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MIND AND ONTOLOGICAL COMMITMENT: A COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

The mind-body problem is one of the few metaphysical issues that has refused to go away despite the various attempts by recent analytic philosophers to "clear it away" with the rest of metaphysics. Indeed, of all the Western philosophic approaches it is particularly the empiricist tradition from Locke, Berkeley, and Hume down to the contemporary analytic movement that has done battle with and continues to propose ways of solving or dissolving the mind-body problem. But this problem has shown a remarkable ability to survive all such attempts to proclaim it dead. It still rumbles in the ruins of the Cartesian mansions. which are the foundations of analytic philosophy's efficiency housing. It lurks benind Strawson's primitive "persons" and has recently again surfaced in Kripke's criticism of the identity-theory. [1]

On the other hand, the mind-body problem has been virtually absent in the Indian philosophic scene. While there is much talk about the mind in the literature of the various Indian traditions, one rarely finds the relationship between mind and the physical body being discussed as a philosophic (i.e. metaphysical) problem. A conspicuous difference between the Indian and Western empiricist approaches to mind is that in the empiricist tradition, mind has enjoyed a very special epistemological and ontological status—only to be rivaled by that of the physical body. By contrast, in India mind has been generally regarded as only one among several functions that make up the human psychophysiological being.

The purpose of the present paper is to examine the coneept of mind and the mind-body problem from a comparative standpoint. Rather than presenting a general survey of the Indian approaches or a detailed exposition of some particular Indian approach, I shall concentrate on the mind-body problem itself and its ontological presuppositions. I shall restrict my consideration of the Indian tradition to two well-known approaches, Advaita-Vedānta and Buddhism, and confine my remarks on the Western tradition to the Empiricist-Analytic movement.

A comparison of these two traditions is particularly instructive since they circumscribe the domain of mind in rather similar ways. Thus in empiricist philosophy as well as psychology, mind consists primarily of sense-impressions, ideas, and associations among these; the more subtle cognitive functions have been either ignored or considered derivative of the sensorily-based functions. In the Buddhist and Advaita-Vedāntic analysis the lower mind (mano-vijñāna) is similarly concerned with associating and categorizing the data of the senses, whereas the higher cognitive functions are attributed to a distinct organ (i. e. buddhi or vijñāna). Given this initial similarity in the ways in which the capacities of mind are described in the Indian and Western traditions, it becomes all the more interesting to ask, why do the two traditions differ so vastly as to the significance that they attribute to mind ?

The significance of mind in the empiricist tradition is clearly illustrated in the polemics waged over the mind-body problem during the past four centuries. The following solutions have all been proposed within this tradition : that all of reality is of the nature of mind (phenomenalism and subjective idealism), that all of reality is of the nature of body (materialism), and tnat reality somehow partakes of both mind and body (varieties of dualism).

Turning to the Indian analyses, one finds no such privileged status assigned to mind. Considered as a modification of pure consciousness (as in Advaita-Vedānta) mind (mano-maya) is a sheath (kośa) of medium subtlety, grosser than the discriminative, reflective consciousness (vijñāna-maya) or the spiritual consciousness (ānanda-maya), but finer than the vitality that permeates the physical body (prāṇa-maya) and certainly finer than the physical body (anna-maya)[2]. When considered from the point of view of the functions that constitute worldly experience (as in Buddhism), mind is again just one among the several "...aspects [skandhas] of an indivisible process to which neither the quality of ' being ' nor of ' non-being ' can be attributed. "[3]

By juxtaposing each of the kośas or skandhas with its adjacent one, several other dualisms could be obtained besides that of mind and body. And why not? A fresh look at our sciences as well as our own immediate experience reveals a number of dua-

lisms that are just as profound and real as that of mind and body. Thus consider the dualism of feeling and thought. Take fear as an example of feeling. My fear of the dark, lonely alley is not the same thing as my perception of it. Yet psychology has not been able to solve the riddle of the relationship between perception and feeling any more than philosophy has been able to solve the riddle of mind and body. Or consider the dualism of living and non-living. We distinguish living organisms from non-living aggregates of molceules; yet biology has not been able to unravel the secret of vitality which accounts for the difference between the living and the merely physical.

