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CONSCIOUSNESS EXPLAINED?

By James H. Cumming



My recently completed book, *The Non-dual Mind*, compares Hindu nondual philosophy to that of Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677 C.E.), demonstrating the similarity of Spinoza’s ideas to Kashmiri *Pratyabhijñā* Shaivism. Two previous editions of *Dogma* published excerpts from that book, and the present article constitutes a third excerpt, where I explore some of the significant ramifications of the ideas presented in the previous articles. It is not necessary to read those articles before reading this one, but readers who seek a deeper understanding may want to do so. Those articles discuss two main points: All things are conscious, and all consciousness is consciousness of self. As those articles explain, one cannot be conscious of a thing without *being* that thing. Hence, subject-object consciousness is an illusion; one knows an outside world only because one is conscious of its reflection inside one’s own being. Whatever external object one may be perceiving, it is always one’s own self that is the content of one’s consciousness, and one’s consciousness of self is ontological, not epistemological. The first of my previous articles presents these ideas in the abstract, and the second shows how these ideas find expression in the texts of Hindu nondual philosophy and Spinoza.

Importantly, the second article reveals the close affinity between Spinoza’s nondual philosophy and that of *Pratyabhijñā* Shaivism. Spinoza’s core philosophical insight is his assertion of thought-matter equivalence: “[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.” (*Ethics*, IIP7, Schol.)¹ But seven centuries before Spinoza wrote those words, Somānanda (10th century C.E.), one of the seminal teachers of *Pratyabhijñā* Shaivism, had already articulated the same thought-matter equivalence, saying, “a clay jar, by comprehending its own self, exists.”² And another teacher of *Pratyabhijñā* Shaivism, Yogarāja (11th century C.E.), had elaborated Somānanda’s philo-

1 The term “thinking substance” does not mean a material substance that thinks. Rather, Spinoza contrasts “thinking substance” (i.e., mind or consciousness) with “extended substance” (i.e., matter). Note: The translations of Spinoza’s writings that appear in this article — and in my previous articles — are from Curley, Edwin (ed. and transl.), *The Collected Works of Spinoza, Volume I & II* (Princeton Univ. Press 1988 and 2016), sometimes with minor edits. Due to an unintended oversight, my previous articles neglected to credit Curley.

2 *Śivadr̥ṣṭi* 5.34 (KSTS, vol. 54, p. 187).

sophical insight, explaining that all things are conscious (i.e., conscious of themselves), but only organisms that have sense organs, a central nervous system, and a brain are constructed in such a way that the universal nondual consciousness (*pratyavamarśa*) takes the form of an individual soul knowing an external material world. And Yogarāja further explained that this dualistic subject-object consciousness occurs because external objects are reflected internally, as if in a mirror.³

As my second article shows, Spinoza reached a very similar conclusion. According to Spinoza, everything has a mind, even a lump of clay. (*Ethics*, IIP13, Schol.) In other words, everything has the thought of itself. But “in proportion as a Body is more capable than others of doing many things at once, or being acted on in many ways at once” — that is, in proportion to the development of its sense organs, nervous system, and brain — “so its Mind is more capable than others of perceiving many things at once.” (*Ibid.*) And, insofar as a body becomes more capable of that sort of multifaceted and nuanced perception, its mind becomes more cognizant of external things, for “[t]he human Mind does not perceive any external body as actually existing, except through the ideas of the affections of its own Body.” (*Id.*, IIP26; see also *id.*, IIP13, Schol.) And, at the same time, its mind becomes cognizant of itself as the knower of those external things, for “[t]he Mind does not know itself, except insofar as it perceives the ideas of the affections of the Body.” (*Id.*, IIP23.) And thus arises the illusion of the subject-object divide — the awareness, that is, of a mind perceiving an external world. As Spinoza said, “he who has a Body capable of a great many things, has a Mind which

3 See, e.g., Yogarāja’s com. to *Paramārthasāra*, verse 8 (KSTS, vol. 7, p. 25).

considered only in itself is very much conscious of itself . . . and of things.” (*Id.*, VP39, Schol.) And as Yogarāja likewise said, “whenever objects of sense such as sound . . . are apprehended in the mirror of intellect . . . — then, that same Self [(i.e., consciousness)], its form now fully manifest, is apprehended”⁴

