



Journal of Arts & Humanities

Volume 09, Issue 03, 2020: 89-94

Article Received: 08-03-2020

Accepted: 05-04-2020

Available Online: 07-04-2020

ISSN: 2167-9045 (Print), 2167-9053 (Online)

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.18533/journal.v9i3.1875>

The Response against Gilbert Ryle's Myth of Volition

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ABSTRACT

Volition or will power is considered to be important in order to explain and signify our action. Gilbert Ryle, who is a classical figure in the realm of philosophy of mind, argues against the myth of volition. The purpose of this paper is to the response against Gilbert Ryle's conception of the myth of volition. In order to do that at first, I will describe the Cartesian doctrine of Rene Descartes. Then I will explain the official doctrine along with the categorical mistake. Afterward, I will describe Ryle's myth of volition following the explanation of the four criticisms that he sets forward to refute this myth. And finally, I will response against each of these significant criticisms.

Keywords: Volition, action, official doctrine, myth of volition, mind.

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1. Introduction

British philosopher, Gilbert Ryle in his celebrated "The Concept of Mind" goes against Cartesian dualism. In order to do that, he voices against the dogma of the ghost in the machine where he talks about the infamous categorical mistake, and afterward, he extends his view against the myth of volition. To debunk the myth of volition, he puts forward four criticisms. At first, he criticizes by saying that we do not have any empirical proof of volition behind our action. Secondly, he criticizes that the volition fails to explain the judgment of the action. Thirdly, he criticizes that the connection between volition and movement is admitted to be a mystery. And finally, he thinks that volition is neither voluntary nor involuntary, but criticizes it as a causal hypothesis. Nevertheless, each of them is not exempt from further criticism themselves.

2. Cartesian doctrine

Cartesianism is the philosophical work and legacy of Rene Descartes. Descartes, the French rationalist, advocated the doctrine of dualism in the question of the body-mind problem. He philosophized that there are two substances, such as the body and the mind. And the body and the mind interact. The volition which resides within the mind can cause the bodily movement.

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Cartesianism is the philosophical work and legacy of Rene Descartes. Descartes acknowledges reason to be the prime indicator of his philosophical outlook. And as a result, he reasons that there is something rational in the human being which is not identical to the body. Thus in his explanation, among many things, he propounds his views about the mind-body relation. And this entails a significant domain in his philosophical tradition, Cartesianism.

Descartes “advocated the doctrine of dualism” (Doney, 1967, p. 304) in the question of the body-mind problem. Here he thought that there is, on the one hand, the body, and on the other hand, the mind. Both of them can exist independently. Thus understandably, he goes against the monistic view that there can only be the independent existence of the body or the independent existence of the mind. That is why his view is called dualism. And so by acknowledging the independent existence of both the body and the mind, his view becomes dualistic.

He argues for the existence of two substances. He claims that the “body is one substance, and the mind is another.” (Wilson, 1969, p. 159) Substance, by its definition, is independent, inheriting its own existence. That is the reason why the body is independent in its existence, that is to say, it does not depend on other substance or substances for its existence. Similarly, the mind is also independent in its existence; that is to say, it does not depend on other substance or substances for its existence. So he argues for the existence of two substances.

He also claims that “the body and the mind interacts.” (Wilson, 1969, p. 163) He thinks that the independent substances, i.e., the body and the mind, interact. Where the body interacts with the mind, and the mind interacts with the body. So the body and the mind interact.

The volition which resides within the mind can cause the bodily movement. He states that the volition or say the will power is within the mind. And this volition causes the movement in the body. For example, I have the volition to type this paragraph, and fingers, which in this case can be referred to be the body, are moving onto the keyboard of the laptop. So the volition resides within the mind that can be the cause to move the body.

3. The dogma of the ghost in the machine and the categorical mistake

Ryle refers to Descartes' conception of the distinct dual existence of the body and the mind as the official doctrine. He refers to Descartes' position regarding the mind which is within the body as the ghost in the machine. He thinks Descartes' ascribes to the categorical mistake.

He refers to Descartes' conception of the distinct dual existence of the body and the mind as the “official doctrine.” (Priest, 1991, p. 44) He thinks that Descartes states the mind and the body are two separate substances. Both of them exist independently without each other's assistance. And this view of his is “widely subscribed.” (Priest, 1991, p. 44) So thanks to the wide popularity of this account of the distinct dual existence of the body and the mind, it is phrased as the official doctrine.

