence, that they must have the same meaning. In this case, we assume that since behavior verbs refer to physical actions, mentalistic verbs must refer to mental actions. This gives us the impression that there are two realms of being, the realm of physical being and the realm of mental being, however we construe that duality, whether in the literally dualistic way that Descartes does or in the sort of descriptive dualism that Locke prefers.

Ryle’s argument — and it’s an awfully original argument. Ryle’s is one of those
arguments where even if you think it’s absolutely wrong, you have to admire it for its ingenuity, for its cleverness, and for its perceptiveness — for how it sees things that perhaps a less perceptive person would not notice, someone less a genius than Ryle would not notice. Ryle argues that the assumption that the mentalistic sentences and the behavioral sentences are essentially the same, that beyond their surface grammar, that their logic, their meaning is essentially the same, he said that that assumption is a mistake. That to make that assumption is to commit the category mistake that then produces the position, the mentalistic position, that produces the mind/body problem.

But it’s one thing to say that that something — that to make a certain comparison is a mistake or to be convinced that two sentences are similar is a mistake, the question then is begged: well, why is it a mistake and b) what is the correct way of understanding these sentences? And, of course, Ryle has an answer for this. Ryle says that unlike behavioral verbs, unlike verbs like 

\[ \text{kissed, drank, voted against} \]

mentalistic words do not refer to mental objects or to mental activities. So let me say that again. Ryle says, “Look. Yes, it is true that behavioral verbs refer to physical activities. So the word 

\[ \text{kissed} \]

refers to the act of kissing. The verb 

\[ \text{drinks} \]

refers to the act of drinking. The verb 

\[ \text{voted against} \]

refers to the action of voting against someone.” But, he says, mentalistic verbs do not refer in the same way. Mentalistic verbs do not refer to mental objects or mental activities.

Well, the question is, “Well, what do they refer to then? What does a mentalistic verb mean?” And this is where I think his view is quite ingenious. Ryle says our mentalistic vocabulary is a kind of shorthand for describing people’s behavioral dispositions. That is, for describing the behaviors that a person is likely to engage in. He says on page 116 of your reading, quote: “To say that a person knows something or aspires to be something — that is, to ascribe a mentalistic verb to a person — is not to say that he is in a particular moment in process of doing or undergoing anything, but
that he is able to do certain things when the need arises or that he is prone to do and feel certain things in situations of certain sorts. The verbs no, possess, aspire and other mentalistic verbs do not behave like the words run, wake up, or tingle. We cannot say he knew so-and-so for two minutes, then stopped and started again after a breather. He gradually aspired to be a bishop or he is now engaged in possessing a bicycle.” In other words, what he is saying is that we can tell that mentalistic verbs don’t function like behavioral verbs in what we can’t say with them. A behavioral verb refers to a physical activity, John runs. And so we can say something like, “John started running but then he stopped a few minutes, and now he’s gonna start again.” But what Ryle is saying is you can’t say that kind of thing for mentalistic verbs like knowing or understanding. You can’t say, “Well, he knows this — he knew this for five minutes and then he stopped, and now he’s gonna start again.”

What does it mean to say that mentalistic verbs refer to behavioral dispositions rather than to mental activities? Well, I think the best way to explain this is simply to give examples again. So my examples now are going to involve two categories. The first example will be a mentalistic sentence. The second will be that mentalistic sentence translated into the dispositional sentence that it really means. This will be clear as the examples come out.

So let’s take one of the ones that we’ve already done, the mentalistic sentence John loves Jill. Ryle says that what we really mean when we say something like John loves Jill is we mean that John is likely to kiss Jill, John is likely to ask Jill out on dates, John is likely to send Jill flowers on Valentine’s Day, John is likely to say things to Jill like I love you. In other words, the word love is a shorthand for all of these behaviors that John is inclined to engage in with respect to Jill. The mentalistic verb love does not refer to a mental action of John’s. Rather, it refers to the inclination on John’s part to engage in various physical actions. Our mentalistic vocabulary is another way of
talking about physical activity. Specifically, it is a dispositional way of speaking about physical activity.

Let’s take another example that we’ve already given. *John is thirsty*. Now, that’s the mentalistic version. *John is thirsty*. Once again, Ryle would say the word is *thirsty*. The mentalistic word is *thirsty*. It does not refer to a mental state of John. It does not refer to some thought in his head. Rather, when we say *John is thirsty*, we’re employing a kind of shorthand. What we really mean is that John will drink a glass of water or other refreshing liquid if it’s offered to him. Again, the mentalistic word does not refer to a mental object or an event. The mentalistic word refers to the physical actions that John is likely to engage in at the moment.