In developing these ideas, the teachers of *Pratyabhijñā* Shaivism frequently use the example of a city reflected in a mirror to show that subject-object dualism is merely an illusion. The reason there appears to be an outside world, when in truth one is only conscious of one’s own self, is the same reason that the reflection of a city on the flat surface of a small mirror appears to be a distant city. It is a trick of perception that makes one’s consciousness of self appear to be the knowing of an external world. Thus, the genius of the city-in-a-mirror simile is that it collapses subject and object into one without privileging either the subject side or the object side. All things are consciousness, but all things are also conscious.

For Spinoza, too, one’s own self is always the true content of one’s consciousness. If, for example, one is gazing at an apple sitting in a bowl of fruit on a table, one is not actually conscious of the apple; rather, one is conscious of one’s own brain reflecting and representing the apple in the form of neural spiking frequencies. The brain is configured to reflect and represent the external apple, and the brain’s thought of itself at that particular moment is what one experiences as an apple-thought. But Spinoza also recognizes that even the

4 Yogarāja’s com. to *Paramārthasāra*, verse 8 (KSTS, vol. 7, p. 25), translated in Bansat-Boudon, Lyne, and Kamaleshadatta Tripathi, *An Introduction to Tantric Philosophy: The Paramārthasāra of Abhinavagupta with the Commentary of Yogarāja* (Routledge 2011), p. 98.

phrase “thought of itself” implies a dualism of thought and matter. We still have on the one side a thought and on the other side a material brain patterned by neural spiking frequencies. Spinoza closes that gap by asserting that the thought and the material thing are two attributes of a single universal “substance,” which Spinoza equates with God. And if we go just a step further — a step that Spinoza doesn’t take, but one that fits — we can say that Spinoza’s divine “substance” is the nondual consciousness of self (*pratyavamarśa*) that, according to *Pratyabhijñā* Shaivism, is the essence of all conscious experience.⁵ But in using the phrase “nondual consciousness of self,” we are not referring to the subject side of the subject-object divide. Rather, we are referring to a direct consciousness of self that is based on being, not on knowing. It is that *nondual* consciousness that appears to us as the duality of thought and matter, just as the flat surface of a mirror reflecting a distant city appears to have depth.

In summary, we find in Spinoza’s writings all the principles that we find in the leading texts of *Pratyabhijñā* Shaivism. The core of the mind-body problem is the illusion of subject-object dualism. When the insight arises that all consciousness is really nondual consciousness of self (*pratyavamarśa*), the mind-body problem disappears, and the riddle of consciousness is solved.

With the benefit of that brief introduction, let us consider some of the implications of these important philosophical ideas.

1. The Evolution of the Soul

To suppose that the eye with all its inimitable contrivances for adjusting

⁵ See *Īśvarapratyabhijñākārikā* I.5.13 (KSTS, vol. 34, 2nd text, p. 18).

the focus to different distances, for admitting different amounts of light, and for the correction of spherical and chromatic aberration, could have been formed by natural selection, seems, I freely confess, absurd in the highest degree. When it was first said that the sun stood still and the world turned round, the common sense of mankind declared the doctrine false; but the old saying of *Vox populi, vox Dei* [(“The voice of the people is the voice of God”)], as every philosopher knows, cannot be trusted in science. Reason tells me, that if numerous gradations from a simple and imperfect eye to one complex and perfect can be shown to exist, each grade being useful to its possessor, as is certainly the case; if further, the eye ever varies and the variations be inherited, as is likewise certainly the case and if such variations should be useful to any animal under changing conditions of life, then the difficulty of believing that a perfect and complex eye could be formed by natural selection, though insuperable by our imagination, should not be considered as subversive of the theory.⁶

— Charles Darwin (1809–1882 C.E.)