It is obviously not my intention to suggest that Indian philosophers have been preoccupied with all these and other dualisms. The point I wish to make here is that if one were concerned with the dualisms of worldy experience, as Western philosophy certainly has been, then why limit this concern to just one kind of dualism, namely that of mind and body? The Indian analyses imply that the mental and the physical do not exhaust all possibilities, and an inquiry into the phenomenology of experience also suggests that the mental and the physical do not exhaust the domain of experience. The question, therefore, which the Indian view of mind poses to Western philosophy and the empiricist tradition in particular is, why do to the mind and the mind-body problem occupy such a central position in philosophic analysis while the other facets of experience, such as vitality and feeling, have been peripherally acknowledged at best, and have never enjoyed the epistemological and ontological significance attributed to the mental and the physical?

The answer to this question lies in the unique power that mind possesses to force ontological commitments on us, that is, to fashion the world in its own image.

The first step toward fashioning the world in the image of mind consists in the identification of mind with its *objects*, i. e. sense-impressions, memory-images, thoughts, etc. Such an identification was strikingly evident in Hume's abortive inquiry into the self. It began with the assumption that whatever else the self may be, it must be an object of experience, thus a sense-impression or an idea.[4] The fact that Hume did not find an idea or an impression of the self did not alter his view that mind is a collection

of sense-impressions and ideas—only now he was convinced that, beyond these, there was no such thing as the self.

The distinguishing feature of the empiricist tradition in both philosophy and psychology has been the identification of mind with its objects. The ways of referring to these objects have varied from Hume's impressions to the logical empiricists' sense-data and the behaviourists' internal stimuli. The point is that such objects have been thought of as the elements of which mind is constituted. The reverse possibility, namely that mind through its own activity constitutes these objects, has never been seriously entertained in empiricist philosophy or psychology, including phenomenalism. The only genuine mental activity that has been acknowledgd in this tradition is the mind's capacity to form associations. However, it should be noted that the principle of association, central as it was in Hume's analysis of knowledge and experience and in contemporary behaviouristic psychology, has never been seen as *constitutive* of the mental objects. The objects are there, prior to the associations both psychologically and ontologically. It is not surprising, then, that the empiricist philosophers have found it relatively easier to talk about what the mind *is* than what it *does*. It is nothing more than the set of mental objects. But what it does can only be illrustrated by means of the embarrassingly crude metaphor of the fruitbasket that contains apples and oranges.

The way in which the mind-body problem has been cast in the empiricist tradition reflects the prior commitment to objects and the identification of mind with its objects. Thus the problem always concerns the status of some object of experience, whether it should be construed as part of an irreducible mental state or as reducible to a brain-state-for example, whether the image of a tree that I am now seeing is reducible to certain neural states of my brain. The question as to whether I myself am reducible to my brain-states has struck many philosophers as patently absurd, or at best a misstatement of the problem. In the correct statement of the problem, I am inevitably turned into an object—whatever it is that the proper name 'I' refers to, according to Russell and Quine, or "rigidly designates," according to Kripke. The point is that it is always some object of experience, such as an image or a thought, whose status as mental or physical is in

question (that some philosophers talk in terms of 'mental states' and 'mental events' in no way detracts from this observation, the reason for this being that states and events are analyzed as objects).

It is clear that the identification of mind with its objects has amounted to far more than merely a conception of mind. The first step (that of identifying mind with its objects) in fashioning the world after the image of mind has been followed by the second step: the real itself, whether mental or physical, has come to be identified with the object. The ontology of objects provides the thread of continuty in the empiricist tradition from the British Empiricists to the contemporary theories of meaning and truth.

Let us now turn to the Indian analysis of mind. There we find that mind is described as the associating, categorizing activity. Sometimes it is described as another organ along with the five sense organs, or as a faculty whose function it is to associate, categorize, and judge the objects of the senses. In the early Bhddhist literature one finds the functions of the senses, mind, intetlect, etc. analyzed in formidable detail, yet without loss of the dynamic activity that constitutes the psychophysical process:

As to function : what is the faculties' function? Firstly, ... the eye faculty's function is to cause by its own keenness, slowness, etc., the occurrenc of eye consciousness and associated states, etc., in a mode parallel to its own, which is called their keenness, slowness, etc., this function being accomplishable through the state of faculty condition. So too in the case of the ear', nose, tongue, and body. But the function of the mind faculty is to make conascent states subject to its own mastery.[5]

In such analyses, frequent references are made to "elements" (dharma, dhātu). However, the "elements" of the Buddhists are not to be equated with "mental objects" as we have used this term previously. Thus the text quoted above offers the following explanations:

So each thing (dhamma) among those beginning with the eye is called a 'sort (dhātu—element)' in the meaning just stated beginning 'It sorts out, it assorts well' ,...Furthermore, 'element' as a term for what is soulless; and for the purpose of abolishing the perception of soul the Blessed One accordingly taught the elements in such passages as 'Bhikkhu, this man has six elements'.