He refers to Descartes' position regarding the mind, which is within the body as “the ghost in the machine.” (Priest, 1991, p. 44) He says that Descartes has conceived that the body to be “publicly observable” (Cooney, 2000, p. 33) It is also mechanical in nature. That is to say; it can be “explained by the mechanical law.” (Priest, 1991, p. 44) And in contrast, the mind's “working is private”. (Cooney, 2000, p. 34) It is non-mechanical, mysterious in nature. That is to say, it can be explained by “mysterious non-mechanical laws.” (Priest, 1991, p. 44) Ryle thinks that so in Descartes' view there is the mind which is mysterious is within the body which is mechanical. So there is the ghost in the machine.

He thinks Descartes' ascribes to the categorical mistake. The categorical mistake is a kind of “a special mistake” (Robinson, 1998, p. 125) that occurs when one mistakes one category with another category. And in the case of Descartes, it is held that the body is a substance which has an independent existence. And there is the mind which is another substance, also having an independent existence. Here the mistake lies in implying the predicate or attribute or quality or category- existence to both the body and the mind. This is because though it is true in the conception of Ryle's that the body has existence, but it is a mistake to imply the same category which is existence to be implied upon the mind. This is because the mind does not exist independently as the body does. And thus, by ascribing existence to both the body and the mind, Descartes is making the categorical mistake.

4. The myth of Volition

Ryle thinks that volition or say will power is a myth. He explains the myth of volition as a conception that the mind produces volition, and it is a special form of act where “the mind gets its ideas translated into facts.” (Ryle, 1983, p. 62) So when one has the volition to do something, then the body moves as an expression of the volition. For example, if one has the volition to walk, then his or her legs will start to move. And by this, the “bodily actions become the expression of mental processes.” (Ryle, 1983, p. 63) This conception is to him nothing but a myth. Nevertheless, he states that “mental events can happen but not by the separate substance called the mind.” (Ryle, 1983, p. 23) So Ryle argues against the myth of volition.

5. The four criticisms by Ryle

Ryle gives four criticisms against the myth of volition. Among the four criticisms at first, he criticizes by saying that we do not have any empirical proof of volition behind our action. Secondly, he criticizes that the volition fails to explain the judgment of the action. Thirdly, he criticizes that the connection between volition and movement is admitted to be a mystery. And finally, he thinks that volition is neither voluntary nor involuntary, but criticizes it as a causal hypothesis.

Firstly, Ryle criticizes by saying that we do not have any empirical proof of volition behind our action. He explains that people do not say that at 10 am, he or she has this or that volition. Besides this “we do not know what sort of predicates should be used to describe them.” (Ryle, 1983, p. 63) It is not clear that whether they can be attributed with predicates such as “sudden or gradual, strong or weak, difficult or easy, enjoyable or disagreeable” (Ryle, 1983, p. 63) and so on. Thus he claims that the “ordinary vocabulary has no non-academic names for them.” (Ryle, 1983, p. 64) So thinks that we do not have any empirical proof of volition behind our action.

Secondly, Ryle criticizes that the volition fails to explain the judgment of the action. He explains that we only “infer others volitions by overt action.” (Ryle, 1983, p.64) Which is the observable action that is demonstrated by the behavior of the body, so in any case, we cannot guarantee that the overt action is the effect of a given volition. It can also be said that in a particular case the “volition may have some other movement as its effect” (Ryle, 1983, p. 65) and the action may have some other cause as well. He gives the example of pulling a trigger where volition may have some other movement as its effect, rather than pulling the trigger. And pulling of the trigger may be the effect of some other cause rather than volition. So he thinks that the volition fails to explain the judgment of the action.

Thirdly, Ryle criticizes that “the connection between volition and movement is admitted to be a mystery.” (Ryle, 1983, p. 65) He says that according to the official doctrine, which is the doctrine of Rene Descartes, the mind and the body are two entirely different substances. He explains that as they are two separate substances, they are not numerically identical, so they cannot causally connect. Because by definition, substances are independent and completely different from one another. That is why the “transaction between minds and bodies involve links where no links can be.” (Ryle, 1983, p. 65) Thus the connection between volition and movement is mysterious.

