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From Ghost to Mechanism: Revisiting Ryle's Behaviourism and its Implications for Non-dualist Theories of Consciousness

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Abstract

This paper critically revisited Gilbert Ryle's philosophical behaviourism, particularly his repudiation of Cartesian dualism encapsulated in the metaphor of the "ghost in the machine." The methods of analysis and criticism was employed in the research. Ryle's central argument is that mental states are not private inner episodes but dispositions manifested in observable behaviours. This argument is a powerful critique of the metaphysical assumptions underpinning traditional mind–body theories, particularly, that of Cartesian dualism. The study explored how Ryle's analysis prefigures and informs contemporary non-dualist approaches to consciousness, including embodied cognition, enactivism, and second-person perspectives. It situated Ryle within broader philosophical and cognitive science debates, demonstrating that his work, far from obsolete, provided valuable tools for clarifying conceptual confusions in current discourse. The study argued that Ryle's challenge is mostly conceptual rather than empirical, even while it acknowledges criticism from philosophers like David Chalmers who claim that Ryle ignores the qualitative, subjective aspect of experience. The findings of the paper among others included the fact that Ryle's method helped dissolved misleading questions that had sustained the so-called "hard problem" of consciousness. Furthermore, the paper also discovered that Ryle's insights can guide future inquiries in AI, neuroscience and social cognition. The study concluded that a full understanding of consciousness demanded both empirical evidence and philosophical precision—an approach that Ryle's legacy richly supports.

Keywords: *Behaviourism, Ghost in the Machine, Consciousness, Cartesian Dualism*

Introduction

The mind, for much of philosophical history, has been cast as a mysterious, immaterial entity - an elusive ghost trapped within the mechanical shell of the human body. This dualistic portrayal, famously articulated by René Descartes, has shaped centuries of debate in philosophy, psychology, and neuroscience. But, what if the mind is not a private theatre of ghostly impressions

but a way of behaving, acting, and interacting meaningfully with the world? What if centuries of philosophical confusion about consciousness stem not from unsolved mysteries, but from misunderstandings about language, logic, and categorisation? These provocative questions lie at the heart of Gilbert Ryle's critique of dualism and his call for a fundamental rethinking of mental concepts.

The target of Ryle's critique was none other than René Descartes, the father of modern philosophy, whose substance dualism posited the mind (*res cogitans*) and body (*res extensa*) as two fundamentally distinct kinds of substance (Descartes, 1984, p. 54). According to Descartes, the mind is immaterial, private, and self-aware, while the body is physical, extended, and governed by mechanical laws. This dualistic framework created a sharp epistemological and ontological divide between mental and physical phenomena, leading to persistent puzzles about how the two interact. Though enormously influential, Cartesian dualism left behind conceptual tensions that Ryle would later describe as a fundamental confusion about the logical status of mental concepts. Gilbert Ryle forcefully rejected this conception, branding it a "category mistake" and deriding it as the myth of the “ghost in the machine” (Ryle, 1949, p. 17). Ryle's metaphor not only served as a scathing critique of Cartesian dualism but also marked a turning point in philosophical approaches to understanding the mind and consciousness. By challenging the assumption that the mind is a hidden, internal substance separate from the body, Ryle ushered in a new way of analysing consciousness, a new ay that prioritises conceptual clarity over metaphysical speculation.

In his seminal work *The Concept of Mind*, Ryle offered an alternative grounded in what has come to be known as philosophical behaviourism. He argued that mental concepts such as belief, desire, and intention should not be interpreted as inner, private states, but rather as dispositions to behave in certain ways under particular conditions (Ryle, 1949, pp. 27–29). This approach challenged the deeply entrenched assumption that the mind must be some inner realm accessible only to introspection and posited instead that meaningful talk about the mind is rooted in observable behaviour and social context.

