
THE NONDUAL MIND

Vedānta, Kashmiri *Pratyabhijñā* Shaivism, and Spinoza

by James H. Cumming



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Indeed, if I may be allowed the anachronism, the Hindus were Spinozaites more than 2,000 years before the existence of Spinoza; and Darwinians many centuries before Darwin; and Evolutionists many centuries before the doctrine of Evolution had been accepted by the Scientists of our time, and before any word like Evolution existed in any language of the world.

— *Sir Monier Monier-Williams (1819–1899 c.e.)*

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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

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.

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

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 or-

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

ganisms. 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-

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 materia-

lism, 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 “supervenies” 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 exten-

sion 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 spot-light 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

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.

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

10 Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, pp. 1–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 pre-

vious 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

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

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.

James H. Cumming (Bachelor of Arts, Columbia University; Juris Doctor, magna cum laude, University of Pennsylvania) is a senior research attorney at the California Supreme Court, where he is an expert in philosophy of law. He has also been a scholar of religion for over 40 years. He began by studying Sanskrit and Indian scripture, specializing in the nondual philosophy of Kashmir. Later, he learned Hebrew and completed a comprehensive study of Jewish mysticism. In 2019, he published *Torah and Nondualism: Diversity, Conflict, and Synthesis* (Ibis Press). This article is excerpted from his second book, *The Nondual Mind: Vedānta, Kashmiri Pratyabhijñā Shaivism, and Spinoza*, which is still in manuscript and which can be accessed on Academia.edu.

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HINDU NONDUAL PHILOSOPHY, SPINOZA, AND THE MIND-BODY PROBLEM

by James H. Cumming



This article is a second excerpt from James H. Cumming's book *The Nondual Mind: Vedānta, Kashmiri Pratyabhijñā Shaivism, and Spinoza*, which is still in manuscript, and which can be accessed on Academia.edu (the first excerpt was published in the winter edition of *Dogma*). Mr. Cumming (Bachelor of Arts, Columbia University; Juris Doctor, *magna cum laude*, University of Pennsylvania) is a senior research attorney at the California Supreme Court, where he is an expert in philosophy of law. He has also been a scholar of religion for over 40 years. He began by studying Sanskrit and Indian scripture, specializing in the nondual philosophy of Kashmir. Later, he learned Hebrew and completed a comprehensive study of Jewish mysticism. In 2019, he published *Torah and Nondualism: Diversity, Conflict, and Synthesis* (Ibis Press).

My book, *The Nondual Mind*, compares Hindu nondual philosophy to that of Baruch Spinoza, demonstrating the similarity of Spinoza's ideas to Kashmiri *Pratyabhijñā* Shaivism.¹ In the previous edition of *Dogma*, I published an introductory excerpt from that book. The present article continues where the previous article left off, constituting a second excerpt from the same book. In this excerpt, I examine the texts of Vedānta, *Pratyabhijñā* Shaivism, and Spinoza, focusing in particular on texts that address the mind-body problem. Close textual analysis can be difficult,

but the effort one invests in understanding these texts promises great reward, for the analysis presented in this article constitutes the heart of my book, and it undergirds many of the book's most powerful and liberating conclusions. Moreover, a comparative analysis of these texts is valuable in its own right, deepening one's understanding of these philosophical systems by tracing significant similarities and distinctions.

The interested reader may want to read my previous article before reading this one. Doing so, however, is not necessary. The previous article discusses two main points: All things are conscious, and all consciousness is consciousness of self. As that article explains in some detail, one cannot be conscious of a thing — anything — without *being* that thing. Hence, subject-object consciousness is an illusion; one knows an outside world only because

1 The simpler term "Kashmiri Shaivism" is misleading because, historically speaking, Shaivism does not divide neatly into a northern type in Kashmir and a southern type in Tamil Nadu. More importantly, even within Kashmir, Shaivism was far from monolithic. The nondual Kashmiri philosophy discussed in the present article is better described as *Pratyabhijñā* Shaivism, and therefore I will use that term.

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. Let us see how these ideas find expression in the texts of Hindu nondual philosophy and Spinoza.

1. The Principal Upanishads

The Upanishads are philosophical discussions that form a part of the Vedas. The philosophy presented in the Upanishads — known as Vedānta — is not consistent in every detail, but one basic principle that emerges is that Brahman (God, or the ground of being) is the same as *Ātman* (the “self” of the universe, or the “universal consciousness”), which is the same as *ātman* (the “self” of the individual, or the “individual consciousness”).

