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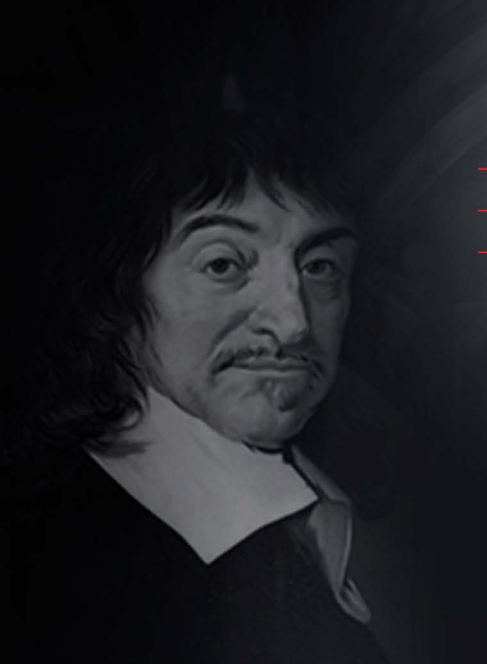

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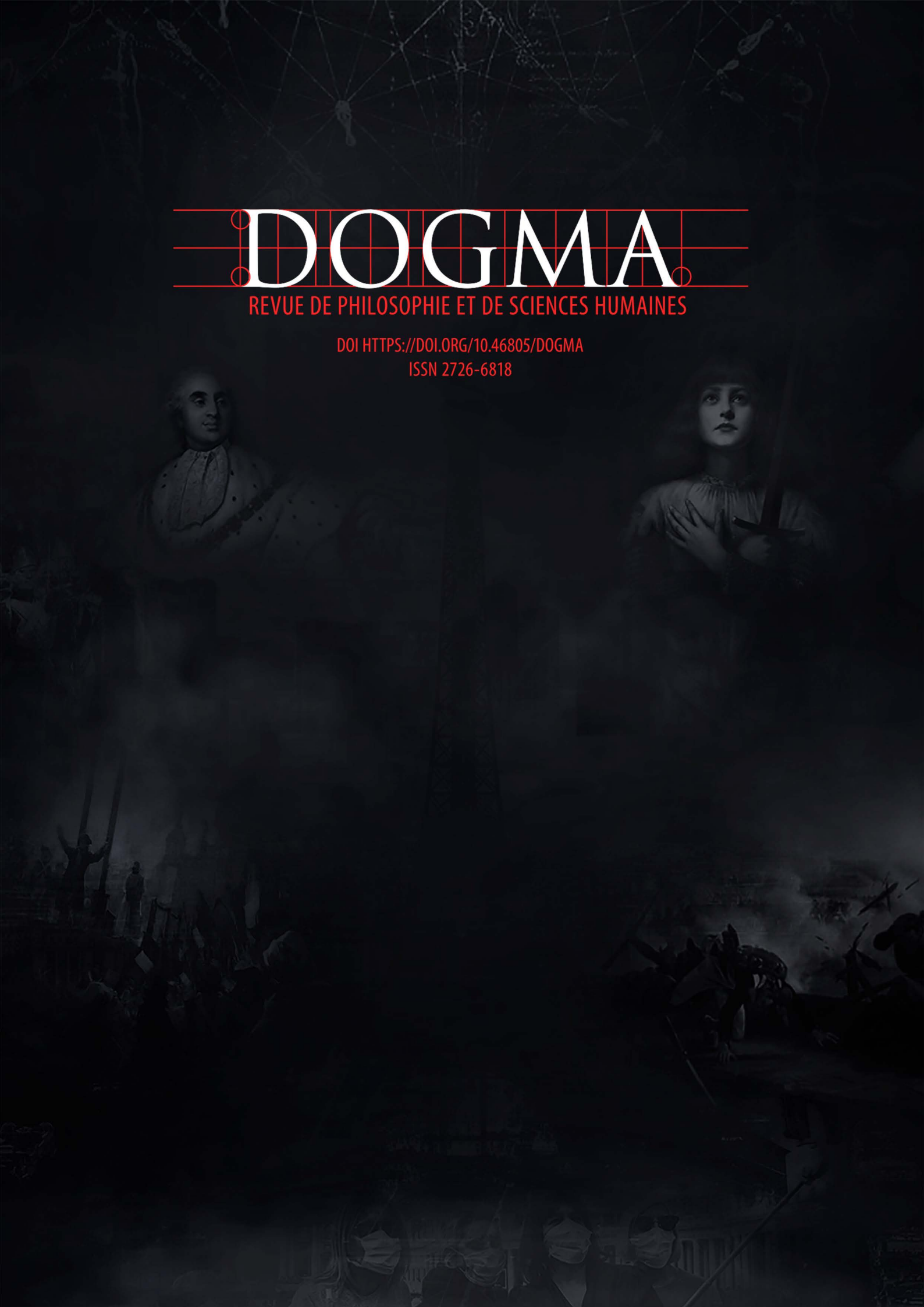

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THE NONDUAL MIND

By James H. Cumming

In my recent book, The Nondual Mind, I compare Hindu nondual philosophy to that of Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677), demonstrating the similarity of Spinoza's ideas to nondual Kashmiri Shaivism. Among other things, the book dispels the illusion of the subject-object divide, which is the primary source of confusion for many philosophy-of-mind scholars. And when the illusion of the subject-object divide dissolves, the mind-body problem dissolves with it. The key point is that all consciousness is consciousness of one's own self. One cannot be conscious of a thing — anything — without being that thing.

This excerpt from the book's beginning explains the basic principles that the book later finds articulated in the teachings of both nondual Shaivism and Spinoza.

1. Introduction: Cartesian Dualism and Its Alternatives

[I]t would be easier for me to concede matter and extension to the mind [(i.e., to concede that the mind is a material thing having a spatial form)] than it would be for me to concede the capacity to move a body and be moved by one to an immaterial thing.

— Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia (1618–1680)

We tend to divide the world into pairs of opposites, and often this dualism takes on a moral valence. We speak of truth and falsity, good and evil, God and devil, but in doing so, we fail to appreciate that this moral dualism has its source in a deeper rift at the core of human psychology. I am referring to the subject-object divide, the distinction we feel between self and other. The subject-object divide gives rise to moral dualism, for it is very hard to describe something as evil without first seeing it as other, but the subject-object divide also gives rise to something that philosophers call the mind-body problem.

The mind-body problem is brought to the fore by Princess Elisabeth's challenge to René Descartes, quoted above. How, Princess Elisabeth asked, could "an immaterial thing" (a mind) have "the capacity to move a [material] body and be moved by one"? Put another way, what constitutes the point of intersection between one's mind and one's brain? How does a physical process in the brain give rise to a conscious thought in the mind, and how does a conscious thought in the mind initiate a physical process in the brain?

Moral dualism is concerned with the problem of evil, and moral dualists often suppose evil to be the creation of an anti-God — a supernatural force in competition with God. Thus, moral dualism is closely related to theological dualism. By contrast, ontological dualism is concerned with Princess Elisabeth's challenge to Descartes. It focuses on the fundamental rift

between mind and body, and more broadly between self and other, seeing consciousness and matter as ontologically distinct realms. But as said, moral dualism has its source in ontological dualism. So, let us delve into the mind-body problem, and from what we learn about the mystery of consciousness, let us see what we can learn about God and the devil.

René Descartes (1596–1650) asserted that each of us is an immaterial soul operating a body from a command center located in the pineal gland of the brain. According to that view, data from the sensory nerves flow through the body's neural network to the brain and, after some suitable processing, these data arrive in the pineal gland, and there the soul awaits, ready to observe, interpret, and respond with appropriate command decisions: "Stop at the curb. Look both ways. Listen for passing cars. Now proceed. . . ." And as the soul issues its diverse directives, the body responds dutifully. A message is dispatched, again through the neural network, to the relevant muscle group, which reacts as necessary to actualize the soul's intentions. That, at least, is what Descartes imagined, and people who have not thought deeply about the mind-body problem usually embrace some variant of his mind-body dualism, because it seems to align so closely with everyday human experience.

And apparently confirming this Cartesian model of the human soul is the near-death experience. The immaterial soul slips temporarily from its sheath of flesh and experiences its independence and immortality. There, below, sprawled across the sidewalk, lies the body, paramedics crouching at its side, administering aid, and above that frenetic scene, the soul gazes down with calm detachment. And then, perhaps, the soul makes a conscious decision to reenter the body. The heart muscle resumes its autonomic contractions, and the paramedics sigh in relief, smile, and cheer.

As noted, most people are more or less comfortable with the Cartesian notion that the physical body contains an immaterial bubble-like soul, and they imagine that at the moment of bodily death, the soul will slip away unscathed, and it will then reincarnate in some suitable new body. Or, perhaps, it will "sleep in the dust" until the resurrection of its original body in messianic times. Or, perhaps, it will journey to the world of the ancestors, bundled up in the "bundle of life." Or, perhaps, there is a world of disembodied souls, high in the starry heavens, a world where the soul will be rewarded for its constancy, piety, and faith.

René Descartes's answer to the mind-body problem is known as "Cartesian dualism," and Cartesian dualism has serious flaws. Its first and most fundamental flaw is that, according to physical science, the physical world is a causally complete and closed system. Every event in the physical world is fully and sufficiently explained by immutable laws. Physical events need no soul to initiate them, for they have physical causes that do so, and in the absence of such physical causes, the soul is helpless to effect any change whatsoever.

Even Descartes struggled to explain how an immaterial soul — a thinking thing — could initiate a biological process that would, in due course, activate nerves and muscles, causing the movement of, say, an arm. How exactly does the soul communicate its message to the biological system? When Princess Elisabeth asked that question, Descartes could offer no persuasive response. Specifically, Princess Elisabeth asked "how the mind of a human being, being only [an imma-

terial] *thinking substance*,[1] can determine [(i.e., move or activate)] the bodily spirits in producing bodily actions."[2] The best Descartes could come up with was to invoke axiomatic truth. He might just as well have replied, "It is so because it is so." But Princess Elisabeth's doubt remained, and therefore she asked again "how the soul (nonextended and immaterial) is able to move the body." And this time, she added the statement quoted at the beginning of this section: "[I]t would be easier for me to concede matter and extension to the mind than it would be for me to concede the capacity to move a body and be moved by one to an immaterial thing."[3]

For Princess Elisabeth, it would make more sense that the soul was a material thing — *a component* of the physical body, in other words — than to imagine that it was an immaterial thing that could somehow interact causally with physical things. Here, Princess Elisabeth was not distinguishing matter from energy and doubting the capacity of immaterial force fields to move particles of matter; rather, she was doubting the capacity of the mind — consciousness — to do so. Princess Elisabeth had thus identified the most fundamental problem with Cartesian dualism: What provides the causal link by which an immaterial soul can direct the movements of a physical body? And how can we say that the soul's directives — and not the laws of physics — are what actually determine the physical body's actions?

But the Cartesian dualist has to answer another question, too. In a living person, each component of the "soul" has some physical system on which it depends. The soul's power to see depends on the existence of physical eyes and a visual cortex; its power to hear depends on functioning eardrums and an auditory cortex; and its power to recall past events depends on the medial temporal lobe and the neocortex. If a beautiful golden sunset is seen and the soothing roar of the ocean is heard, there are eyes seeing the former and ears hearing the latter. If a memory of a pleasant summer evening is recalled, there are neurons in the medial temporal lobe and the neocortex from which the memory is drawn. If there are thoughts passing through the mind, there is some measurable electrical activity in the brain. As our scientific knowledge grows, it is becoming increasingly clear that there is a physical substratum somewhere in the body for every intellectual and perceptive capacity of the "soul," and if we damage that substratum, the soul loses the corresponding mental capacity.

