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THEISM, THE POSTMODERNIST BURIAL OF METAPHYSICS, AND INDIAN MIND-BODY DUALISM

Vladimir K. Shokhin

There is a post-modernist myth that metaphysics has always been an exclusively Western heritage. This article refutes such a view by reviewing the many centuries of debate between Indian mind-body dualists and champions of reductionist physicalism. It also suggests the relevance of the Indian dualistic arguments for contemporary discussions of the mind-body issue.

I

Mind-body dualism has long been integral, not only to the philosophy of mind, but also to the philosophical foundations of theism. Indeed, the direct opposition between dualism and two rival ontologies of mind is of very old age. One of these rivals is physicalism, or naturalistic reductionism, or the identity theory of mind, all of which allow the status of substance only to the body with its functions. The other is the denial of substantiality of both material and spiritual kinds, that is, the reduction of the self to discrete dynamic elements of consciousness and their objects. If either of these standpoints is admitted, theism loses a secure foundation. Is it not the case that if the soul be an epiphenomenon of corporeal constituents destined to be annihilated with their destruction, or nothing more than a flux of sensations, volitions, cogitations, and so on, coordinated by nothing, it can be neither a recipient of eternal bliss nor anything like the image of God destined to acquire his likeness? And, consequently, that all practical claims of theism (the acquisition of *theōsis* being the most important among them) turn out to be senseless? One may object that some philosophers have embraced one or other of these positions without renouncing theism,¹ but that says less about the compatibility of theism with the above-mentioned doctrines than the lack of consistency in these philosophers' minds.

It is, in contrast, quite consistent that popularizers of postmodernism who reject theism also consider mind-body dualism outdated.² This

¹Among the philosophers of Enlightenment one can name Joseph Priestly and some deists, like John Toland and John Collins and some others. The contemporary approval of physicalism from the side of theists might be exemplified by P. van Inwagen, *Metaphysics* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1993), pp. 4–5, 178–183.

²So, according to Mark Taylor, while humanistic (modern) atheism transfers the attributes of God to human nature, more progressive posthumanistic (postmodern) atheology carries

attitude must be seen within the broader context of their philosophy. Theism is rejected because it is based on classical metaphysics. The latter is in turn rejected because "the pillars" of contemporary philosophy rejected it: in the beginning Nietzsche, who demonstrated the death of "a metaphysical God," then Heidegger, who endorsed such a verdict because metaphysics had supposedly led to the oblivion of Being, the power of technics and nihilism, and then Derrida and Lyotard who declared it to be the philosophical expression of "onto-theo-teleo-phallo-phono-logocentrism" (which is to be treated by the method of "deconstruction") and, correspondingly, of the totalitarian claim to a universal truth (which, with a universal rationality, became a justification for some modes of social organization, i.e., power). Finally, theism and metaphysics are also rejected because they are declared to be fruits of an outdated monotheism and Eurocentrism unable to withstand the challenge of non-European thought that has offered a successful alternative to outdated European rationalism.³

The postmodernist negation of a universal rationality proves, however, as does any consistent nihilism (I use this term not in its Heideggerean but in the general sense), to be self-refuting. Surely, if any claim to a universal truth contains already totalitarianism, then the statement of the non-existence of such truth cannot be an exception to this rule and must express (let us use Nietzschean idioms) someone's will to power. And if it is a universal rationality whose "deconstruction" gives us understanding of what took place in Auschwitz (as alleged by Lyotard), then also the very attempt to dismantle metaphysics, being carried out by means of the same rationality, cannot be relieved from the same responsibility.

But another claim, that metaphysical "logocentrism" remains the legacy of the outdated Hellenic-Mediaeval European tradition alone,⁴ needs not a logical but historical refutation. To examine the most abundant non-European philosophical tradition would be most useful in this regard. I mean Indian philosophy, which prior to the modern age had not been in the least influenced by the West and may be considered, therefore, purely autochthonous.

the death of God to completion by denying the idea of autonomous selfhood as well and doesn't fail to notice that "the death of God is at the same time the death of the self." M. Taylor, *Erring: A Postmodern Altheology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), p. 20.