Therefore the exposition should be understood here firstly as to meaning thus : it is an eye and that is an element, thus it is the eye-element.... it is mind consciousness and that is an element, thus it is mind-consciousness element.[6]

Thus the elements refer neither to passive, inert atoms not to ontologically ultimate constituents of reality. They are best viewed as the units of a phenomenological analysis which multiplied as the analysis captures ever subtler facets of experience.

From the Advaita-Vedāntic literature it also becomes clear that mind is not to be equated with its objects ; rather, mind by its activity produces objects :

The mind (manas) constantly produces for the enjoyer sense-objects without end, by nature dense or subtle, and differing according to kind of body, social status, stage of life and outward circumstances, with their qualities, activities, causation and effects.[7]

Indeed, mind is not just thoughts and images moving about but rather it is precisely movement. And when the movemnet of thought ceases, mind itself ceases. Thus objects are merely the way of the movement that is mind, like the ripples on the surface of a pond. When the wind calms down, the ripples vanish ; so also when the movement of mind stops, objects disappear. Such a conception of mind lies at the foundation of the practice of *dhyāna.*

In Budhism and Advaita Vedānta, mind is considered to be ontologically on a par with feeling, vitality, and the other skandhas or kośas. Thus mind produces thoughts, images, and in genral, objects; feeling produces artachment; and vitality produces the order and integrity that is the living organism. But, strangely enough, vitality and feeling, though undeniably facts of our immediate experience, have been almost totally neglected by the empiricist tradition in the west. Why did they disappear from the ontological scene of empiricist philosophy? The answer that arises in the Buddhist and Advaita vedānta perspective is simple enough; vitality and feeling do *not* present objects of experience the way mind presents objects of thought or perception. Thus thc fear that I may be feeling is *not* an object of my feeling but a lebel or description of the feeling itself. It is interesting to mote in passing that it is precisely the direct, phenomenological impact of a feeling,

such as a pain, that convinced Kripke of the non-identity of the mental and the physical. For by the inclusion of feeling, the mental becomes irreducible to an object, such as the brain. Thus Kripke says that pain " · · · is picked out by the property of being pain itself, by its immediate phenomenological quality."[8] I take him to be saying here nothing more than that the experience of pain is determined by just the expcrience of pain, neither by names nor by descriptions. Kripke goes on to say that "If any phenomenon is picked out in exactly the same way that we pick out pain, then that phenomenon *is* pain"[9]—and, needless to say, a brainstate is not picked out in that way !

Thus, a feeling is *not* an object. Of course, all kinds of objects may appear with the feeling, for example, an image of the dark, lonely alley that I am fearful of; but none of them is the feeling itself. If one were to penetrate through the images, one might encounter the process, the activity, the movement that is the feeling. But no sooner does this happen than the mind again declares its presence by offering an *image* of the process—perhaps something like flowing river. Those whose powers of imagination allow them to almost reach the flow without the river will find that the flow, wlthout something flowing, is not an image at all and hence not an object.

One also find that, however modest one's powers of imagination, they (powers of imagination) reach farther than language does. With the disappearance of objects, language goes on holiday and can at best serve those which enjoy the festive mood thereof : the poets and the mystics. To the poets and the mystics, langaage is a transparent metaphor which in their playful hands can capture some of the process that the words in their literal meaning cannot. Is it by accident that poetry is the language of feeling and mystical insight the way to capture life itself ?

