

Early Buddhism and Ryle on Thinking Thought

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Abstract: The issue that concerns the debate over thinking, whether it is direct awareness of the object or an inferential procedure, has emerged largely in philosophical discussion. The nature and function of thinking, which has often led to a controversy, plays a role similar to that of the function of sense data in perception. This paper tries to analyse the concept of thinking thought with special reference to Buddhist philosophy and Gilbert Ryle. Finally, it studies my argument and ends with a few remarks about the concept of thinking and thought.

Key Words: Early Buddhism, Ryle, Mind, Thought, Action, Agent

1. Introduction

The main purport of this paper is a comparative study of the conception of mind and thoughts as delineated by the early Buddhist theory and the contemporary *Rylean notion* of 'mind,' (Ryle, 1963) thereby make an attempt to bring to surface the hitherto unexplored similarities in both. It also endeavors to demarcate their radical differences in theorizing the very concept of 'mind and thoughts.' In order to achieve the above mentioned aim I have brought forth the arguments against 'dualism' (from different angles) in both the systems of thought. Both of the philosophies have rejected the concept of dualism or eternal self. In this paper I have delineated the nature of thought and Mind. However, Buddha's conjecture of 'mind' was taken up for more radical theorizing by his followers later on (Buddhaghosa, 1956, 479-546) and we see more similarity, than dissimilarity, in them. Through this study, I submit that the early Buddhist thinkers had comprehended the problem of 'mind' *in toto* (a problem which the modern thinkers grapple with) though not with the sophistry of today. This paper is organized as follows: in the first section, Ryle and Buddhist concept of *mind* are discussed. Next, the paper argues that the Buddhist philosophy talks about the subjective consciousness. Thereafter, it examines the concept of thoughts in both these philosophical traditions.

2. The Concept of Mind

In the western tradition, Descartes established the dualism of mind and body. In his book *Meditations on First Philosophy*, the philosopher made a distinction between mind and body. He argued that mind is indubitable and necessary but bodies are dubitable and contingent. Knowledge of mind is “truer and more certain” as well as “much more distinct and evident” than knowledge of bodies. Primarily, the essence of Descartes' distinction between mind and body is the distinction between thinking and extension. A mind is “thinking, non-extended thing,” whereas a body is “an extended, non-thinking thing”. Ryle rejects this theory and talks only about the physical state. He argues that mental state is not different from physical state. He critiqued Cartesian dualism as the dogma of 'the Ghost in the Machine' because in dualism, one is material and the other immaterial. He argues that the workings of the mind are not distinct from the actions of body. Mind represents the entire function of the body and this is the Ryle's concept of mind. He has pointed out that category-mistakes are made by those people who are perfectly skilled to apply concepts, at least, in the situations with which they are familiar. These people are still liable, in their abstract thinking, to allocate these concepts to logical types to which they do not belong. However, as Ryle wishes to argue, there is no such mind, like a ghost, that controls the body as a machine. Mind is the recipient of knowledge through the five gate-ways of sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch. In Ryle's elucidation of mind, mental state and physical state are not different. According to Ryle, one should not think that as the human body is a complex organized unit, so the human mind must be another complex organized unit, though one made of a different sort of stuff and with different sort of structure (Ryle, 1963, 19).

It is fascinating to note that in Indian philosophy, Buddhism has also rejected the concept of self/soul. Thus, both these systems do not accept the existence of soul which, is eternal and, enters at the time of birth and quits at the time of death. Ryle rejects Cartesian dualism and says that one should not hold that mind and body belong to the same category. Similarly Buddha also rejects the ghostly existence of soul. In early Buddhism the person is nothing more than five aggregates or Mind (Nama) and Body (Rupa). One should not understand *Nama* as a 'formless' like soul that enters the body. Buddha refused to accept a formless and eternal self. Buddha's explanation is the abolition of ambiguity. It is not to shift the soul to the mind. However, Buddha did not reject the metaphysical existence of soul absolutely as mentioned above. He maintains the middle path with

silence. Accordingly, it must be said, that in early Buddhism *Nama* represents all the activity of body.

So far we have been dealing with the concept of mind and mind is no more than physical activity. The word 'mind' represents the complete act of perception or cognition and is also a link between two lives (Kalupahana, 1975, 119). Consciousness is the relation between the subject and object and is all about awareness of the object. It includes all of the enormous varieties of awareness. Conscious states exist only when they are experienced by some human or animal subject. In this sense, they are essentially subjective. So in the second part of this paper, we will discuss on the nature of thought with special reference to early Buddhist philosophy.

3. The Notion of Action

In early Buddhism, “*sankhara*” is one of the five aggregates. This aggregate is used for volitions. *Sankhara* can be translated in many different ways: formations, activities, processes, forces, determinations, and constructions. It is responsible for generating rebirth and, thus, for sustaining the onward movement of *samsara*, the cycle of birth and death. In this context *sankhara* is virtually synonymous with *action*. Action plays an important role in Buddhism. The doctrine of *action* is one of the fundamental principles of Buddhism. Action undertaken, according to Buddhist belief, determines the prospects of one's future life and existence. Our present existence is the outcome of the past act and present act produces our future. Buddhist ethics inculcates that good or bad deeds produce a good or bad result. In early Buddhism, the intention behind an action plays an important role. The original Sanskrit term *karma* literally means “action”, and, as this suggests, the basic point is that our actions have consequences. According to Buddhism only purposive action determines its result. Thus, the moral consequences of the action of a person who is not in normal state of mind will be comparatively light. Here, a question could be raised whether the offender could be blamed for his action. Buddha states that we cannot blame him because he was out of mind when he was committing the offence or mistake. The amount of moral consequences of one's actions corresponds directly to the degree of one's mental stability, intelligence and understanding. Thus, the moral consequences of the action of a person who has an unstable mind are comparatively light, while for those who have sound mind and clear understanding the consequences are relatively heavy.