Are we then to assume that this close dependence of the soul on the physical body is merely temporary and that when the body dies, the soul somehow regains the powers of thought and perception that it lost, bit by bit, as the body deteriorated prior to death? Are we to assume, despite the lockstep correlation between the mental capacity of the soul and the functioning of the physical body, that the soul somehow exists independent of the body and that when the body dies, the soul floats away to a future existence, all its mental capacities miraculously intact? Isn't it much more likely that the human soul does not exist independent of the body; rather, it is a consciousness that is somehow linked to and dependent upon the physical systems

1 The term "thinking substance" does not mean a material substance that thinks. Princess Elisabeth used the term "substance" in the Cartesian sense, which contrasts "thinking substance" (i.e., mind or consciousness) with "extended substance" (i.e., matter).

2 Garber, Daniel, *Descartes Embodied: Reading Cartesian Philosophy through Cartesian Science* (Cambridge Univ. Press 2000), p. 172, italics added.

3 Garber, *Descartes Embodied*, p. 172, italics added.

that give rise to its conscious experiences? It is easy to see why Cartesian dualism is attractive to those confronting the certainty of bodily death, but it is hard to harmonize Descartes's theory with the laws of physics or with the obvious dependence of specific conscious experiences on corresponding physical systems.

After considering the weaknesses of Cartesian dualism, many people abandon it in favor of some nondual solution to the mind-body problem. Some — especially neuroscientists and computer programmers — veer toward the material, denying that there is any such thing as an immaterial soul. They argue that the physical world alone exists and that consciousness is a physical thing that we will eventually discover, just as we have discovered leptons and quarks. Others — especially religious mystics and armchair philosophers — see problems with the materialist solution to the mind-body problem. Acutely aware of the subjective experience of consciousness, which seems to them to be an undeniable fact independent of the physical facts of any observed system, they veer toward the immaterial, denying the existence of a physical world altogether. For them, the physical world is merely thought-stuff, a dream without a physical dreamer.

But there is a third possibility. What if subjective consciousness and objective matter are simply the same thing comprehended in two different ways? According to this third possibility, neither the knower (consciousness) nor the known (matter) is the ultimate reality; rather, they are each characteristics of a third thing that mediates the two. We can think of that mediating thing as consciousness, but it is not the subject side of an unbridgeable subject-object divide. Rather, it is a nondual consciousness, conscious only of itself, and conscious of itself simply by being itself.

Below is a painting of an outdoor scene:

Perspective of the Night by Leonid Afremov *(used with permission)*

The image is flat, but it appears to have depth because of the rules of perspective that the artist, Leonid Afremov, has applied when painting the image. By analogy to that painting, consider the possibility that in one's *knowing* of an object — say, a chair one might be sitting on — the "object" that is known has no separate existence from the "subject" that is knowing it. Consider that the object and its knower are only tricks of perception, like the depth that seems to characterize Afremov's painting. They are appearances that arise when nondual consciousness — which is conscious only of itself — assumes a particular configuration, giving rise to a particular point of view.

A teacher of nondualism once asked his young student to sip from a cup of unsweetened *chai* (spiced black tea). He then asked the student to stir some sugar into the *chai* and to sip it again. "What do you taste?" asked the teacher. "Sweet," responded the student, wondering what point the teacher was making. "Who knows the sweet?" inquired the teacher, and he told the student to contemplate the question. The student ended up leaving the teacher's academy, but he never abandoned his pursuit of nondual wisdom. After many years, he returned to visit the same teacher, who was now an old man. The student paid his respects and then said with smile, "The sweet knows the sweet."

According to this theory, both the knower (the student's mind) and the known (the sweetness of the tea) have a basis in reality, just as the depth that characterizes the artist's painting has a basis in the perspective lines that are sketched on the flat surface of the canvas, but knower and known are secondary interpretations imposed on primary facts. What actually exists is nondual consciousness of self, configured to give rise to the illusion of a soul knowing the sweetness of tea. This point may be difficult to grasp, but the "hard problem" of consciousness is half solved if we consider that all consciousness is actually nondual consciousness of self, not subject-object consciousness. And the "hard problem" of consciousness is the rest of the way solved if we consider that there is no material thing that *has* or *contains* this nondual consciousness of self; rather, nondual consciousness of self is the underlying substance of existence.

We can certainly describe the foregoing answer to the mind-body problem as a type of idealism. The chair and the sweet tea are nothing but *consciousness*. But they are not merely the dream images of a remote dreamer, ready to go "poof" when the dreamer dreams a different dream. They are a real chair and real sweet tea in a real universe that operates according to immutable physical laws, laws that can be inventively applied to predict real events and to devise real answers to real problems. That is so, because in using the word "consciousness" to describe the true being of the chair or the sweet tea, we are not — despite the limitations of the English language — referring to the subject side of the subject-object divide; rather, we are denying the reality of the subject-object divide. The chair and the sweet tea are not just the hallucinations of some remote observer; they are also the hallucinations of *themselves*, having their own intrinsic being. Therefore, although they are consciousness, they are no less material, and we can just as validly describe the philosophical system proposed here as a type of materialism, but it is a type of materialism that focuses on what matter is, not merely on what matter does.

But this summary is hopelessly inadequate to convey the true sense of these counterintuitive ideas, for it is nothing less

than a new conception of self that these ideas demand of us. In what follows, I describe the mind-body problem in greater detail. I then draw some basic conclusions about epistemology and consciousness, and I outline the theory of thought-matter equivalence. For a fuller understanding, I refer the interested reader to my book.

2. The Mind-Body Problem

[L]et's conceive something very simple. Suppose a stone receives, from an external cause which strikes against it, a certain quantity of motion, by which it afterward will necessarily continue to move, even though the impulse of the external cause ceases. This continuance of the stone in motion, then, is compelled, . . . because it must be defined by the impulse of the external cause. What I say here about the stone must be understood concerning any singular thing, however composite it is conceived to be, and however capable of doing many things: each thing is necessarily determined by some external cause to exist and produce effects in a fixed and determinate way.[4]

— Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677)

We will begin by looking more closely at the way modern physics complicates the mind-body problem. The experience we all have of being a conscious soul that dwells in and directs a material body gives rise, as we have seen, to a seemingly intractable dilemma. What provides the causal link by which an immaterial thing (a soul) can activate and influence a material thing (a body)? And how can we say that the soul's directives — and not the laws of physics — are what actually determine the physical body's actions?