³On "the great principle of polytheism" as an alternative to monotheism and a pattern of radical pluralism see, e.g., the paper, "Lob der Polytheismus über Monomythie und Poly-mythie" in O. Marquard, *Abschied vom Prinzipiellen: Philosophische Studien* (Stuttgart: P. reclam. jun., 1981), pp. 91–116; and J.-F. Lyotard and J.-L. Thébaud, *Au juste: conversations* (Paris: Bourgois, 1979), pp. 33, 35. One of the most typical attacks on metaphysics as the legacy of Eurocentric worldview one can find in G. Vattimo, *After Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).

⁴Here the representatives of process-theology are close to postmodernist theologizing, because they reject not only creationism in the real sense, but also such fundamental Divine attributes as simplicity, impassibility, immutability, necessity and eternity in favor of their "dipolar theism." One of them, Nicholas Wolterstorff, who prefers God to be more everlasting than eternal, also treats metaphysics, which is basic for the abovementioned attributes, as a specific Hellenic heritage, outdated in the context of the today's understanding of the Bible.

II

The powerful trend of Indian philosophy which has elaborated a very many-sided mind-body dualism is designated usually by the Sanskrit compound term *ātmavāda* (cf. the Pāli *attavāda*). It means "the teaching of Ātman" or "the teaching that Ātman exists," Ātman being understood as the permanent essence, beginningless and endless, correlated with the psychophysical aggregate of a living being but ontologically foreign to both its outward and inward body, the locuses of its sensual, active, and mental capacities. The term is far from being monosemantic: in some important contexts it is similar to "soul," more often it is closer to "spirit," but at the same time it is closer to "the self" and "the pure subject" which differs from everything that can be objectified. The name of *ātmavāda* contrasts this doctrine to those two forms of opposition to mind-body dualism mentioned earlier. In India their equivalents were *dehatmāvāda* ("the teaching that Ātman is the body"), that is, materialist physicalism-cum-eliminativism, and *anātmavāda* ("the teaching that Ātman doesn't exist"), or the Buddhist substitution of Ātman by fluxes of instant and decentered spots of consciousness-cum-existence (*dharma*s). The champions of *ātmavāda* were more careful in controversy with the Buddhists, their much more sophisticated and influential opponents, but for investigation of intercultural substance dualism their engagement with the materialists is of more interest. We will follow now its main landmarks from the beginnings up to the end of the early medieval period.

It was already before the birth of philosophy in India, in the touching myth of the ancient *Chāndogya-Upaniṣad* (from the eighth to seventh century B.C.) about the king of gods Indra and demon Virocana, two disciples of Prajāpati, the father of all living beings, where anxieties of the pious Brāhmaṇic society about naturalistic moods were first reflected. According to this tale, these two characters, as representatives of their clans and desirous of the knowledge of Ātman, studied thirty-two years at the feet of Prajāpati before he decided to examine them. Having commanded them to array and adorn themselves and look in a pan of water, he declared their reflections in water to be the Ātman they were searching for. While Virocana returned to the demons with a tranquil heart, Indra realized that such an Ātman, which depends on successful and unsuccessful conditions of the body and so perishes immediately after the latter's destruction, could not satisfy him. He therefore remained with Prajāpati about seventy more years before the acquisition of full knowledge (VIII.7–12).⁵ Of more interest is, however, the concise description of those who, like Virocana, regard the self as the body: they are not givers, have no faith and do not offer sacrifices (VIII.8.5). So even at the dawn of Indian thought, it was understood that the teaching of the self as reducible to the body was incompatible with religious faith and duties.

⁵Here and below I refer to the editions of the Pāli Text Society; the first number indicates the corresponding volumes, the second one pages.

Up to the time of the first philosophers of India (or, what is the same, of the first attempts at rational critique and systemization of world-outlook), which coincides with the Śramaṇic intellectual revolution of the fifth century B.C., this intuition of the Brāhmaṇists had been fully confirmed. According to the Buddhist Pali *Samaññaphalasutta*, Ajita Kesakambala, the leader of the materialists, insisted that inasmuch as a man was a mere combination of the four natural elements (earth, water, fire, and wind) and is to be disintegrated after death back into them, cremation should be the only real offering and only fools talk about the use of generosity (Dīgha-Nikāya I.55). There are also several other Buddhist and one Jaina source of good antiquity where such views are reproduced. In addition, in the *Brahmajāla-sutta* (Dīgha-Nikāya I.34–36), the views of those who insist on “the final destruction, decline and nonbeing” of men are referred to, and this doctrine is designated as *ucchedavāda* (“the teaching of destruction”), a name later extended to the whole teaching of the materialists.