Having discussed the Buddhist position on volition and action, now let us look at the same in Ryle. Ryle has a similar kind of conception of an agent and action. According to him, if one acts intentionally then his action is voluntary. In order to explain it further, let us take an instance of a boy who arrives late at school and, after the investigation of his school teacher, it turns out that he left home at the usual time and did not delay on his way to the bus stop and caught the usual bus. But, the bus broke down and he could not complete his journey. The boy tried his best to reach the school on time. There was nothing else that he could have done for remedying the effect of the breakdown of his vehicle. Even though he ran as fast as he could, he could not get there on time. In this example, his late appearance was not the result of failure to do what the boy was capable of doing (because he was prevented by the situation which was not in his control). Ryle points out that the distinction between voluntary and involuntary applies to mental as well as to physical events. For instance, something can remind me of my sister and so I can start think of her involuntarily. Also, I can deliberately start to think about her. In the latter case, volition has occurred because it is a voluntary mental event.

The purpose of discussing the notion of volition in Buddhism is to show that Buddha refutes the notion of eternal self. Thus, action can take place because there is a body performing the said action. For any kind of action, we do not need an eternal agent. For Buddhism, there is no reason to assume that agent must have a soul or permanent substance serving as the self. Early Buddhism explicitly explained that the five aggregates are the agent who performs action. This section prepared the ground for the main claim. In the next section, we will take up the nature of thoughts.

4. Thinking thoughts and Agent

Ryle argues that the word 'thinking' covers some activities which are attempts to reach the answer to questions. When we say that 'X is thinking', it means that X has learned it and not forgotten how to do it. He argues that when we say that someone is well trained, it means that he does lot of hard work. The notion of well-trained philosopher or poet has something nonsensical in it but philosophizing and composing are largely without prescribed techniques. This is so because to be successful in them is to advance ahead of all the beaten tracks. They do not require manuals but practice, stimulation, hard work and flair. Ryle explicitly writes that the verb 'think' can refer to both beliefs and opinions

(Ryle, 1990, 392). According to Ryle, thinking in what one does multiplying and translating is something that he cannot conceive to do without having learned and not forgotten how to do it.

For Ryle, when the intention with which an agent does *X* is ancillary to the intention with which he will or would do *Y*, we can say that his *X*-ing is an intention-parasite in his *Y*-ing in mind; and he may have to have *Z*-ing in mind in order to have *Y*-ing in mind (Ryle, 1990, 474). So, thinking is just recalling the past experiences. The contents of the historical narrative cannot be put in the 'extra-chronicle form'. No more than the plot of a play can have an extra scene or action in the play. In the history of thinking, we present only a chronicle of images but there are many other vital unique aspects which are rooted in its essential 'intention-parasitism.' Early Buddhist also talks about thinking thoughts without the thinker. But Buddhist philosophy talks about the subjective world. We do not perceive an object as it is. As we have mentioned in the second section of this paper, we do not come in this world with blank slate. Therefore, we cannot think objectively. Here it is significant to note that Buddhist notion of thinking is little different from the Rylean notion of thinking. In early Buddhism, emotion plays important role. Therefore, thinking become very subjective in Buddhism. Let me take Santarakshita's argument for emotion. He was one of the most important and pivotal thinkers in the history of Indian and Tibetan Buddhist philosophy. Emotion plays significant role in one's life. We cannot talk about the starting point of emotions. Our emotion is the effect of the past experiences. In other words, we have learnt emotion through the repeated experiences in the past. Again, due to emotion, this world appears differently to each one of us (Jha, 931, 1986). So, for Buddhism, our first experience of emotion is due to our experiences of past life. Our main intention in elucidating the notion of emotion is claim that one cannot perceive an object objectively. In perception, emotion plays significant role. Therefore, when we think we always recall the past experiences but not objectively. There are subjective elements in the nature of thoughts. Buddhist position is different form Ryle's position in this sense. But it is always fruitful to see one's philosophy in another's philosophy.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, one might beg to differ from the Rylean repudiation of dualism, purely by logical analysis, as the early Buddhist denial of dualism is different from that of Ryle's.

But the conception of mind in both early Buddhist philosophy and Ryle does share some common traits. For early Buddhism, *mind* and *body* constitutes the complete personality (or person), and self is nothing but a bundle of aggregates. The conception of mind in early Buddhist philosophy is diametrically opposed to the Cartesian *cogito ergo sum*. In the early Buddhist thought, mind is not different from five aggregates which are *dhamma*. Similarly, the Rylean notion of mind also shows that the substance of mind is not different from substance of body. The Buddha and Ryle did not commit themselves to the existence of metaphysical self (soul), but explained everything in terms of the mind mechanism. Through this study, we submit that notion of thinking is not more than recalling our past experiences. But in Buddhism there are some subjective elements are always present.

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