Decades later, as the Cartesian model continues to lose ground in favour of more empirically grounded frameworks, a diverse array of non-dualist theories of consciousness has emerged. Functionalism, eliminative materialism, and embodied cognition all reject the bifurcation of mind and body, seeking instead to locate consciousness within physical, behavioural, or relational systems. However, the relevance of Ryle's behaviourism to these contemporary theories remains a matter of philosophical contention. Is Ryle merely a historical stepping stone on the road to more sophisticated theories, or does his work still offer conceptual tools for dismantling lingering dualist assumptions? Therefore, this paper seeks to revisit Ryle's critique of the “ghost in the machine” in light of contemporary debates on consciousness.

Ryle's Behaviourism and the 'Ghost in the Machine’

Gilbert Ryle's most famous philosophical intervention is his scathing dismissal of Cartesian dualism, encapsulated in the phrase “the ghost in the machine.” In *The Concept of Mind*, Ryle argues that Descartes committed a fundamental *category mistake* by treating the mind as a separate kind of entity, akin to the body but non-physical in nature (Ryle, 1949, p. 16). A category mistake, in Ryle's analysis, occurs when things are represented as belonging to a logical type or category to which they do not actually belong. For example, to treat “the university” as a separate object over and above its colleges, libraries, and departments is to misunderstand the term's proper

usage. Ryle believed this was precisely the error committed in discussions of the mind. Ryle argues, Descartes and his intellectual successors mistakenly construed the mind as a hidden internal thing rather than a way of speaking about behavioural and dispositional patterns.

In rejecting this dualist framework, Ryle proposed what is now known as *logical* or *philosophical behaviourism*. According to Ryle, mental concepts like "thinking," "believing," or "intending" are not names for inner, ghostly processes. Rather, they refer to patterns of observable behaviour, tendencies, and competencies. To say someone is intelligent or believes something is not to attribute to them a hidden mental item, but to describe how they are likely to act in relevant contexts (Ryle, 1949, pp. 27–29). This outlook constitutes the core of his philosophical behaviourism, which holds that mental states are logically connected to behavioural dispositions rather than being ontologically separate inner causes.

Ryle's behaviourism was both revolutionary and controversial. It attempted to cleanse philosophy of what he saw as outdated metaphysical assumptions and instead encouraged a return to ordinary language and common sense. William Lyons (2001) points out, Ryle's rejection of inner causes was not a denial of consciousness, but a re-conceptualisation of its grammar: "Ryle's central claim is not that there are no thoughts, but that thoughts are not ghostly events in an inner theatre" (Lyons, 2001, p. 108). For Ryle, the question was not what mysterious processes occur "in" the mind, but how mental terms function in our everyday linguistic and social practices (Ryle, 1949, p. 42)

Ryle thought he was providing a more realistic and less enigmatic description of mental life by emphasising how we employ mental vocabulary in everyday situations. Ryle did not, however, support a reductionist or mechanical explanation of human behaviour. Unlike strict psychological behaviourists such as B.F. Skinner, Ryle's position was not rooted in empirical generalisations or stimulus-response theory, but in conceptual analysis. His goal was not to eliminate mentalistic language, but to clarify its use and expose philosophical confusion. In this sense, his work shares affinities with the broader tradition of ordinary language philosophy, as developed by Wittgenstein and Austin, though Ryle was arguably more systematic in his critique of mentalism Ryle, 1949, pp. 5–6; Glock, 2003, p. 212; Teichmann, 2011, pp. 88–89).

Thus, Ryle's analysis challenges the notion that mental states must be associated with private, internal episodes, instead redefining them as externally observable dispositions based on language and practice norms. His critique of the "ghost in the machine" invites a rethinking of what it means to have a mind, shifting the focus from internal introspection to outwardly manifested competencies and social practices. This shift lays the groundwork for reconsidering consciousness as a dynamic set of capacities shaped by social, behavioural, and linguistic contexts rather than as a ghostly presence within, a perspective that is still relevant in non-dualist theories of mind, albeit in modified forms.