According to *Pratyabhijñā* Shaivism, nondual consciousness of self (*pratyavamarśa*) is not just a special characteristic of neural cells or of the energy that flows through them. Rather, nondual consciousness of self is the intrinsic stuff of *all* being. The entire material universe is, as a whole and in each of its parts, conscious of itself, not in the way a subject is conscious of an object, but simply by being itself. And

⁶ Darwin, Charles, *The Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life* (London, John Murray, 6th edition, 1872), pp. 143–144.

to the extent that any part of the material universe — say, a brain, or perhaps some component of a brain — is configured to reflect and represent internally the detailed characteristics of the world that surrounds it, that part's knowing of itself can give rise to an inference about the characteristics of the surrounding world, and when it does, there becomes associated with that part what we call an "individual soul" and "subject-object consciousness." And we have further seen that Spinoza makes the same assertions, although he doesn't go so far as to say that nondual consciousness is the intrinsic stuff of all being. Instead, he simply says that all things have the thought of their own material form, and he adds that this thought and this material form are dual attributes of a single universal substance (*substantia*).

Of course, in an infinite universe such as ours, a universe governed by physical laws but also one that is dynamic and changing in every moment, there will naturally arise discrete systems that function more or less as units, at least for a short time. Their individuality might be only apparent, because no finite thing is completely independent of the things that surround it, but these discrete systems will nonetheless have a certain degree of independent existence, and they will tend to maintain their distinct form longer if happenstance has constructed them in a way that predisposes them to self-preservation. Hence, in an infinite universe such as ours, discrete systems that are self-preserving in some way will slowly become more prevalent, while those that are less self-preserving will dissipate and disappear. And two traits that vastly increase the self-preservation of any such system is its ability to recognize destructive forces in its environment and its ability to initiate defensive responses to avoid those destructive forces.

Moreover, the complex internal configuration that makes possible such recognition and responsiveness will, in very many cases, be the same sort of internal configuration that gives rise to an individual soul. Perhaps a very basic organism — say, a sea sponge (*phylum porifera*) — can function completely mechanistically, but if an organism is to have a more sophisticated ability to recognize and respond to external threats, it would need to have a very supple internal component that was capable of accurately reflecting and representing the changes occurring in its surrounding environment. And therefore, that component would have the precise characteristics that, according to both *Pratyabhijñā* Shaivism and Spinoza, give rise to subject-object consciousness.

The implication of this brief discussion is, of course, that subject-object consciousness is something that evolved in our universe in the same way that the human eye evolved — simply by natural selection. And a further implication of this discussion is that functionalism turns out to be a viable theory for explaining the presence of subject-object consciousness. The internal structures that are necessary to perfectly mimic the behavior of a higher-order animal will, as a byproduct, give rise to an individual soul.

2. Mind Meld

[W]e generally say, in the case of experiencing [the presence of] a man: the other is himself there before us "in person." On the other hand, this being there in person does not keep us from admitting forthwith that, properly speaking, neither the other Ego himself, nor his subjective processes or his appearances themselves, nor anything else belonging to his own essence, becomes given in our experience originally. If it were,

if what belongs to the other's own essence were directly accessible, it would be merely a moment of my own essence, and ultimately he himself and I myself would be the same.⁷

— Edmund Husserl (1859–1938 C.E.)

Our discussion of *Pratyabhijñā* Shaivism and Spinoza has, however, overlooked a troublesome detail. It is well and good to say that all things are conscious (i.e., conscious of self), but what in this context constitutes a “thing”? What defines the boundaries of a self-conscious unit? We can consider the problem both from a macro and a micro perspective. From the macro perspective, how can we speak of distinct “parts” of the material universe? Isn't every so-called “part” fully determined, in both form and action, by all the things that surround it? Isn't the entire universe a single individual that cannot be divided into parts, except perhaps by conventions of speech? And if so, how does the universal consciousness of self become segmented to become the consciousness of self associated with, say, a human brain? Or, considering the problem from the micro perspective, how does the consciousness of self associated with, say, a single subatomic particle merge with that of similar subatomic particles to become the consciousness of self associated with an atom, a molecule, a neural cell, and, finally, a collection of neural cells constituting a brain? In short, we have not really answered the mystery of subject-object consciousness until we have determined what sort of things can share a single mind.