We can explain every event in the universe in purely physical terms, right down to the subtlest physiological processes that occur in the brains of complex living organisms. Every star and planet, every earthquake and winter storm, every green sprout and blooming flower, and every muscle, gland, and neuron is part of a single dynamic system, and all this activity is fully explainable by a vast web of causes and their inevitable effects, proceeding in accordance with a set of immutable physical laws.

When one moves one's arm, for example, a physicist could fully explain that movement in terms of the contraction of muscles and tendons, the metabolism of sugar in the blood, and the electronic pulse of a neural signal. And the same physicist could, in theory at least, also explain the physical causes of the neural messages that initiated the physiological process. And those causes, in turn, would have physical causes, and so on, *ad infinitum*. The underlying physics that explains an arm's movement, like the underlying physics that explains a boulder's chaotic, tumbling descent down a steep hillside, might be enormously complex, but the fact remains that every event in the universe has a physical cause that is both necessary and fully sufficient to explain its occurrence. And yet, in the midst of this fully mechanistic universe, there is *consciousness* — an extra thing, unnecessary from the perspective of physics, and unexplained by all the physical facts. Here then is a preliminary expression of the mind-body problem: In a universe that is fully explained by physical laws, what role, if any, does consciousness play?

If one were to see a metal spoon lying on a table in front of a man holding a wand and wearing a top hat and cape, and if the spoon handle suddenly began to bend and twist as the man stared intently upon it, what would be one's natural conclusion? Would one conclude that the man was a stage magician who had created a marve-

4 Letter 58 [Gebhardt, Carl (ed.), *Spinoza Opera*, 4 vols. (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1925), IV/266/1–15].

lous illusion? Would one assume there was some hidden explanation for the spoon's unexpected behavior, an explanation that was fully congruent with the laws of physics? Or would one conclude that, without any physical explanation, the spoon handle was being bent by the power of the man's mind alone? Most of us would reject the latter conclusion, even as we applauded the magician's performance.

The point is that most of us side with Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia in her epistolary debate with Descartes. Few of us believe that thoughts can move matter, although that belief is the necessary implication of the widely accepted theory that the soul (a thinking thing) pilots the body from some location within the brain (a material thing). If the soul sits inside the brain, receives information channeled to it from the senses, makes choices based on that information, and, like a ship's captain, directs the body's operations, then how exactly does this soul activate the neurons and glands that, like the switches and wheels found on the bridge of a ship, direct the body's course? Put another way, if we doubt that the immaterial thoughts of a magician can exert a force that bends a spoon, then shouldn't we also doubt that an immaterial soul can exert a force that causes a neuron to fire or a gland to secrete a hormone? Shouldn't we instead be looking for purely *physical* explanations for those physiological processes, and aren't we very likely to find them if we study the matter closely enough?

a. Materialism

As already noted, many people, after considering the weaknesses of Cartesian dualism, adopt a nondual solution to the mind-body problem. Some of these people seek the answer exclusively on the material side of the dilemma. Doing so solves the problem of how the soul directs the body's activities. According to materialism, the soul has a material basis, and as a material thing, it is capable of exerting a force (whether mechanical, electrical, or chemical) upon the body's physical control mechanisms. But what then can we say about the soul's existence independent of the body? If the soul is a material thing, then it is a part of the body. More importantly, if the soul is a material thing, then it is an integral part of the closed system of causes and inevitable effects that characterizes the physical world, and therefore its every action is fully determined by the laws of physics. In short, it can only "choose" to do what the laws of physics compel it to do. Thus, all the events of history — the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt, the Buddhist inscriptions on the Pillars of Ashoka, Constantine's conversion to Christianity, the invention of the printing press, Napoleon's decision to sell the Louisiana Territory, Hitler's invasion of Poland, etc. — were necessary and immutable. Indeed, everything in the dimension of time is fixed, merely waiting for its moment to occur.

And even if we accept determinism, there still remains the question of consciousness. Some materialists posit the existence of a physical substance, not yet identified, that has consciousness as one of its inherent characteristics. Once we identify this soul-stuff, we will be able to dissect a brain and point to it, even transplant it. Other materialists prefer to explain consciousness in purely functionalist terms. According to the latter theory, machines of the future that are engineered to mimic, perfectly, the functionality of the human body will be conscious by reason of their ability to act *as if* they are conscious. One might think of the popular episode of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* entitled "The Measure of a Man." In that episode, Commander Data — a human-mimicking android — is adjudicated to be a conscious

being, entitled to the same legal rights as biological humans.

The Commander Data problem is a variant of the "other-minds problem" that has puzzled philosophers for thousands of years. By inductive reasoning, we are generally willing to assume that other human beings have consciousness very much like our own, and we do so because they *act as if* they have it. Therefore, if a machine (Commander Data, for example) perfectly mimics the behavior of human beings, then who are we, who are not inside the "brain" of the machine, to say that it is *not* conscious? Many fans of Commander Data are functionalists at heart, and they are willing to assume that consciousness is a thing that somehow happens when a machine is sophisticated enough in its design to mimic conscious beings.