Non-Dualist Theories of Consciousness: An Overview

The decline of Cartesian dualism in contemporary philosophy of mind has given rise to a range of non-dualist theories that attempt to explain consciousness without positing an immaterial soul or mental substance. These theories are united by the conviction that mental phenomena (however complex or elusive) are ultimately rooted in the physical world. Yet, their approaches to explaining consciousness vary widely, from the computational models of functionalism to the radical rejections of folk psychology seen in eliminative materialism, and the more embodied and enactive models that challenge the brain-centric focus of earlier paradigms.

One of the most influential non-dualist theories is functionalism, which holds that mental states

are defined by their functional roles in a system, rather than by their internal composition. In other words, what matters is not what the mind is *made of*, but what it *does*. According to Hilary Putnam (1967), who helped formalise this view, just as a mousetrap can be made of metal, wood, or plastic and still function as a mousetrap, so too can mental states be realised in different physical substrates, including brains, silicon chips, or even hypothetical Martian systems, so long as the functional relations are preserved. This position allows for a scientifically tractable understanding of consciousness, and it has proved particularly attractive in cognitive science and artificial intelligence research. However, functionalism, while avoiding dualism, faces its own philosophical challenges. Chief among them is its difficulty in explaining *qualia*, or the subjective, first-person aspect of experience. As Ned Block (1978) famously argued in his thought experiment on "China Brain," it is possible to imagine a system that performs the same functions as a conscious brain but lacks any internal experience. If every person in China simulated the neural functions of a single brain, Block contends, the system might have the right functional structure but still lack consciousness (Block, 1978, p. 281). Such arguments cast doubt on the sufficiency of functionalism for explaining consciousness as we actually experience it.

Another non-dualist approach is eliminative materialism, advanced by philosophers like Paul Churchland and Patricia Churchland. This theory takes a far more radical stance, arguing that our common-sense understanding of mental life (what is called "folk psychology") is fundamentally flawed and should be discarded in favour of neuroscientific explanations. Just as we once abandoned the concept of phlogiston in chemistry, eliminativists claim that terms like “belief” or “desire” may one day be seen as outdated theoretical constructs (Churchland, 1981, p. 75). On this view, there is no need to account for mental states in a behavioural or functional framework because they are simply illusory—a striking departure from Ryle's view, which sought to retain mental concepts while deflating their metaphysical implications. However, the eliminativist stance is not without controversy. Critics argue that it faces a form of self-refutation: to argue that beliefs do not exist seems to require having the belief that they do not exist. Moreover, as John Searle (1992) has pointed out, eliminative materialism neglects the *irreducibility* of subjective experience. The feeling of pain, the redness of red, or the sensation of awe may not be captured by any amount of neurobiological data, no matter how complete. These arguments underscore a persistent tension within non-dualist theories: the more they reduce mind to mechanism, the more they risk losing the phenomena they aim to explain.

A third, increasingly influential position is embodied and enactive cognition, which challenges the view that consciousness is housed entirely in the brain. Advocates such as Alva Noë (2004) and Francisco Varela argue that consciousness arises from the dynamic interaction between brain, body, and environment. On this view, perception and cognition are not processes occurring *in* the head but are enacted through a situated agent's engagement with the world. For example, seeing a tree is not just a matter of neural representations but involves bodily movement, sensory feedback, and environmental context. Consciousness, then, is not a passive, internal event but an *activity*, that is, a process of embodied interaction.

This embodied turn resonates in interesting ways with Ryle's behavioural dispositions. Ryle, too, resisted the idea that mental life was interior and private. Instead, he saw mental terms as rooted in public criteria and action-oriented practices (Ryle, 1949, p. 48). While Ryle lacked the empirical resources to develop an embodied theory, his focus on how mental states are expressed in behaviour anticipates the enactivist emphasis on action and world-involvement. Both reject the inner theatre model of consciousness and shift attention to the patterns of engagement that

constitute mental life. Nevertheless, the embodied approach still struggles with the classic *hard problem* of consciousness as articulated by David Chalmers (1995): why and how does subjective experience arise from physical processes at all? While these theories enrich our understanding of the structure and function of cognition, they often sidestep the question of *why* certain processes are accompanied by conscious awareness. This challenge remains unresolved across non-dualist theories and continues to fuel debates in both philosophy and neuroscience.