Edmund Husserl, who is quoted at the

beginning of this section, pointed out that a defining characteristic of any distinct mind is the inaccessibility of other minds, and conversely the accessibility of another's mind makes that other mind, by definition, an extension of one's own mind. (See *Cartesian Meditations*, § 50.)⁸ So, if clusters of subatomic particles, atoms, molecules, and neural cells can all somehow share a single merged mind, does it necessarily stop there? Could a group of people share a single mind as does the *homo gestalt* in Theodore Sturgeon's popular science fiction novel *More Than Human*?

It may be that the minds of two or more people can in fact merge given the right circumstances. The two hemispheres of the human brain are in many ways redundant, meaning that if one hemisphere of the brain does not properly develop, a person can still function, albeit to a limited extent. In a sense, then, most of us have two conscious brains, not one, and yet we experience both these conscious brains as a single mind.⁹ And if a person can merge the minds of two distinct brain hemispheres, then presumably two people can merge the minds of two distinct brains.

But what would it take for such a “mind meld” to occur? Presumably, it would take conditions similar to those that apply to the two hemispheres of the brain. The two people would need to be bound closely together, sharing similar sensory inputs, and they would need to be in close communication with each other. In addition, they would need to share a functional unity such that there was a systemwide advantage to having a single shared mind. Under those conditions, their sense of being two

7 *Cartesian Meditations*, § 50, translated by Dorion Cairns, reprinted in Welton, Donn (ed.), *The Essential Husserl: Basic Writings in Transcendental Phenomenology* (Indiana Univ. Press 1999), p. 146.

8 A similar idea is expressed in Spinoza's *Ethics*. See *Ethics*, IIA4, IIA5, and IIP13, Dem.

9 See Nagel, Thomas, “Brain Bisection and the Unity of Consciousness,” *Synthese* 22 (May 1971), pp. 405–409.

minds might recede, and it might be replaced by a single merged mind.

According to *Pratyabhijñā* Shaivism, every object that maintains a distinct physical form does so because of a *desire* to do so, implying that every such object has its own independent mind. Hence, Somānanda said, “the riverbank *wishes* to collapse”¹⁰ — that is, it gives up the desire to maintain itself as a riverbank, and it adopts a different desire. This theory may seem naive, imputing volition to natural events (the tree desires to grow, the wind desires to blow, the mountain desires to stand firm, etc.), but if we consider that for an object to exist as a distinct object, it must have some physical forces or processes that maintain its form, and if we accept that thought and matter are the same thing, then the physical forces or processes that maintain an object’s form must correspond, in thought, to a *will* to do so. And that is exactly what Spinoza asserts: “Each thing, as far as it [can by its own power], *strives* to persevere in its being.” (*Ethics*, IIP6, italics added.)¹¹ In other words, the affiliation of parts that defines a distinct material object is sufficient also to define a distinct mind, even if that mind is only the abiding desire to maintain a particular form.

3. Language and the Human Mind

Like everything metaphysical the harmony between thought and reality is to be found in the grammar of the language.¹²

— Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951 C.E.)

¹⁰ *Śivadr̥ṣṭi* 5.17 (KSTS, vol. 54, p. 185), italics added. See also *Śivadr̥ṣṭi* 5.4.

¹¹ Literally: “Each thing, as far as it is in itself, strives to persevere in its being.”

¹² *Zettel*, no. 55, translated in Anscombe, G.E.M., and G.H. von Wright (eds.), *Ludwig Wittgenstein: Zettel* (University of California Press 1967), p. 12e.

Without language, an individual soul’s perception of the external world is no more than a stream of incomprehensible data. But when a soul begins to categorize that incoming data by type and pattern, it is forming a mental language, and it can then begin to interpret the world it is perceiving. An animal may not attach a particular phoneme chain to the experience of water, but it recognizes water, because it is capable of categorizing the data that underlie its perceptions. It is able, in other words, to compare the received data against a catalog of stored concepts, and by finding a match, it can recognize a thing such as water. Therefore, without a mental language, no meaningful perception can occur.