The same sources also describe the teaching of another famous Śramaṇic philosopher, Pakudha Kaccāyana, who held the opposite viewpoint. According to the afore-mentioned *Samaññaphalasutta*, he selected the seven essences (*kāya*) “by none made, fabricated neither directly, nor indirectly, barren, stable as the picks of mountains, immutable as pillars” whose combinations give us what we call living beings (Dīgha-Nikāya I.56). He included in his list the four natural elements which were accepted by Ajita and everyone else, but, in addition, the essences of contentment and suffering and the spiritual principle (*jīva*). Although the ethical conclusions deduced by Pakudha from his scheme did not surpass those inferred by Ajita from his unsophisticated ontology,⁶ his philosophical world picture was beyond comparison much richer. The Jaina version of his list of essences, from which contentment and suffering were subtracted, space added and the spiritual principle remained untouched (Sutrakṛtāṅga I.1.1.15), also supports the view that Pakudha was the first consistent substance dualist in Indian philosophy.

In the opinion of some Indologists, the direct opposition between Ajita and Pakudha is recollected in Pali literature.⁷ But of more importance is the fact that the mind-body problem was included in the list of topics which were discussed by professional Śramaṇic philosophers at their sessions. From many Pali texts one can derive technical designations of both mutually opposed positions (Majjhima-Nikāya I.484, etc.). The materialist one was designated as *taṃ jīvaṃ taṃ sarīraṃ* (“what is the body, the same is the soul”) which literally corresponds to the contemporary identity theory of mind, and the dualist one as *aññaṃ jīvaṃ aññaṃ sarīraṃ* (“the body is

⁶According to him, when a man cleaves a head in twain with a sharp sword, he does not thereby deprive anyone of life because the sword only penetrates between the seven substances, and when someone teaches another one it is, in the final analysis, only an illusion, for in reality the self is not the doer.

⁷See, e.g., B. Barua, *A History of Pre-Buddhistic Indian Philosophy* (Delhi, etc.: Motilal Banarsidass, 1970 [1st ed. 1921]), p. 294.

one, the soul is other"). From the same Śramaṇic century also dates, most likely, the ethical counter-argument launched against materialistic mind-body monism by Jina Mahāvīra and his first disciples, i.e., that those who hold to this view cannot distinguish between good and evil.

The topic of the existence of Ātman as the immaterial essence substantially different from the body and its functional structure remains one of the most important subjects of controversy in the period of the early philosophical schools as well, i.e., from the fourth century B.C. up to the second century A.D. At least, some dialogues from the didactic books of the great Indian epic *Mahābhārata* give evidence concerning it. For example, in the Bharadvāja-Bhṛgu dialogue the first character, acting as the champion of a generalized materialist position, tries to prove that Ātman is in every respect superfluous. While the functions of wind and fire in the fivefold body⁸ are entirely certified, the same cannot be said about those of Ātman, nor that it could be perceivable during the death of a living being. Furthermore, the functions of the five elements are both necessary and sufficient for the sustenance of the body, while it is difficult to find a place for Ātman in this respect. Hence all priestly hopes are in vain, for a man sacrificing a cow will perish after it and, "if the root of a cut tree does not put out shoots, even if its seeds grow further, wherein goes the dead?" Bhṛgu, a spokesman of *ātmavāda*, retorts that the soul does not suffer annihilation after the destruction of the body, in the same way as seemingly extinct fire is preserved in reality in a subtle condition, and it is incorrect to consider the five elements sufficient for the functioning of a living organism, while the appearance of Ātman's return into them is actually only its separation from them after temporal interaction (XII.179–180).⁹