Ryle's Relevance in Contemporary Philosophy of Mind

To begin with, Ryle's rejection of the "ghost in the machine" metaphor was not merely a dismissal of dualist metaphysics but a call to reconceptualise mental predicates as grounded in behavioural tendencies and dispositions. In his own words: "when we describe people as having certain mental qualities, we are not referring to occult causes lurking behind their actions but to patterns in the ways they behave, speak, and respond" (Ryle, 1949, p. 58). This move was not a crude denial of inner life but a reconceptualisation of how we attribute mental states, placing emphasis on publically observable criteria rather than introspective access. This insight has found unexpected resonance in contemporary *enactivist* and *embodied* theories of mind, which view cognition as dynamic interaction rather than internal representation. Alva Noë, for instance, shares Ryle's dissatisfaction with the internalist view of the mind. In his influential work *Action in Perception*, Noë (2004) writes:

> Perception is not something that happens to us, or in us. It is something we do. It is a kind of skilful activity on the part of the animal as a whole... Consciousness, accordingly, is not something that occurs inside us—it is something we achieve (p. 1).

This passage could have come straight from a Rylean playbook. Noë's model, like Ryle's, refuses to treat consciousness as a "ghost" riding in a cognitive vehicle; rather, it sees it as constituted by patterns of intelligent behaviour and interaction.

Furthermore, Ryle's emphasis on *category mistakes* remains useful in policing contemporary philosophical errors. Ryle introduced this notion to show how dualists misclassify the mind as a "thing" in the same way as the body, thus leading to a false metaphysical bifurcation. As he famously explained:

The dogma of the Ghost in the Machine... represents the facts of mental life as if they belonged to one category of existence when they actually belong to another. It is like saying 'She came home in a flood of tears and a sedan chair' (Ryle, 1949, p. 17).

In contemporary discourse, this critique warns against simplistic reductions or reifications of the mind, as when neuroscientists claim that a brain scan *is* a thought or that consciousness *is* identical to certain neural activations. Philosophers such as Bennett and Hacker (2003) have deployed similar arguments in their critique of neuroreductionism, arguing that "it is a profound conceptual error to treat psychological predicates, such as 'believes', 'thinks', or 'feels', as if they denoted neural states or processes in the brain" (Bennett & Hacker, 2003, p. 73). This Wittgensteinian concern with the misuse of language, which Ryle shares, helps guard against the epistemological hubris sometimes exhibited in cognitive neuroscience.

Even in the domain of artificial intelligence, Ryle's insistence on *dispositional* rather than *occurrent* mental states offers a compelling lens. With the rise of generative AI and machine

learning, questions about whether machines "understand" or "know" anything have re-emerged with force. Ryle's framework suggests that attributing understanding to an agent—biological or artificial—should depend not on hidden internal states but on the exhibited capacity for meaningful behaviour. Thus, the Turing Test, which assesses intelligence based on conversational behaviour, echoes Ryle's view that intelligence is not an inner glow but a set of capabilities observable over time.

That said, critics argue that Ryle's approach flattens the inner landscape of consciousness and reduces the rich phenomenology of experience to mere patterns of behaviour. Thomas Nagel (1974), in his classic paper *What is it like to be a bat?*, emphasised the irreducibility of subjective experience:

> An organism has conscious mental states if and only if there is something that it is like to be that organism... the subjective character of experience is not captured by any amount of behavioural or functional analysis (Nagel, 1974, p. 436).