It might be debated to what extent animals are born with this catalog of stored concepts — this mental language — and to what extent they build it from experience. They are probably born with a large part of it, for even a newborn calf knows to suckle the teat of its mother, and many animals begin the process of navigating the world they inhabit within minutes or hours of birth. And because animals — including human ones — interpret the world by matching the data of perception against a catalog of stored concepts, their knowing of the world is, in actuality, a knowing of their own concepts about the world, not a direct knowing of the world.¹³

But even if animals are born with a catalog of stored concepts, they certainly augment that catalog over time, based on their experiences, and some animals assign unique vocalizations or bodily movements to the most important concepts, thus allowing them to communicate

¹³ These stored concepts can be thought of as universals, but they do not have an existence independent of the physiology of a particular organism’s brain.

with one another semiotically. As a human child masters spoken language, an ever-increasing vocabulary of phoneme chains is stored in its memory, and these phoneme chains can then be retrieved, arranged, and combined according to rules of grammar. As a result, human beings are able to describe past events, predict future benefits or dangers, and plan coordinated responses, but most importantly, human beings are able to present to themselves, in the privacy of their own propositional thoughts — what Plato called *dianoia* — a narrative about the external world they are encountering.

Thus, the advanced linguistic capacity of human beings inalterably changes human perception. For a person, perception is not just a matter of recognizing water in a forest stream; a person is also able to formulate complex propositional thoughts about all the things that water implies. Most animals wander through the world recognizing categories such as food, shelter, and danger, and responding with appropriate patterned responses, but they do not construct an accompanying narrative about these experiences. Human perception, however, includes a narrative about a person living in a world, and that narrative affects what it means to have a conscious mind.

In other words, we use language not just to communicate with one another but also to communicate with *ourselves*, and thus we generate a world of the imagination that rivals the world of sensory perception. Every experience is integrated into a story we are authoring about who we are and who we will become, and if a particular experience doesn't fit the story, we must change the story, or we experience a psychological crisis. And, if we are injured, we do not merely feel pain, as does an animal. We also include that pain in a

narrative about a person who suffers pain. The pain exists for a time, and then it ends, but the story about a person who had pain, and who will have pain, remains. And because of that story, our pain can become unbearable. Thus, language turns out to be a dangerous thing.

But propositional thought is not the only thing that colors human perception. Emotion does, too. A beautiful flower is not just a blend of shining colors; there is also a unique feeling in the body that accompanies a person's perception of a flower, a feeling that is different for each person. Philosophers sometimes use the plural term "qualia" to refer to aspects of perception that are personal to the perceiver. They talk about "what it's like" for Mary to see a particular flower, distinguishing that experience from "what it's like" for John to see the same flower.

But this subjective emotional aspect of human perception is easily explained. We have learned that subject-object consciousness is actually consciousness of one's own self in which the external world is reflected like a city reflected in a mirror. But what happens if one sees just a little bit of the mirror's surface in addition to seeing the distant city? What happens if physiological changes in one's own body distort one's perception of some external object or event? The answer is that one experiences that distortion as an emotional coloration of the object of perception.

Thus, the human experience of seeing a beautiful flower is a combination of (1) the perceived details of the flower (light frequencies, shape, texture, aroma, etc.), (2) a particular narrative about flowers that runs in one's stream of propositional thoughts (youth, fertility, springtime, romance), and (3) the perception one has of one's own physiology as it is affected by both the flower and the narrative (en-

dorphin release, rapid heart rate, altered breathing pattern). And therefore, Mary's seeing of a flower can never be the same as John's seeing of it, because Mary and John might be gazing at the same flower illuminated by the same setting sun, but the true content of Mary's consciousness is her own self, and the true content of John's consciousness is his own self. Each might be gazing at the same flower, but each is looking at it through a different mirror.

4. Mary Is Seeing Red

Mary is a brilliant scientist who is, for whatever reason, forced to investigate the world from a black and white room via a black and white television monitor. She specialises in the neurophysiology of vision and acquires, let us suppose, all the physical information there is to obtain about what goes on when we see ripe tomatoes [¶] What will happen when Mary is released from her black and white room [and actually sees a ripe tomato for the first time] . . . ? Will she learn anything or not? It seems just obvious that she will learn something about the world and our visual experience of it. But then it is inescapable that her previous knowledge was incomplete. But she had all the physical information. Ergo there is more to have than that, and Physicalism is false.¹⁴

— Frank Jackson (born 1943 C.E.)