And let’s do the last one. *John thinks that George Bush is the worst president ever*. And so this is gonna be, again, the mentalistic sentence. And, once again, Ryle is gonna want to say the mentalistic verb *thinks that* *George Bush is the worst president ever* doesn’t refer to a mental entity in John’s head — namely, the thought that George bush is the worst president ever. Rather, what this is is a shorthand way of saying that John is likely to vote against George Bush. He’s likely to campaign against him. He’s likely to stand outside the White House and picket him, and so on and so forth.

So let’s sum up for a minute because I know that linguistics is not one of those subjects taught in high school. Neither is philosophy, for the most part. This may be a very, very — to you, a very odd way of thinking about things, and so let’s just sort of step back for a minute and resummarize the position.

We have a certain philosophical position. That position we’ve called mentalism, the view that, in a sense, there exists thoughts and there exists physical — there exists behaviors, and the thoughts or the causes of the behaviors. It is out of these thoughts that our self, our personhood, is comprised. I mean, that’s what we call the mentalistic position. Now, that mentalistic — that philosophical position that we call mentalism
spawns a number of philosophical problems that we have deemed — that we’ve put under the rubric the mind/body problem. These problems are perennial. That is, philosophers have been debating these problems for as long as there have been philosophers.

Incidentally, one of the motivations of the ordinary language school of philosophy was what was perceived to be a lack of progress in the solving of philosophical problems. And so what these ordinary language philosophers thought was, “Well, maybe there is no answer to the problems. Maybe the problems are not real problems or maybe the problem is the problem — the problems themselves.” So you’ve got this position. We call it mentalism. It spawns a bunch of problems that we’ve called the mind/body problem. These problems are perennial and seem to defy solution. The ordinary language philosophers — and particularly Gilbert Ryle — come along and say, “Look, the only reason anybody holds this philosophical position from which these problems arise is due to a confusion about the way that we use our mentalistic vocabulary.” We have all of these mentalistic words and we mistakenly assume that these mentalistic words function like other words. Specifically, that mentalistic verbs function like behavioral verbs. And so we falsely assume that there is a whole realm of mental objects and mental activities.

But once we realize that that’s not the case, once we realize that mentalistic words do not refer to mental objects and mental activities but instead are simply a way of — a shorthanded way of referring to behavioral dispositions, once we realize that we will be no longer inclined to posit the existence of a separate realm of mental objects and mental activities. In other words, we will no longer be tempted to be mentalists. If we’re no longer tempted to be mentalists, the mind/body problem never arises. This is not so much the solution of a problem or a set of problems as it is the dissolution of a problem or a set of problems.
I’m going to leave it to you to decide whether you find this analysis persuasive. I left you last time with a bunch of questions, one of which I believe was — went directly to the question of whether you find this argument — this cluster of arguments to be persuasive. Whether you do or not — and I’m not sure that I do — as I said, I think the argument is to be admired for its ingeniousness, for its creativity, and for its perceptiveness of certain facts about our ways of speaking. I mean, surely even if we finally decide at the end of the day that we don’t agree with Ryle, that we do think that these mentalistic verbs do refer to mental objects and mental activities, Ryle is surely correct that what we’ve been calling these dispositional sentences, these behavioral dispositions, are certainly implicated by a mentalistic vocabulary perhaps in ways that we’ve not been previously aware.

Now, next time we’re gonna talk about B. F. Skinner who, of course, is one of the — considered to be one of the founders of the behaviorist school of psychology, which remains a powerful intellectual paradigm within psychological theory and especially within clinical practice. We’re gonna talk about B. F. Skinner on the subject of minds, persons, freedom and values. We’re gonna have two lectures on Skinner, just like we had two lectures on Ryle. We’re gonna read from two selections. One is essentially a scientific treatise and the second is a quasi-political treatise. The first sort of describes the basic arguments for and logic of behaviorism and psychology. The second, which are excerpts from the book Beyond Freedom and Dignity, describe what Skinner thinks should be the social and political consequences of behaviorist psychology.

I’m gonna leave you with three things to think about. The first, what does Skinner believe are the aims of science? What does Skinner think science ultimately is for? Two, why does Skinner think that we need specifically a science of man, as he calls it? And, three, what exactly does Skinner think is unscientific about the mentalistic concept of a person? So this concept of a person that we’ve been talking
about, whether in its Cartesian or whether in its Lockeian form, this essentially mentalistic concept where a person is thought to be comprised of his or her various thoughts and other mental states, what does Skinner think is unscientific about this view? It’s very important that we understand the basic view that Skinner is putting forward, the scientific view that Skinner is putting forward, before we can fruitfully address the social and political program that he wants to base on those scientific views.

So that’s all for today, for this installment. We’ll see you next time when we take up the subject of B. F. Skinner. He will be the last of the topics within this first part of the course. We’ll see you next time. Thanks.