This critique highlights a persistent tension: while Ryle's dispositional account is powerful in deflating metaphysical mysteries, it may struggle to account for the immediacy and privacy of phenomenological experience.

Still, many philosophers today take a more charitable and layered approach to Ryle's legacy. As Julia Tanney (2009) observes:

> Ryle's intention was not to deny the inner, but to question the way we conceive of the inner as a separate ontological domain... He wanted to show that our mental vocabulary is not a theory, but a practice: a grammar of how we speak about people (p. 115).

Such reinterpretations rehabilitate Ryle as a philosopher not of reductive behaviourism, but of conceptual clarity and philosophical therapy, one whose insights can guide discussions across cognitive science, philosophy of mind, and language. Ryle's relevance therefore lies not in providing a complete theory of consciousness but in disrupting metaphysical confusions and redirecting attention to the conceptual frameworks through which we interpret mental life. His warnings against category mistakes, his commitment to public criteria for mental terms, and his suspicion of the mythologised inner life continue to shape how philosophers and scientists alike think about the mind. In an era of accelerating technological and neurocognitive advances, Ryle's philosophical restraint may be more important than ever.

Implications for Future Theories of Consciousness

The trajectory of philosophical inquiry into consciousness has shifted significantly in recent decades, embracing neuroscientific advances, computational models, and phenomenological methods. Yet, Gilbert Ryle's work, often dismissed as a relic of mid-20th-century philosophy, presents crucial conceptual tools that remain vital in resisting reductionist and dualist extremes. As this paper has argued, is emphasis on dispositional analysis, category distinctions, and the behavioural criteria of mental ascription provides a philosophical grammar that contemporary theorists would do well to revisit and integrate into evolving frameworks.

It is imperative that future theories of consciousness first address the persistent problem of conceptual clarity. The category error identified by Ryle, which treats the mind as an object in the same ontological class as the body, has not been eliminated; rather, it has just been repackaged. For

instance, some neuroscientific theories reduce consciousness to neural correlates, thereby falling into what Bennett and Hacker (2003) call the "mereological fallacy"—the mistaken attribution of psychological predicates to the brain rather than to the person as a whole (p. 72). Ryle's conceptual critique still holds relevance here. He did not deny the brain's role but insisted on the distinction between *causal mechanisms* and *logical grammar*. This makes his framework indispensable to philosophical oversight in scientific theorising.

Moreover, Ryle's influence anticipates key aspects of *embodied and enactive cognition*, where consciousness is seen not as a detached internal representation but as dynamically embedded in bodily and environmental interactions. As Gallagher (2005) asserts in *How the Body Shapes the Mind*:

> The phenomenological body is not a container of mind, nor is the mind something that happens inside the head. Rather, the body is a part of the dynamic system through which consciousness and cognition arise (p. 244).

Here, Ryle's dispositional view finds renewed traction. Consciousness is not an invisible light bulb glowing within, but a series of context-sensitive capacities, performances, and intelligible actions. The embodied turn in philosophy of mind vindicates much of Ryle's resistance to inner–outer dichotomies.

That said, future theories must also address the **phenomenological gap**—the so-called "hard problem" of consciousness. Critics like David Chalmers (1996) argue that Ryle's model lacks the tools to explain *why* and *how* physical processes give rise to subjective experience (p. 5). In *The Conscious Mind*, Chalmers maintains:

> Even when we have explained the performance of all the cognitive and behavioural functions in the vicinity of experience—perceptual discrimination, categorization, internal access, verbal report—there may still remain a further unanswered question: Why is the performance of these functions accompanied by experience? (p. 4).

This represents a serious challenge to any theory influenced by Ryle. However, a possible Rylean rejoinder is not to deny the existence of phenomenal consciousness but to reject the way the problem is posed. Instead of searching for neural correlates of *qualia*, Ryle would question the coherence of treating experience as a substance-like "extra" that needs to be tacked onto behaviour and cognition. In this way, future theories may benefit from *conceptual deflation*, examining whether the so-called "hard problem" is in fact a product of linguistic confusion or metaphysical overreach.