But the literal language of the empiricist philosopher is the language of mind—the instrument through which mind fashions the world in its image. The language of empiricist philosophy deals with objects; gone self-conscious in the hands of contemporary analytic philosophers, it now deals with the *words* that refer to objects. This is an ironical conclusion for a philosophy that claims its basis in human experience. The best of poetry, on the other hand, does not deal with words; rather it uses them

to convey what the poet experiences. Western philosophy, particularly the empiricist tradition, has always conceived itself in sharp opposion to poetry and mysticism, the latter have been regarded by the philosophers as being scracely more than an indulgence in emotion and fantasy, possibly of some subjective, therapeutic value to non-philosophers or perhaps even to philosophers in their unphilosophical moments, but certainly of no use to a serious inquiry into human experience and knowledge. Thus poetry and philosophy have gone their separate ways, the one talking directly from experience and the other talking not even about experience but just about talk. The paradox of Western empiricist philosophy lies in the fact that, on the one hand, it claims to investigate mind and world as empirical phenomena and to rely on the empirical methods of observation and veriffication. On the other hand, the way the inquiry into mind and the mind--body problem has been conducted in this tradition has been for removed from genuine empirics. Thus it has been one of the axioms of empiricist philosophy that mind is accessible to observation only in immediate experience. Yet the reliance on such experience has been explicitly banned as being subjective, unreliable and invalid as a method for investigating mind. As a result, the objects of mind—or the words that refer to them—have set the ontological boundaries of the inquiry, ruling out the possibility of an *empirical* investigation into the origins of these objects in consciousness.

The empiricism of the Indian approaches to mind goes much farther than that of the Western empiricist philosophy. Thus both the objects of mind and their arising in consciousness are seen as empiricai phenomena which are to be investigated not through an *a priori* logical analysis but through the empirical methods of yoga and meditation. Through such methods mind is revealed as not simply a collection of mental objects but as the activity or process that produces these objects. *Ontological commitment* is then seen as the very essence of this mind activity. Śaṅkara's theory of the superimposition of names and forms provides an analysis of how an ontological commitment is made. Thus it is the veiling (āvaraṇa) and projectlng (vikśepa) mind-activity,[10] reinforced by feeling-attachments, that generate not only the objects of the world but our commitment to their reality as well. And through his uncompromising dialectic, Nāgārjuna shows how ontological commitments can be unmade. Through analyses such as Śaṅkara's

and Nāgārjuna's, the mind's power to fashion the world after its image is thus made transparent.

But the nature of ontological commitment cannot be penetrated so long as mind is identified with its objects, i.e. with that which ontological commitments are about. The term 'ontological commitment' has been made popular by Quine and its implied relativity of categorial frameworks has made a lasting impact on contemporary philosophy. Quine has made us aware that we make ontological commitments and that we may even exercise some choice in the matter.[11] But exactly *how* do we make an ontologicel commitment or choose one ontology over another? How, for example, does the intuition come about by which Kripke claims to know, when referring to an object, that "If I am talking about it, I am talking about *it*"?[12] To the best of my kuowledge, nobody in the empiricist tradition has inquired as to the nature of ontological commitment as such. Some including Quine, have looked to behaviouristic psychology for an account as to how the habitual ways of talking, including referring, of a community are acquired by growing up in one. [13] But the implications of such an account are more alarming than have often been realized. For what is implied here is that philosophers should consult psychologists as to how to go about deciding ultimate ontological issues. What could be more demoralizing as a way of rendering philosophy a hand-maiden of science-and a shaky one at that!

Yet, ontological commitment inevitably falls outside a philosophy that has restricted its domain, *a priori*, to the objects generated by such a commitment. They fall, in the words that are all-too-familiar to need a footnote, "outside the limits of language," and hence they also come under the equally familiar dictum: "whereof one cannot speak, thereof must one remain silent." But silence can be of two kinds, the one that arises out of direct apprehension of truth, when there is no need to talk; the other that arises out of a total obscuring of vision by limitations, self-imposed or otherwise, when one simply cannot talk. I strongiy suspect that the empiricist philosophers' silence on ontological commitments is of the latter kind.

But it is here that the Buddhist and Advaita Vedāntic philosophers would not remain silent. For them the understanding of the nature of ontological commitment, not just as this or that

set of beliefs or propositions, but as the very process by which beliefs are generated, provides the ladder that leads to the final silence of direct seeing that transcends all talk.

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NOTES

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7. VC, verse 177, p. 56.
8. Kripke, *Op. cit.*, " Naming and necessity ", p. 340.
9. *Ibid.*
10. VC, verses 139, 140; commentary by Wood, pp. 38-39.
11. W. V. Qwine, *Word and Object*, The MIT Press, 1960. See " Ontic Decision", pp. 238-243.
12. Kripke, *Op. cit.*, p. 273.
13. Quine, *Op. cit.*, pp. 5-8, 80-81.