Thus the main materialist argument was, according to this dialogue, that the soul and its actions are not perceivable and, therefore, nonexistent, whereas the dualist argument was that not everything existent is necessarily perceivable. The latter statement seems reasonable enough, though one has an impression that the first side was better prepared for debate. Still more materialist arguments are collected in another chapter, where the achievements of the famous thinker of the Sāṃkhya tradition of philosophy named Pañcaśikha are eulogized. The author, wishing to present the materialistic position, lists many examples of causal factors (a seed of a tree, the magnet and iron, the sun stone devouring solar rays, the soil imbibing water, etc.) to show that all causal processes work only in the sphere of material things. Other examples developed specially for these debates (one has to bear in mind that in India examples in general had the force of demonstration) were also adduced by Indian physicalists, e.g., if eternal things like Ātman exist, then an immortal king on the earth also ought to exist; but the latter case is an absurdity, so the first

⁸That is, consisting of earth, water, fire, wind, and space.

⁹Here and below I refer to the critical edition of the Śāntiparvan book of *Mahābhārata* published in 1954 by Shripad Krishna Belvalkar.

one should also be as well. They also tried to support their doctrines with epistemological arguments: to admit ceaseless things one has to refer to the instruments of knowledge (*pramāṇa*), but perception, the only one reliable among them, repudiates their existence. But the counter-arguments of the real dualist Pañcaśikha were also much better prepared than those of the mythical Bhṛgu. He argued that the fact that the soul separates from the body after the death of a living being does not mean its own corruption; that successful invocation of incorporeal gods refutes the statement that all causal links are natural; and that the cessation of a living being's actions after its physical death testifies against the capability of the body to be their origin in this life-time (XII.211).

The Sāṃkhya dualists continued to oppose naturalistic physicalism during the classical stage of Indian philosophy from about the second to ninth century A.D., when the most important basic texts, i.e., the sūtras and kārikās, of the main schools, along with commentaries thereon came into being. Īśvarakṛṣṇa (from the fourth to fifth century A.D.), the author of the canonical *Sāṃkhya-Kārikā*, adduces five reasons for the existence of *puruṣa* which is the same as Ātman. They are as follows: (1) all aggregations exist for the sake of something else; (2) there must be something opposite to the three *guṇas*;¹⁰ (3) there must also be some controlling factor required by nonconscious ones; (4) there must also be a subject of experience different from the latter; (5) there is an inclination in the world to seek freedom, or isolation from the world (vs.17). The main philosophical method used here (as elsewhere in the *Sāṃkhya-Kārikā*) is the deduction of essences from some objective characteristics which must have ontological foundations.¹¹

But the most detailed commentary on the *Sāṃkhya-Kārikā*, the *Yukti-dīpikā* (circa the sixth–seventh centuries A.D.), opens a further space of controversy. Though its author pays more attention to the Buddhist *anātmavāda*, he does not lose a chance to answer typical materialist objections. So in his comments on the same kārikā 17 the generalized materialist opponent states that no instrument of knowledge confirms the existence of imperceivable objects, such as *puruṣa*. Sāṃkhya's answer is that the latter's existence is established by inference based on general correlation, for the body, being composite like a bed or other artifact, is meant for something other than itself. The materialist offers a seemingly reasonable objection, i.e., that one composite may be meant for some other, as the bed for the man Devadatta. But it is not too easy to take the author of the *Yukti-dīpikā* unawares: the heterogeneous principle under discussion

¹⁰According to the Sāṃkhya philosophy these are the three constituents of the primaevial matter (*Prakṛti*), or profoundest dimensions of being, which determine everything with the exception of *puruṣas*. They are experienced on a more psychological level as pleasure, pain, and delusion, and on a more ontological one as intelligibility, activity, and restraint.

¹¹In a similar way the existence of *Prakṛti* is deduced from the necessity for finite specific things to require a cause, to have some common foundation for their inner homogeneity, to imply the corresponding potentiality, etc. (vss. 15–16).

cannot be composite just because of its imperceptibility, on which the opponent himself insists.