A promising avenue lies in **second-person approaches** to consciousness, where the mind is accessed not through introspection or third-person observation but through intersubjective engagement. Philosophers like Shaun Gallagher and Dan Zahavi (2008) argue that consciousness is inherently social, shaped by interaction and shared practices. This echoes Ryle's insistence that mental predicates are rooted in behaviour intelligible to others. As Zahavi puts it:

> We should abandon the idea that consciousness is something private and hidden away in an inner realm. Our mental lives are accessible not only through introspection but also through our embodied interactions (Gallagher & Zahavi, 2008, p. 189).

Such views align with Ryle's public criterion of mental concepts and extend it by situating

consciousness in dialogical and social contexts—a step Ryle himself did not fully take but arguably paved the way for.

In terms of **artificial intelligence and consciousness**, Ryle's theory raises cautionary flags. Claims that AI "understands" or "experiences" must be scrutinised through a Rylean lens. If mental states are not ghostly causes but demonstrated capacities, then attributing consciousness to a machine requires more than functional mimicry; it demands genuinely context-sensitive, norm-governed interaction. Mere output is not enough. As John Searle famously argues in his Chinese Room thought experiment, syntax is not semantics (Searle, 1980, p. 419). Ryle would add: semantics is not behaviour *alone*, but meaningful performance embedded in normative contexts. Thus, future AI-consciousness models must integrate not just functional roles but dispositional intelligibility within human practices.

Ryle's philosophical contributions offer more than historical curiosity; they are critical lenses through which to assess the direction of consciousness studies. His work is a neglected resource because of his cautions against metaphysical mistakes, his emphasis on the public and normative nature of mental ascription, and his foresight of embodied cognition. Ryle tells us how to think more clearly about awareness, even though he might not be able to solve the hard problem. Conceptual rigour may be just as important to the future of consciousness studies as scientific advancement, and Ryle continues to be a vital resource in this regard.

Conclusion

Consciousness remains one of the most enduring and perplexing subjects in philosophy. From antiquity to contemporary neuroscience, thinkers have wrestled with questions about the nature of the mind, the relationship between thought and action, and the possibility of subjective experience being reduced to objective explanation. While many modern accounts turn to brain imaging, artificial intelligence, or computational models to explain mental states, the philosophical underpinnings of these discussions often remain unclear or unquestioned. As a result, debates about consciousness frequently oscillate between reductive materialism and mysterious dualism, reflecting a lack of conceptual clarity about what the mind actually is.

A major divergence from conventional metaphysical approaches to the mind may be seen in Gilbert Ryle's rejection of Cartesian dualism through his idea of the "ghost in the machine" and his development of philosophical behaviourism. By demolishing the erroneous division between the mind and body, Ryle encouraged a shift of perspective, viewing consciousness as a complex array of dispositions and capacities manifested in language and behaviour rather than as an internal, private theatre of immaterial states. While his approach has encountered criticism for purportedly disregarding subjective experience, its continuing appeal resides in the conceptual clarity it gives to disputes too often muddled by unexamined assumptions.

As demonstrated throughout this paper, Ryle's work continues to have powerful implications for contemporary theories of consciousness, especially those resisting reductionist or dualist extremes. From embodied and enactive cognition to second-person perspectives and critiques of AI consciousness claims, Ryle's insights remain philosophically potent. His method reminds us that not all questions about consciousness are empirical, many are conceptual, and the clarity of our answers depends on the precision of our questions. In the end, further investigations into consciousness need to combine philosophical criticism with scientific understanding. Ryle left behind a collection of analytical, linguistic, and ontological tools that assist define what we mean

when we talk about the mind rather than a complete theory. Scholars continue to be challenged to consider what it means to be a conscious being in the world in a different and possibly more productive way by his call to dissolve rather than answer some of the mysteries surrounding awareness.

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