Maybe so, but those who explain consciousness in terms of functionalism seem rather stuck on the object side of the subject-object divide, telling us much about neuroscience and data processing, but fudging the details when it comes to stating precisely how consciousness arises in complex computational systems. When the materialist reaches that critical point in the argument, what we often get is conclusory gobbledygook such as: "[A]ll the phenomena of human consciousness are explicable as 'just' the activities of a virtual machine realized in the astronomically adjustable connections of a human brain."[5] For the materialist, it would seem, consciousness is nothing but an elaborate smoke-and-mirrors trick.[6]

But what happens when one jabs one's finger with a sewing needle? There are various behavioral events that typically transpire: (1) the needle pierces the skin on the finger, (2) an electrical message is communicated to the spinal cord via a chain of neural cells in the finger, hand, and arm, (3) a return message is communicated to the arm muscle, (4) the muscle contracts, (5) the hand recoils, (6) the person shouts, "Ow!" But aside from all that, something else is going on: *consciousness of pain*. The pain isn't merely an electrical impulse that causes a particular behavioral response; it is also *known*. As regards the subjective experience of being a conscious human being who suffers from a needle jab, the purely functionalist explanation of consciousness seems to fall short.

Moreover, materialism fails to assign a *role* to consciousness. If consciousness is just a characteristic of some yet-to-be-identified physical substance, then why does that substance need to have that particular characteristic? Wouldn't an unconscious substance do the job just as well? And if, instead, consciousness is explained in functionalist terms, as something that somehow just happens when a machine is sophisticated enough in its design to mimic the behavior of higher-order animals, then why does it need to happen? Wouldn't an unconscious machine be able to do the same things? In either case, what does consciousness add?

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the materialist who attempts to explain consciousness in terms of ectoplasm or machine science has no answer for how space, time, and matter came to be. Existence poses just as much of a philosophical riddle as consciousness. So, if consciousness is explained in material terms, then we have merely substituted one philosophical riddle for another. In place of the question "What is consciousness?" we have the question "What is the physical universe?" We have come no closer to ultimate truth.

5 Dennett, Daniel, *Consciousness Explained* (Back Bay Books 1992), p. 431.

6 Dennett, *Consciousness Explained*, pp. 438–440.

b. Idealism

The idealist, by contrast, seeks a non-dual solution to the mind-body problem by looking exclusively at consciousness. Thus, if the materialist seems rather stuck on the object side of the subject-object divide, the idealist seems rather stuck on the subject side of that divide, proposing a universe that is a mere dream having no physical foundation.

But according to the idealist solution to the mind-body problem, what, if anything, can we say is real? A drunk man imagines he sees a hole in the path in front of him, and he steps aside to avoid it. The hole was real *for him*, argues the idealist. Whether there was an actual hole in the path or merely a dark shadow is irrelevant. The drunk man was subjectively aware of a hole, and because subjective thought is the only thing that exists, the hole — even if merely imagined — was real. So reasons the idealist, and the same reasoning can just as well be used to argue that the hole was *unreal*, for according to idealism, there is nothing outside the mind that one's perceptions represent.

As a theory, idealism offers one important advantage over materialism: By making consciousness the only thing that exists, it gives consciousness a role to play. According to idealism, the world exists for the sake of being known, and its knower serves also as its creator, writing and directing the show, and also playing all the parts. Thus, idealism seems to have a lot going for it — until, that is, one stubs one's toe.

Kick at the rock, Sam Johnson, break your bones:

But cloudy, cloudy is the stuff of stones.

— Richard Wilbur (1921–2017)

Consider once again the drunk man who stepped aside to avoid an imagined hole in the path in front of him. If the same drunk man bites down hard on a ceramic apple, he will break a tooth. Regardless of how sure he is, subjectively, that the ceramic apple is a piece of soft fruit, the objective world has a sometimes-unpleasant way of taking charge of subjective experience. There is, after all, the universe that is shared in common with others, not just the universe that exists in one's own imagination. The world can be a difficult place, and that difficulty is something idealism brushes aside a bit too casually. Holocausts happen. Earthquakes happen. People die. Worse, people suffer *without* dying. Countless people lack adequate nutrition and shelter. Epidemic diseases sweep across the planet. Wars ravage entire nations. And the subjective idealist merely shrugs, asserting that it is all just dream images flashing on the screen of consciousness.

And why apply oneself to discovery, invention, and industry in a world that is only a dream? Quietism and renunciation seem like the better response. At best, we should be finding ways to dream better dreams, not ways to engineer the objects appearing before us in our present dream. Why eke out some small benefit through ingenuity and toil if, instead, one can simply awake from one's bad dream and dream a better dream? But has any society ever overcome hunger, cold, and disease by teaching its people to dream better dreams? I'm all for dreaming better dreams, but it seems like an impractical and fanciful approach to solving the problems confronting the world.

Moreover, who (or what) is the dreamer? People die every day, and yet the dream goes on. Few of us believe that one person's death will cause the universe to suddenly blink out. Indeed, we suspect that even *our own* death will have no effect on the universe's continuing existence. Is the answer, then, that we are all dreaming individual pieces of a shared dream? If so, how are

our individual dreams coordinated with one another so that we each dream of the same object in the same place at the same time? Is perhaps God the master dreamer, coordinating all our dreams in accordance with the laws of physics? But if the dream is governed by the laws of physics, then, as seekers of philosophical truth, we seem to be no better off calling it a dream than we would be if we called it a material world. Whether it is made of dream-stuff or physical matter, it acts the way physical matter acts, and the difference between materialism and idealism is merely semantic.

c. Parallelism?

After contemplating these issues, some philosophers have proposed some version of parallelism as the most satisfying solution to the mind-body problem. These philosophers suggest the existence of a world of thought that duplicates the law-bound material world in every detail and "supervenes" upon it. But why complicate the picture in that way? Why not apply Occam's razor to the problem and consider the possibility that thought and matter are simply the same thing? Then one does not need to prefer matter over thought (materialism), or thought over matter (idealism), or to marry the two in an eternal duet (parallelism), for thought *is* matter.

But how can *that* be? Thought and matter are so obviously *not* the same thing. One does not solve the mind-body problem simply by denying it. Before we can accept that thought and matter are the same thing, we need to reimagine both the self and the universe in nondual terms.