While the Sāṃkhyas postulated a spiritual principle directly as the necessary condition of the establishment of experience, the Naiyayikas inferred it through the abstract inference "by residue" (*śeṣavat*), that is, by excluding all other explanations of experience. That is why, according to the *Nyāya-sūtras* (from the third to fourth century A.D.), desire, aversion, effort, pleasure, pain, and cognition are inferential marks of Ātman (I.1.16). Both the composer of the sūtras and his famous commentator Vātsyāyana (from the fourth to fifth centuries A.D.) enter into direct polemics with Indian naturalistic physicalism. The latter first develops an ethical argument against mind-body monism, namely that even a killer, according to the teaching of the monists, is not responsible for his crime because material elements are not capable of bearing responsibility (III.1.4). The generalized materialist questions this inference to Ātman by supposing that desire, aversion, and so on may belong to the earth and other components of the human body as well, since they are capable of activity and inactivity. The Naiyayikas reply that activity and inactivity belong also to an axe and many other inanimate things, but no one ascribes to them mental capacities. The materialist tries to get out of this difficulty by indicating that desire, aversion, and so on inhere in the body every time, whereas they do not in the case of an axe. But Vātsyāyana regards this objection as unconvincing, for it contradicts the major premise of the materialist's syllogism, i.e., that everything which is active and inactive is endowed with desire and the like. Besides, he continues, since the body is composed of many particles capable, according to the opponent, of mental capacities, the result should be an assumption of many subjects of experience in the same body, which is a sheer absurdity. In addition, the activity and inactivity of material things are, in general, due to qualities of quite different entities, such as effort, which has a common locus with *saṃskāra*, viz., the balance of immaterial *dharma* and *adharma* (III.2.35–37).

But it was Śaṅkara (from the seventh to eighth centuries A.D.), the famous founder of Advaita-Vedānta, who offered the most considered refutation of mind-body monism in Indian philosophy of the classical period. The following are his main arguments in his commentary on the sūtras of Vedānta, the *Brahmasūtrabhāṣya*: (1) in contrast to attributes of the body, thinking or memory are imperceivable in principle; (2) we are conscious of the elements of the body, but had consciousness been their quality, this would have been impossible, as it is impossible for fire to burn itself or for an actor to ride on his own shoulder;¹² (3) in contrast to corporeal components which are subject to everlasting change, the self is invariably identical to itself, and common experience confirms this when one says, e.g., "This is I who have seen this or that"; (4) from the fact that consciousness

¹²One may mention that these examples were borrowed by the Advaitins (among many other things) from the Buddhist Madhyamaka system, starting with the texts ascribed to its founder Nāgārjuna (from the second to third century A.D.).

occurs where the body is present, it does not follow that it is an attribute of the latter, just as although visual perception occurs when daylight is present, it does not follow that perception is an attribute of light itself (III.3.54). Other of Śaṅkara's arguments may be considered as amplifications of these. For example, in the *Praśnopaniṣadbhāṣya*, having listed the main attributes of Ātman as contrary to those of the body, i.e., the properties of consciousness, invariability, purity, and partlessness, he underlines that objects depend on consciousness for their existence, just as color depends on the capacity of seeing for its manifestation (VI.2).

Śaṅkara's disciple Sureśvara, who composed an enormous commentary on his teacher's commentary on the *Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad* entitled *Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣadbhāṣyavārttika*, also engaged critically materialist arguments. Here the generalized materialist (*dehatmāvādin*—see above) announces that the famous slogan of the same Upaniṣad, "Verily Ātman is Brahman" (IV.4.5), being contrary to perception, is to be interpreted figuratively. Intelligence is born by combination of the four elements, and the most common self-identification, "I am a man," shows that everyone identifies himself as the body. Sureśvara answers that, according to his opponent's logic, a dead body must be seen as conscious since it too is a combination of elements. He also mentions that some yogis remember their previous lives, which proves that a person is not to be reduced to his present body, and asks why the body, supposed to be Ātman, is sometimes conscious and sometimes not (III.116–155).