Frank Jackson proposed the thought experiment of Mary and her black-and-white room — quoted above — as a way of showing that consciousness is something that exists independent of all the physical facts governing conscious experience. Consider the moment that Mary, the brilliant scientist described in Jack-

son's thought experiment, steps out of her black-and-white room and actually sees a ripe red tomato hanging on a vine in the afternoon sunlight. On the one hand, there are all the physical facts related to the sunlight, the tomato's surface, the reflected light, Mary's eye, her nervous system and brain, her brain's electrical activity, etc. On the other hand, there is Mary's subjective experience of seeing a red tomato for the very first time. Thus, consciousness seems to be an additional fact, distinct from all the physical facts. Put another way, we can imagine the existence of all the physical facts (the sunlight, the tomato, the reflected light, the eye, the brain, the electrical activity, etc.) without consciousness being part of the show. The physical facts do not seem to demand consciousness, which seems therefore to be something extra.

But Mary's consciousness is not an additional fact, distinct from all the physical facts involved in the act of seeing the red tomato; rather, her consciousness is the experience of *being* one of those physical facts.

One is reminded, here, of the story of the tenth man. Ten men, traveling on foot, cross a river that has a swift current. When they reach the other side, they want to confirm that none of them has drowned. Each counts the others, and each counts only nine. Then they lament the loss of their colleague, but each has neglected to count himself. No one has actually been lost. Jackson's thought experiment involving Mary and her black-and-white room is a variant of that story. Imagine that each of the ten men counts ten physical bodies, including his own, but failing to recognize that he actually *is* one of those physical bodies, each man thinks there are now eleven men, one of whom — himself — is now a ghost. In that way, Mary's study of the physical facts counts everything that is

¹⁴ Jackson, Frank, "Epiphenomenal Qualia," *The Philosophical Quarterly* 32/127 (Apr. 1982), p. 130.

present, and she doesn't find consciousness among the physical facts that are present, but her study doesn't take into account that consciousness is the experience of *being one of the physical facts*. And once she corrects that mistake, she realizes that only a tomato can be conscious of a tomato, and whether inside the room or out, Mary was only ever conscious of her own brain and nothing more.

5. The “You Are Here” Arrow

This is how we see the world. We see it [as if] outside ourselves, and at the same time we only have a representation of it in ourselves.¹⁵

— René Magritte (1898–1967 C.E.)

15 Magritte, René, *La Ligne de Vie II*, quoted in Torczyner, Harry (transl. by Richard Miller), *Magritte: Ideas and Images* (H.N. Abrams 1977), p. 156.

According to both *Pratyabhijñā* Shivism and Spinoza, we know the external world by way of its reflection and representation within our own being. And this process is universal. All things reflect and represent internally, at least to a limited extent, what surrounds them, and therefore the world can be characterized as a vast house of mirrors, although most of those mirrors are relatively poor reflectors. It follows, therefore, that the more one investigates and accurately comprehends the true nature of the surrounding world, the more one replicates it within oneself. And perhaps becoming a thing by knowing it ever more perfectly is a suitable definition of love. The human soul can, therefore, be described as a mirror in a house of mirrors, and love cleans the glass. Love, in other words, reveals to us that we are all really one.



PHOTO BY TEUVO UUSITALO
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Thoughtful people sometimes ask themselves, Why was I born as *this* person and not as *that*? Why am I this thoughtful reader of philosophy journals? Why am I not that beggar, or that billionaire, or that bird? Such thoughts fail to recognize that consciousness is a single indivisible whole, just as the universe is a single indivisible whole. When gazing at the reflections of the sun in a series of water-filled jars, the sun appears to be many, and when looking at all the conscious beings in the world, each pursuing its individual interests, consciousness appears to be many, but there is only one sun, and there is only one consciousness. That is the teaching of Śaṅkara's Vedānta, and it is also the teaching of *Pratyabhijñā* Shaivism and Spinoza.

We are individuals only insofar as we perceive the world through the mediation of our sense organs rather than resting in the universal nondual consciousness that we are. Relying on our sense organs, we imagine that we are tiny souls inhabiting a vast external universe, and like the image of the world reflected in the mirrored surface of a crystal ball, everything for us then becomes distorted relative to a unique point of observation. But even so, we are all reflecting the same universe, and therefore we are one.