3. All Consciousness Is Consciousness of Self

[T]he thinking substance [(i.e., thought)] and the extended substance [(i.e., matter)] are one and the same substance, which is now comprehended under this attribute, now under that. So also a mode of extension and the idea of that mode are one and the same thing, but expressed in two ways.[7]

— Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677)

Each of us can inwardly focus the attention and identify what appears to be an internal knower of the body's propositional thoughts, its feelings, and its perceptions. This knower is sometimes called the "I" or the "soul"; other times, the "self." Consider, however, one's knowing of the knower.

Ramana Maharshi (1879–1950), the 20th century Indian sage who attracted many people to nondual philosophy, urged his disciples to practice *ātma vicāra* ("contemplation of the self"). He suggested that during silent meditation, the meditator should use the question "Who am I?" to continually refocus the attention on the knower of whatever thoughts or feelings might arise. But how does one focus one's attention on the knower? One certainly doesn't know the knower in the same way one knows an external object like a chair or a cup of sweet tea, for as soon as one attempts to objectify the knower, it ceases to be the knower. The very process of trying to cast one's mental gaze on the knower is analogous to trying to use the outwardly focused light beam of a spotlight to illuminate the spotlight itself. It can't be done. But a source of light doesn't need to be illuminated by a light beam, for light is self-illuminating. In other words, we know the knower by *being* the knower, and that is enough. Our knowing of the knower is an unmediated, non-sensory sort of knowing, and therefore even the word "knowing" is inappropriate, for that word implies a subject and an object, and some mediating principle that connects the two. With respect to the knower within each of us, however, *being* the knower and *consciousness* of the knower are the same thing. Dualistic subject-object consciousness simply does not apply.

7 *Ethics*, IIP7, Schol.

Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980) made a very similar point when he discussed consciousness in his book *Being and Nothingness*. Sartre said:

The reduction of consciousness to knowledge in fact involves our introducing into consciousness the subject-object dualism which is typical of knowledge. . . . Are we obliged after all to introduce the law of this dyad into consciousness? Consciousness of self is not dual. If we wish to avoid an infinite regress, there must be an immediate, non-cognitive relation of the self to itself. [¶] . . . In other words, every positional consciousness of an object is at the same time a non-positional consciousness of [the consciousness] itself.[8]

To refer to this special nondual form of consciousness, Sartre coined the phrase "non-positional consciousness (of) self" (*conscience non positionnelle (de) soi*). This consciousness is "non-positional" because it does not stretch across a subject-object divide, and it is "(of) self" — with the "of" in parentheses — because the word "of" implies separation between two things and hence duality.[9] I find Sartre's phrase informative but a bit clunky and obscure. We might express the same idea with the simpler term "self-consciousness" or its synonym "self-awareness," but those terms in English imply an egocentric psychological state (i.e., the state one has when one realizes one is being observed by someone else). To avoid that confusion, I will use the phrase "nondual consciousness of self," but importantly, the word "consciousness" in this phrase does not refer to the subject side of the subject-object divide. It does not refer, that is, to a knower contemplating itself as if from a point of view outside itself. Rather, it refers to a thing's direct consciousness of itself by *being* itself. It refers to an ontology, not to an epistemology; a state of being, not a state of knowing.

Moreover, the foregoing description of consciousness grounds *all* conscious experience.[10] Notwithstanding our strong feeling of being a soul that knows an objective world, subject-object consciousness is merely an illusion, a superimposition. Instead, the experience we have with respect to "[o]ur knowing of the knower" — the experience of being conscious of a thing by *being* that thing, not by *perceiving* that thing — is what all consciousness actually is. All consciousness is consciousness of self; there is no such thing as consciousness of another.[11]

Consider, for example, one's knowing of a tree that one sees standing on a hillside. What is it that one actually knows? Does one know the tree? No — one knows the light rays reflected from the variegated surface of the tree. But does one even know the light rays? No — the light rays pass through the cornea of the eye and make an inverted image on the retina, where rods and cones are stimulated by the light. It is, therefore, the stimulation of those rods and cones that one actually knows. But does one even know *that*? No — for the pattern of that stimulation is communicated through neurons to the visual cortex — some neurons being responsive to light or dark, others to various parts of the color

8 Sartre, Jean-Paul, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology, translated and with an introduction by Hazel E. Barnes* (Philosophical Library 1956), pp. lii–liii, italics added.

9 Sartre explained: "The necessity of syntax has compelled us hitherto to speak of the 'non-positional consciousness of self.' But we can no longer use this expression in which the '*of self*' still evokes the [dualistic] idea of knowledge. (Henceforth we shall put the 'of' inside parentheses to show that it merely satisfies a grammatical requirement.)" Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. liv.

10 Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, pp. l–lvi.

11 Cf. Aristotle, *Metaphysics* XII, 7 and 9 [making a similar point in reference to God's thoughts].

spectrum, and still others to shape or motion — and as a result, a *representation* of the tree, constructed out of neural spiking frequencies and constrained by the informational categories that the neurons are physically capable of recognizing, appears in the visual cortex. It is, therefore, that *representation* of the tree in the visual cortex that one actually knows.

But does one even know *that*? One can continue the same analysis through all the stages of data processing within the brain, searching for the place where sensory data actually become known by the knower — the place, in other words, where consciousness occurs. But wherever that place (or those places) might be, the most significant point is the impossibility of being conscious of anything other than representations of the world that appear somewhere within one's own brain.[12] Hence, whatever external thing one may be conscious of — a chair, the sweetness of tea, a tree on a hillside — it is always only one's own self that is the actual content of one's consciousness, and one does not know it dualistically, by perceiving it from the outside; one knows it non-dualistically, by *being* it.

And this principle holds true regardless of how finely one analyzes the problem. If the thing that one is conscious of is *separate* from oneself — if it is an object relative to a subject — then one can only be conscious of it by being conscious of the effects it is having on oneself, effects that are communicated through some medium. Ultimately, then, it is never anything other than one's own self that is the content of one's consciousness, and because that is so, consciousness is never actually spread across a subject-object divide. One cannot be conscious of a thing without *being* that thing, and therefore consciousness and being are the same thing.