Finally, Ryle thinks that volition is neither voluntary nor involuntary, but criticizes it as a causal hypothesis. That is to say; we only assume this causation between the volition and the action. To explain this at first, he asks whether volition is voluntary or involuntary and answers that it is neither. Because if one cannot but do something which is the case of involuntary action, it is absurd to think that one has volition. For example, one has to do something because he is forced to do so. Again he thinks that if it is held that volition is voluntary then it will lead to an infinite regress as there has to be another voluntary volition before it and another before that and it will go on and on. For example, to pull the trigger one needs to have a previous volition, and one previous to that, and another that and so on. Thus he says the “volition is a term of the wrong type to accept either predicate” (Ryle, 1983, p. 66) such as voluntary or involuntary. And he claims that his refutation of volition “will not invalidate the distinction between voluntary action and involuntary action, but will clear them.” (Ryle, 1983, p. 62) As he thinks that voluntary action is a publicly observable behavior which ensures the capacity and opportunity of the person for doing the action. Furthermore, he criticizes that if there was volition then it would be notorious to think that there can be the weakness of the will. This is because there is the volition, and the action follows the volition, so the volition would never fail to produce the action. For

example, a painter can never fail to paint if he or she has the volition for painting. But Ryle thinks, in reality, we do fail to perform certain actions. Thus he claims “volition is a causal hypothesis.” (Ryle, 1983, p. 66) That is to say that we merely assume about volition. So he thinks that volition is neither voluntary nor involuntary, but a causal hypothesis.

5.1 The response against Ryle’s first criticism

Ryle’s first criticism that we do not have any empirical proof of volition behind our action is not pleasant. The reason being, though we do not have any empirical proof of volition, it does not mean that it does not exist. We may not say at this particular time, one has this or that volition, but it does not mean volition is not done. It is true that normally, people do not talk using the term volition, but it does not make it non-existent. At the question of the appropriate use of predicates, we may not know or have appropriate predicates that we can use to define volition.

Though we do not have any empirical proof of volition, it does not mean that it does not exist. This is because sense has their limits as there are light waves that could not be seen without the invention of photo-sensors. Besides this, apart from experience, we have other sources of knowledge as well. So it can be claimed that we may infer about volition by reason or we may know it by intuition.

We may not say at this particular time, one has this or that volition, but it does not mean volition is not done. This is because we may not be conscious of our volitions all the time, but we can be conscious of them from time to time. For example, one may subconsciously have the volition to sleep, but when he or she fails to sleep, then that person can confront his or her volition to go to sleep in a more conscious, and not to mention in a more lively way than before.

It is true that normally, people do not talk using the term volition, but it does not make it non-existent. For example, we do not talk like I had the volition to do this at 10 p.m., but not using the term “volition” to do something does not erase it from existence. Besides people can say one has this and that volition at 10 pm, but normally, people do not say it like this as it would make their lives more complicated.

At the question of the appropriate use of predicates, we may not know or have appropriate predicates that we can use to define volition. But our limitation of language does not negate the existence of volition. This is because there are a lot of words that are not in the English language but it does not mean that the things that are expressed by those words are nonexistent. Besides this, if there is no predicate, then the predicate can be constructed.

5.2 The response against Ryle’s second criticism

Ryle’s second criticism, which is volition fails to explain the judgment of the action is not up to the mark either. This is because it can be responded that it can be difficult to go from overt action to the volition it comes from, but it is not impossible to do so. The possibility of volition’s effect to be something other than we think does not disregard the credibility of volition. It can also be said that it is also difficult to trace the overt action to its supposed bodily cause.

It can be responded that it can be difficult to go from overt action to the volition it comes from, but it is not impossible to do so. For example, if one consciously has the volition to do exercise and he or she does so then it can be said that the effect, that is the overt action, and in this particular case-exercise has followed from the cause, which is the volition to do exercise.

The possibility of volition’s effect to be something other than we think does not disregard the credibility of volition. This is because if the trigger was pulled, purely by a bodily reflex, then it was not caused by volition. But if the trigger was pulled in a conscious state of what the person is doing, then it must have a cause regarding volition. And it is not impossible that both body and mind can be a cause of action. Thus the action can be judged by the volition. And even if the overt action is faked, it is caused by volition, because in order to fake something, one normally remains in a conscious state of what he is doing.

It can also be said that it is also difficult to trace the overt action to its supposed bodily cause. This is because even if overt actions come from bodily causes, an overt action may be the effect of some other bodily cause than we had supposed. And besides, the problem of faking the behavior is also present. Thus bodily action may fail to judge an action.

5.3 The response against Ryle's third criticism

Ryle's third criticism, the connection between volition and movement to be mysterious, can be responded by not regarding the body and the mind as substances but grounded upon a neutral substance.

We may hold that the body and the mind are not substances, but they are grounded upon a neutral substance. This is because through the body, and the mind are not numerically identical, that is to say they are one and the same thing, but still, they can have a connection if it is held that they are not substances, to begin with. Rather they come from something neutral. And if the substance of everything is basically held as neutral, which is neither ideal nor material. And the mind and the body can be grounded upon it. Thus they come from it. So even though the body and the mind are separate and different entities, they can have a common ground, and as a result, they can causally connect. Because to be causally connected, things do not have to be identical, but it is enough to have common ground that may allow them to affect each other. Thus they can cause events, affecting each other as well. And in this regard, the connection between volition and movement does not remain totally mysterious.