One way to think about the illusion of individuality is in terms of map-territory relation. Alfred Korzybski pointed out that maps are useful to us precisely because they are *not* perfect one-to-one replicas of the territory we wish to know. Rather they are *representations* of that territory. He said: "A map is *not* the territory it represents, but, if correct, it has a *similar structure* to the territory, which accounts for its usefulness."¹⁶

¹⁶ Korzybski, Alfred, *Science and Sanity: An Introduction to Non-Aristotelian Systems and Gen-*

And yet, paradoxically, we often confuse representations of reality for reality itself, and the best example is the representation of reality that appears inside each of us, by which the world becomes knowable to us. That representation is not the world; rather, it is a map of the world. But we look at it (i.e., we look at our own self) and think, I'm looking at the world.

This concept is wonderfully illustrated by René Magritte's *The Human Condition* (1933).¹⁷ Magritte described his famous painting in this way:

In front of a window seen from inside a room, I placed a painting representing exactly that portion of the landscape covered by the painting. Thus, the tree in the picture hid the [real] tree behind it, outside the room. For the spectator, [the tree] was both inside the room within the painting and outside in the real landscape. *This is how we see the world. We see it [as if] outside ourselves, and at the same time we only have a representation of it in ourselves.*¹⁸

Magritte thus sought to convey through his art that our knowing of the world is, in every case, only the knowing of an *interpretation* of the world; it is the knowing of a symbol that, for us, stands in place of the world. "How can anyone enjoy interpreting symbols?" Magritte asked in a letter

eral Semantics, 5th Ed. (International Non-Aristotelian Library Publishing Co. 1994), p. 58.

¹⁷ Other Magritte paintings that illustrate the same idea include: *The Treachery of Images* (1929), *The Fair Captive* (1931), *The Human Condition* (1935), *The Key to the Fields* (1936), *The Domain of Arnheim* (1942), *The Call of the Peaks* (1942), *The Fair Captive* (1947), *Euclidean Walks* (1955), and *Evening Falls* (1964).

¹⁸ Magritte, René, *La Ligne de Vie II*, quoted in Torczyner, *Magritte: Ideas and Images*, p. 156, italics added. Magritte likely drew his insight most directly from Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, although it also illustrates Spinoza's epistemology.

to a friend. “They are ‘substitutes’ that are only useful to a mind that is incapable of knowing the things themselves. A devotee of interpretation cannot see a bird; he only sees it as a symbol.”¹⁹

In our knowing of the world, each of us becomes a map of that world, a map that distorts the world relative to a particular set of concepts and a particular location in space-time. And because of that distortion, we think, I am a thoughtful philosopher, I am not that beggar, I am not that billionaire, I am not that bird. But by investigating and accurately comprehending the true nature of the surrounding world, we map the world ever more perfectly, and as others do the same, we close the illusory gap that separates us from one another. Each of us is a map of the same territory, but for each of us there is a different “You are here” arrow at the center of the map. We need to remove the “You are here” arrow. Then, in the mystical words of Emily Dickinson (1830–1886 C.E.),²⁰ we can say:

The Brain - is wider than the Sky -
For - put them side by side -
The one the other will contain
With ease - and You - beside -

The Brain is deeper than the sea -
For - hold them - Blue to Blue -
The one the other will absorb -
As Sponges - Buckets - do -

The Brain is just the weight of God -
For - Heft them - Pound for Pound -
And they will differ - if they do -
As Syllable from Sound -

19 Letter from René Magritte to Achille Chavée, Sept. 30, 1960, quoted in Torczyner, *Magritte: Ideas and Images*, p. 70.

20 Franklin, R.W., *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Reading Edition* (Belknap Press 1999), p. 269.

6. Consciousness Explained?

It is only when *Citi*, the ultimate consciousness-power, comes into play that the universe comes forth into being, and continues as existent, and when it withdraws its movement, the universe also disappears from view. One’s own experience would bear witness to this fact. The other things [said to be the foundation of existence] . . . , since they are (supposed to be) different from the light of consciousness can never be a cause of anything, for not being able to appear owing to their supposed difference from consciousness-power, they are (as good as) nonexistent. But if they appear, they become one with the light (of consciousness). Hence, *Citi*, which is that light alone, is the cause. Never [are] the other [things] any cause.²¹

— Kṣemarāja (10th–11th centuries C.E.)