Nonetheless, subject-object consciousness remains a persistent illusion. Why? The answer is that we are predisposed to *seeing past* our own self, which is the true content of all consciousness, in order to learn things about the external world that our own self reflects and that we desire to know in order to survive as embodied organisms. Because of this tendency to *see past* the self, the nondual character of consciousness becomes invisible to us, and we feel as if we are a subject knowing an object, an object we take to be material.

An analogy can be made to observing the world through its reflection in the surface of a small mirror — for example, the side mirror on an automobile. When we gaze at the mirror, we are really seeing only the mirror's surface, but we tend to *see past* that surface, ignoring it in order to observe the objects reflected therein, which are what most interests us. The surface of the mirror thus becomes invisible to us in favor of the reflected objects, but the mirror's surface is, in truth, the thing we are actually gazing at. Likewise, although all consciousness is nondual consciousness of self, we tend to see past our own self, ignoring it so as to gather information about the external world reflected therein, which is what most interests us. Our own self thus becomes invisible to us in favor of the external world, although our own self is, in truth, the only actual content of our consciousness.

Everyday experience offers many examples of this "seeing past." If one closes one eye, one sees the tip of one's own nose. But what happens when both eyes are open? The tip of the nose disappears. Certainly, light from the nose is still striking the retina of each of one's eyes. So, why does one's mind tune it out? The answer is that

12 See Russell, Bertrand, *The Analysis of Matter* (Dover 1954), p. 383.

it is not useful information, and therefore it becomes invisible. Likewise, in every act of perception, the medium of perception becomes invisible in favor of the information one is seeking to gather about the external world.

Yet another example of this "seeing past" involves a new pair of eyeglasses. When one first puts on a new pair of eyeglasses with stronger lenses, the shape of external objects may seem to be distorted. Over time, however, the distortion disappears. One learns to see past the distortion created by the lenses in favor of the information one is seeking to gather about the external world.

Language provides yet another example of the tendency of any medium of perception to become transparent. To a German-speaking boy the vocalization "*Ich liebe dich*" has the same meaning as the vocalization "I love you" has to an English-speaking boy. What each boy is actually conscious of is a chain of phonemes, and the phoneme chain in each case is quite different, but the phonemes become transparent, and what the boy experiences when he hears the relevant phonemes is their comforting message. And when the German-speaking boy learns English in school, he learns that "I love you" means "*Ich liebe dich*," and in the beginning stages of that learning, he must hear the English words, substitute their German equivalents, and then draw meaning from the German. But over time, the English words begin to sound like their meanings, and he no longer needs to translate them into German. To put the point in colloquial terms, he begins to "think" in English. The English phonemes have become transparent to him, just as the German phonemes became transparent to him.

And the same process takes place, of course, when one learns a new phonetic alphabet. At the beginning, one must labor to recognize the unfamiliar squiggles that one sees on the printed page, and one must mentally consult a memorized list of correspondences. But over time, the squiggles of the newly learned alphabet no longer demand such deliberative interpretation. Simply looking at them causes one to hear their sound in one's mind.

In a widely read essay, Thomas Nagel considers what it is like to be a bat "seeing" by means of its sonar. Among other things, Nagel is interested in the privileged access each conscious being has to its own mind. As he points out, we cannot really know what it is like to be a bat "seeing" by means of its sonar, for we are not bats. But can we guess? In some respects, a bat's "seeing" by means of a sonar must be very different from a person's seeing by means of eyes, and that difference is due to the functional differences between the tools each species uses to gather information about the external world. The bat's sonar, for example, does not deliver information about color or shadow. Conversely, the bat probably has a heightened sense of depth perception relative to a person, because people infer depth from shadow and also by merging the retinal images of two eyes, whereas depth (distance) is precisely the information that the bat's sonar is capable of delivering. As Nagel explains, the bat's sonar "is not similar in its operation to any sense that we possess," and therefore "there is no reason to suppose that it is subjectively like anything we can experience or imagine."[13]

But in at least one respect, a bat's "seeing" by means of a sonar corresponds to a person's seeing by means of eyes, because in both cases, a sophisticated biological organism (a mammal) is employing a tool to

13 Nagel, Thomas, "What Is It Like to Be a Bat?," *The Philosophical Review* 83/4 (Oct. 1974), p. 438.

gather information about the *shape* of the external world and to construct a *representation* of that world in its brain, and when a mammal is moving forward very quickly, it is the shape of the external world — not the means by which it is perceived — that is of primary interest. In other words, the means by which relevant information is delivered is not as important as the fact that the information gets delivered by *some* means. We know this to be true when we learn a new language, and we can infer it to be true more generally. In example after example, the medium that conveys desired information eventually becomes transparent to us in favor of the information we are seeking. And in like manner, our own self, which is the true content of every conscious experience, becomes transparent to us in favor of the external world reflected therein, a world that we — as organisms seeking to survive — strongly desire to know.

Thus, we feel that we are the knowers of an external physical world, knowing it across an unbridgeable subject-object divide, and we even begin to imagine that subject-object consciousness is what consciousness actually is. But what we are interpreting as "subject" and "object" is nothing other than our inherent capacity to be conscious of our own state of being. We construct that consciousness of self into a subject knowing an object because doing so makes us better survivors in a sometimes-dangerous world.

4. Thought-Matter Equivalence

I should say that what the physiologist sees when he looks at a [hospital patient's] brain is part of his own brain, not part of the brain he is examining.[14]

— Bertrand Russell (1872–1970)

In light of what we have said in the previous section, consider the possibility that consciousness — nondual consciousness of self — is the *being* of a thing, whereas matter is how a thing *appears* when it is known inferentially from the impressions it makes on one's sense organs. And, in referring to "matter," I include everything associated with physical reality, whether energy or mass. In other words, when item X is known empirically, it seems to be matter. But when item X is known directly, simply by being item X, it turns out to be nothing but consciousness. According to this reasoning, it is only the mediation of the senses as one's method of knowing that makes consciousness seem to be material.