III

Let us now draw some conclusions. Some Indian dualists' premises correspond to those of Plato, i.e., that the spiritual principle is self-moving in contrast to material elements, which are inert by nature. Others (which are more essential) are similar to those of Wolff, Reimarus, Mendelsson, and other philosophers of the Enlightenment, i.e., that the spiritual principle is uncomposite in contrast to the elements, which are naturally composite. Finally another, and perhaps the most important, has not been typical of classical Western substance dualism at all. I mean here a transcendental point of departure according to which the subject of experience cannot be placed on the same level of reality with its objects (including the corporeal locus of the subject itself), and this ontological gap between them provides the necessary condition for every experience. Some arguments of the Indian dualists sound naive now, e.g., that a dead body must be seen by their opponents as conscious inasmuch as a combination of elements is present there, or the ethical argument of the Naiyayikas that physicalism leads to immorality (since for consistent materialists ethical considerations should not be very persuasive). But the arguments from the ontological difference between composite and uncomposite entities, on the one hand, and pure subjectivity and objectivity, on the other, adduced in the beginning by the Sāṃkhyas and later reinforced by Advaitins, have, I think, sufficient cumulative force that they remain entirely relevant. There is no doubt that

Śaṅkara's very graphic argument about the inability of fire to burn itself and for a dancer to ride on his own shoulder belongs to the "gold reserves" of intercultural mind-body dualism. The same is true also of his argument that from the statement that an essence *X* with attributes *A*, *B*, *C* correlates with an essence *Y* with contrary attributes, it in no way follows that *X* is *Y*, and of his example of visual capacity and daylight.

Returning now to the outset of this paper, it has become evident that the postmodernist assignment of metaphysics to a purely European heritage proves to be only an illiterate ideological myth, revealing just will to power—over unqualified minds. Moreover, different versions of Indian mind-body dualism do correspond to the diversity of metaphysical reflection. The dualism of Pakudha Kaccāyana grows from examination of the capacity (or lack thereof) of substances to be atomic, i.e., irreducible to anything more primary, unchangeable and eternal, criteria which are purely metaphysical in nature. Dualism of the classical Sāṃkhya grows from the deduction of first principles based, in turn, on a hierarchy of speculatively possible predicates of things. Dualism of Nyāya grows from inference of substances based, this time, on the reasonable localization of their actions and attributes. And one cannot but recognize in all these kinds of mind-body dualism the general mark of classical metaphysics, i.e., the investigation of imperceivable entities that lie behind the perceptible empirical world.

Nor do we have reason to agree with the popular view that Indian doctrines (as non-European—see above), including those of the soul, are best seen as a challenge to Western theism. Certainly there is not a full coincidence, the main and very important difference being that India lacked the teaching of the creation of the soul, instead regarding the soul as ontologically independent and, correspondingly, beginningless by nature and coming to be merely through reincarnation.¹³ But this is only a half of the truth, for I do not know any serious scholar who has regarded, e.g., Plato's psychology, as we know it from the *Phaedo* or *Phaedrus*, to be a challenge to theism, although the soul has there similar characteristics. On the contrary, the similarities with the theistic teaching of the soul are much more important. Here one may recollect a clear distinction between two kinds of truths about God made by Thomas Aquinas in *Summa contra Gentiles* I.3. Aquinas distinguishes truths that exceed any rational understanding (such as that God is both threefold and one at the same time) and those accessible to it (such as that God is existent and one), the latter having been proved by those philosophers who were led by the natural light of reason (*ducti naturalis lumine rationis*). In the same manner in our case rational truths about the soul, e.g., that it is ontologically heterogeneous to the body, uncomposite, reflective, and so on, might be filled in by the teaching of its creation. At the same time the ancient Indian realization that the

¹³Cf. one of Sureśvara's arguments referred to above. According to the Nyāya philosophers the initial instincts of a new-born child are to be explained by its recollections of its experiences in former lives.

soul's reduction to the body is incompatible with any religion fully coincides with the theistic worldview (see above).

Finally, the resources of Indian mind-body dualism have a legitimate role to play in theistic apologetics. In addition to those already mentioned, they cogently demonstrate the philosophical poverty of contemporary physicalism, which is a real challenge to theism, however doubtful it is from a rational point of view. Indeed, the interpretation of mind according to a behaviorist model of a computer system—which is only a variation on the theme of La Mettrie's "man a machine" with disregard of an "engineer" and "programmer"¹⁴—cannot withstand the level of reflection of those Indian philosophers who for so many centuries combated reductionism.

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¹⁴In the final analysis this level of understanding mental phenomena is similar to explaining a piano concerto by the actions of a keyboard instrument alone with elimination of both the pianist and producer of the piano.