5.4 The response against Ryle's final criticism

Ryle's final criticism where he thinks that volition is neither voluntary nor involuntary, but criticizes it as a causal hypothesis is also erroneous. This is because we know that actions can be either voluntary or involuntary. Besides this in the case of voluntary action, there will be no infinite regress as the volition is coming from the one who is having the volition, that is to say, the person. It does not entail that one has volition; thus, he or she will always produce this into action.

We know that actions can be either voluntary or involuntary. Action can be voluntary if it is freely willed. Here the term free can be referred to being avoid of the physical and mental hindrance. For example, to give beggar money is a voluntary action as it is done freely as an act of volition. Actions can also be involuntary if it is not willed freely, for example, by doing something subconsciously, because of having a mental disorder or being forced to give money to a burglar at gunpoint.

Besides this in the case of voluntary action there will be no infinite regress as the volition is coming from the one who is having the volition, that is to say, the person. So there can be a chain of volition, but no infinite regress as the person starts his volition so it does not have an infinite regress as it has a starting point. For example, one has the volition to make tea, so he has the volition to move, to clean pot, to boil water, to pour water in it, to make it hot by a machine, to pour tea leaf, to put sugar and milk in it, to put it into a cup and finally to drink it. So all of these are done by volition, so it has a chain of volition but the person is starting the volition. Besides this, the events that happen because of our volition can have intervals, thus it can be referred to as the endpoint of one chain of volition and the starting point of another chain of volition. For example, one has the conscious volition to have breakfast, and then he or she has the volition to go to work. Here the volition of having breakfast and the process to actualizing it can be considered as one event, having a starting and an ending of volition, and the volition of going to work and the process to actualizing it can be considered as another event, having a starting and an ending of volition.

It does not entail that one has volition; thus, he or she will always produce this into action. As one may have the volition to do something, but along the way of doing it, she feels not to do it; thus, she has the volition not to do it. For example, one has the volition to paint a picture, and she starts painting it, but after a while, she does not continue as she has lost her interest. It can even be the opposite as well where one does not want to do something at first; then, after a while, she does it. For example, one does not have the volition to paint a picture, but after a while, she paints it as all of a sudden, she has an interest in painting. It may happen that one has the volition to do something but cannot produce it into action because of the circumstance. For example, one has the volition to walk, but he or she is too weak to do so. And although there is volition there can be the weakness of the volition or will as well as strength of the volition or will. As even if two people are doing the same work, having the same skills and opportunities even then the one who has the stronger volition than others will do it more seriously. And all of these prove that there are strengths and weakness of the will. Therefore there is volition.

6. Conclusion

In fine, it can be said that Gilbert Ryle in his “The Concept of Mind” tries to refute the concept of the myth of volition; thus he criticizes by saying that we do not have any empirical proof of volition behind our action, the failure of volition to explain the judgment of the action, the mysterious connection between volition and movement, and volition being neither voluntary nor involuntary but a causal hypothesis. But despite his wholehearted attempts, his criticisms fall short to the mark.

This is because Ryle’s first criticism that we do not have any empirical proof of volition behind our action is not pleasant. The reason being, though we do not have any empirical proof of volition, it does not mean that it does not exist. We may not say at this particular time, one has this or that volition, but it does not mean volition is not done. It is true that normally, people do not talk using the term volition, but it does not make it non-existent. At the question of the appropriate use of predicates, we may not know or have appropriate predicates that we can use to define volition. Ryle’s second criticism, which is volition fails to explain the judgment of the action, is not up to the mark either. This is because it can be responded that it can be difficult to go from overt action to the volition it comes from, but it is not impossible to do so. The possibility of volition’s effect to be something other than we think does not disregard the credibility of volition. It can also be said that it is also difficult to trace the overt action to its supposed bodily cause. Ryle’s third criticism, the connection between volition and movement to be mysterious, can be responded by not regarding the body and the mind as substances but grounded upon a neutral substance. Ryle’s final criticism where he thinks that volition is neither voluntary nor involuntary, but criticizes it as a causal hypothesis is also erroneous. This is because we know that actions can be either voluntary or involuntary. Besides this, in the case of voluntary action there will be no infinite regress as the volition is coming from the one who is having the volition, that is to say, the person. It does not entail that one has volition; thus, he or she will always produce this into action. Nevertheless, Ryle’s attempt was a great endeavor in the realm of philosophy of mind.

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