But here we have to be careful because we tend to think of consciousness as the subject side of the subject-object divide, and we cannot allow that tendency to confuse us. True consciousness, as we have explained, is a thing's consciousness of its own state of being, not its consciousness of something outside itself. So, let us use the word "thought" for subject-object consciousness, thus reserving the word "consciousness" for nondual consciousness of self. If we do, we find that thought and matter are complementary and mutually dependent aspects of nondual consciousness.

If, for example, one is thinking of an apple, one's apple-thought involves a mental image of a round object, about the size of a fist, usually red or green, smooth to the touch, having a distinctive aroma, etc. But thought-matter equivalence does not mean that one's apple-thought is the same as a physical apple sitting in a bowl of fruit on a table; rather, it means that one's apple-thought is the same as a physical brain representing an apple in the form of neural spiking frequencies, and it is the brain's thought of itself that is the true content of the apple-thought.

14 Russell, *The Analysis of Matter*, p. 383.

But even with the benefit of that insight, the phrase "thought of itself" necessarily implies a dualism of thought and matter. We still have, on the one side, a brain's thoughts and, on the other, a material brain patterned by neural spiking frequencies. When even that trace of dualism is removed, we are left with just nondual consciousness — consciousness that is conscious of itself by being itself, not by knowing itself. And it is that nondual consciousness that appears to us as thought and matter, just as the flat surface of a mirror reflecting a distant city appears to have depth.

One might ask, however, whether this philosophy is merely a dressed-up form of idealism. If the physical world, when experienced directly rather than empirically, turns out to be nothing but nondual consciousness, then aren't we essentially denying the reality of matter, dismissing it as the illusory effect of a flawed epistemology? And if so, aren't we beset by all the problems that accompany the idealist solution to the mind-body problem?

It is true that the physical world is nothing but consciousness, but that fact does not mean that everything is merely a dream you are dreaming. Rather, everything is a dream being dreamed by *itself*. Thus, the material world is real in every significant sense. Each particle of the universe has its own intrinsic being, but its being is nothing over and above its consciousness of self. To *be* a boson is to *be conscious* of a boson, and that is all it is.

If one perceives, say, a lump of clay on a potter's wheel, the clay appears to be an inert thing, devoid of consciousness. But if one recognizes that, in perceiving the clay, one is actually conscious only of the clay's reflection within one's own self, a self that is veritably sparkling with consciousness, then it becomes hard not to conclude that all things everywhere sparkle with that same consciousness. In other words, the only thing in this universe that one actually knows directly, without any mediation, is one's own self, and it is undeniably conscious, so what basis does one have to deny consciousness to everything else? The fact is that we seek a material substratum for consciousness only because of the illusion of materiality created by the subject-object divide.

This section opened with a quote by Bertrand Russell about the human brain. A very good way to know a hospital patient's brain is to study it, as a physiologist might do, using the most modern scientific equipment available. But a much more accurate way to know the hospital patient's brain is to *be* it. Despite our great faith in scientific objectivity, the physiologist's way of knowing the brain is mediated and therefore inherently unreliable, leading to confused theories such as the notion that the brain's underlying substance is matter.

Some readers might have a doubt about the assertion just made that scientific inquiry is an unreliable form of knowing. Indeed, we value the objectivity of the scientific method precisely because of its accuracy, and in the case of a brain injury, we are grateful for the power of medical science to study the brain and heal it. The point is not that one can discover all the structures and mechanisms of one's brain merely by closing one's eyes and being them.[15] Rather, the point is that when one is conscious of a thing by being it, one's consciousness of that thing is not distorted by any mediating physics; it is direct and, at least in that sense, perfect. Even a drunk man has perfect and undistorted consciousness of his brain — he has perfect and undistorted consciousness of the

15 See Garrett, Don, *Nature and Necessity in Spinoza's Philosophy* (Oxford Univ. Press 2018), pp. 405–407.

misinformation about the external world that his alcohol-sodden brain is at that moment representing.

By contrast, when one knows something by means of sensory perception, one's knowledge of it is quite constrained. Human beings have only five sense organs, each responsive to only a very narrow band of information. Thus, it is as if we are viewing the external world through five tiny fragments of a broken and distorted mirror. It is true that we can vastly improve our understanding of the external world by using scientific instruments to compensate for the distortions and inadequacies of our sense organs, but we remain greatly disadvantaged when we try to learn the true form of external things using only empirical methods. Rather, such methods are most effective at doing precisely the things they evolved to do — seeking sustenance for the body and identifying and avoiding potential dangers.

Speaking metaphorically, we might say that when the physiologist studies a hospital patient's brain, the physiologist's way of knowing the brain is knowing it *from the outside*, whereas the patient's way of knowing the same brain is knowing it *from the inside*. But those metaphors ("outside" and "inside") obscure the fact that the "outside" view is mediated and inferential, whereas the "inside" view is direct. As Bertrand Russell explained, "what the physiologist sees when he looks at a [hospital patient's] brain is part of *his own* brain, not part of the brain he is examining."[16]

5. The Truth Will Set You Free

In *The Nondual Mind*, I examine the teachings of nondual Kashmiri Shaivism and Baruch Spinoza, and I demonstrate the striking ways in which both philosophical systems articulate the principles summarized in this article. In particular, both systems assert that all things are conscious, and both systems add that all consciousness is consciousness of self. But my book does much more. It also persuasively shows that these ideas, taken to their logical conclusion, answer every important philosophical riddle, including the riddle of what it means to be free in a universe governed in every detail by the laws of physics.

But the ideas expressed here demand a complete reimagining of who or what one is. And that point brings me to the theme of this edition of *Dogma*: "Belief." Most of us are heavily invested in Cartesian dualism, deeply *believing* it to be true because it corresponds so closely to how it feels to be human. In Christianity, we learn that *belief* can be our redemption. But sometimes *belief* obscures *truth*, and truth — even counterintuitive truth — can be our liberation.

16 Russell, *The Analysis of Matter*, p. 383, italics added.

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