Many philosophers — unable to overcome the subject-object divide — take the physical universe to be a given, and they consider consciousness to be something extra, something that, in theory at least, could disappear from the physical universe, and the universe could continue just fine without it. For them, the physical universe does not depend on consciousness; rather, consciousness depends on the physical universe. These philosophers happily accept the existence of space, time, and matter, and then they imagine such strange things as universes known by no one and nothing. They even imagine “zombies” — by which they mean bodies that are constructed and function exactly like living human bodies but have

21 *Pratyabhijñāhṛdayam*, com. to *sūtra* 1 (KSTS, vol. 3, p. 2), translated in Singh, Jaideva (ed. and transl.), *Pratyabhijñāhṛdayam: The Secret of Self-Recognition* (Motilal Banarsidass 1982), p. 47.

no consciousness. These philosophers do not question the existence of the physical universe, but they question why, for certain complex organic structures, there is something it feels like, subjectively, to be that thing. They wonder, in other words, how it could be that some physical things have souls.

But *existence* is just as much a philosophical riddle as consciousness. Where, or in what, is this vast expanse of space-time located? And how did it come to contain all these galaxies and blackholes, fermions and bosons, and all the rest? And most importantly, if it all could still exist independently of consciousness, then what could be its significance? These questions are all answered when the problem of existence finds its solution in consciousness — the nondual consciousness of self that *Pratyabhijñā* Shaivism calls *pratyavamarśa*.

This consciousness is not a conglomerate, not an amalgam, not divisible into parts. Nothing is separate from it; nothing is outside it. It is without limitation or constraint. It is independent, absolutely free. It is its own purpose, which is only to delight in its own existence. It is anything one might call God and anything one might call non-God. It is closer to each of us than anything we could seek, closer even than our own name and form. It is the soul of the soul, the self of the self, the I of the I.

This consciousness has no location, size, or duration. It didn't come into existence; it can't cease to exist. It isn't inside space, time, and matter, fragmented by space, time, and matter. Rather, space, time, and matter are inside it. And space, time, and matter are real because they express what is eternal.

This consciousness marks the horizon of existence; its absence is the same as nonexistence. And by “nonexistence” is

not meant emptiness. Rather, the absence of consciousness is simply an impossibility because consciousness and being are the same thing.

These metaphysical principles are commonplace in the texts of *Pratyabhijñā* Shaivism. Spinoza, however, is less explicit about the unity of consciousness and being. To be sure, Spinoza explicitly asserts a *parallelism* of thought and being.²² For example, Spinoza says: “In God there is necessarily an idea, both of his essence and of everything that necessarily follows from his essence.” (*Ethics*, IIP3.) But that is not quite the same as saying that consciousness is the underlying stuff of existence. As Yitzhak Melamed has pointed out, “we have opposite reductive pressures on both sides of the thought-being equilibrium.”²³ For Spinoza, “to be is to be conceived” (i.e., being = thought), but it is also true that for Spinoza, “to be conceived is to be” (i.e., thought = being). Neither thought nor being can be eliminated in favor of the other.²⁴

But we can thread the needle by putting aside the notion that the “consciousness” that is the underlying stuff of existence refers to “thought,” meaning the subject side of the subject-object divide. If the word “consciousness” instead refers to nondual consciousness of self (*pratyavamarśa*), then Spinoza's explicit rejection of subjective idealism — his refusal to reduce all things to thought — tells us nothing about consciousness, which mediates between thought and matter as the underlying divine substance (*substantia*) of each.

22 On this topic, see Melamed, Yitzhak Y., *Spinoza's Metaphysics: Substance and Thought* (Oxford 2013), pp. 139–152.

23 Melamed, *Spinoza's Metaphysics*, p. 197. See generally *id.*, pp. 179–199 [arguing that Spinoza embraced a dualism of thought and being].

24 Melamed, *Spinoza's Metaphysics*, pp. 196–197.

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