The *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, dating to the early part of the first millennium before the Common Era, explains that at first Brahman knew only itself, but then Brahman divided into countless parts, becoming the consciousness of individual beings. Despite this apparent change, however, consciousness remains one, not many, for those who are awake to the truth:

Verily, in the beginning this world was Brahman [(i.e., universal nondual consciousness)]. [¶] It knew only itself: “I am Brahman!” Therefore, it became the All. . . . This is so now also. Whoever thus knows “I am Brahman!” becomes this All; even the gods have not power to prevent his becoming thus, for he becomes their self. [¶] So whoever worships another divinity [than consciousness], thinking “[This divinity] is one and I another,” he knows not.²

2 *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 1.4.10, translated in Hume, Robert Ernest, *The Thirteen Principal Upanishads: Translated from the Sanskrit, with*

The *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* is asserting in this passage that the consciousness each of us experiences internally is not as individual as it seems to be. Instead, the same seamless consciousness — knowing only itself — shines in all things, and when one is aware of that fact, one recognizes one's own innermost self to be the innermost self of all things. By realizing the unity of consciousness, one even becomes the “self” (i.e., soul) of the gods. Based on this principle of universal consciousness, the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* rejects dualistic devotional practices, instead urging the worship of consciousness itself. The Upanishad explains that the one God (Brahman) is not an *object* of consciousness, and therefore our relationship with God cannot be a devotional I-and-thou relationship. Rather, God is the *subject* in all conscious things, a being that is knowable only by experiencing one's own consciousness. This point is expressed in a dialog between Ushasta Cākrāyaṇa and the sage Yājñavalkya. The former pleads: “Explain to me him who is just the Brahman, present and not beyond our ken, him who is the Soul in all things.” The latter responds: “You could not see the seer of seeing. You could not hear the hearer of hearing. You could not think the thinker of thinking. You could not understand the understander of understanding. He is your soul, which is in all things. Aught else than this is wretched.”³

Yājñavalkya also makes the point that one cannot be conscious of a thing without *being* that thing, and therefore all perception is really consciousness of self:

an Outline of the Philosophy of the Upanishads and an Annotated Bibliography (Oxford Univ. Press 1921), pp. 83–84.

3 *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 3.4, translated in Hume, *The Thirteen Principal Upanishads*, pp. 111–112.

Verily, while he does not there see [(i.e., in the state of nondual consciousness)], he is verily seeing, though he does not see; for there is no cessation of the seeing of a seer [in the awakened state] It is not, however, a second thing, other than himself and separate, that he may see. [The next seven verses of the Upanishad repeat the same principle with reference to smell, taste, speech, hearing, thinking, touching, and knowing. It then continues:] Verily where there seems to be another, there the one might see the other; the one might smell the other; the one might taste the other; the one might speak to the other; the one might hear the other; the one might think of the other; the one might touch the other; the one might know the other. An ocean, a seer alone without duality, becomes he whose world is Brahman, O King!⁴

Later, Yājñavalkya elaborates the same basic point:

For where there is a duality, as it were, there one sees another; there one smells another; there one tastes another; there one speaks to another; there one hears another; there one thinks of another; there one touches another; there one understands another. But where everything has become just one's own self, then whereby and whom would one see? then whereby and whom would one smell? then whereby and whom would one taste? then whereby and to whom would one speak? then whereby and whom would one hear? then whereby and of whom would one think? then whereby and whom would one touch? then whereby and whom would one

understand? whereby would one understand him by means of whom one understands this All?⁵

Similar ideas are found in the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*, which also dates to the early part of the first millennium before the Common Era. Again, we are told that it is always one's own self that is the content of one's consciousness, regardless of what external objects one might think one is seeing or hearing. The *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* explains:

As far, verily, as this world-space extends, so far extends the space within the heart [(i.e., the locus of consciousness)]. Within it [(the heart-space)], indeed, are contained both heaven and earth, both fire and wind, both sun and moon, lightning and the stars, both what one possesses here and what one does not possess; everything here is contained within it.⁶

The Upanishads thus emphasize the unity of consciousness, but they don't fully explain matter. Instead, the Upanishads seem to imply a form of subjective idealism that gives matter no intrinsic being. The Upanishads state that the material world is merely "name and form," implying (like Plato's theory of forms) that the physical world is just something the intellect attributes or imagines: "Verily, at that time the world was undifferentiated. It became differentiated just by name and form, as the saying is: 'He has such a name, such a form.' Even today this world is differentiated just by name and form, as the saying is: 'He has such a name, such

4 *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 4.3.23–32, translated in Hume, *The Thirteen Principal Upanishads*, pp. 137–138.

5 *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 4.5.15, translated in Hume, *The Thirteen Principal Upanishads*, p. 147. See also *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 2.4.14.

6 *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 8.1.3, translated in Hume, *The Thirteen Principal Upanishads*, p. 263.

a form.’ ”⁷ No one can deny that the human mind makes the world intelligible by categorizing perceptions according to name and form, but are we therefore to conclude that the material world is merely our projected imaginings with no intrinsic existence? The Upanishads give hints, but they do not explicitly resolve the question.

2. Adi Śaṅkara

Adi Śaṅkara (8th century c.e.) is perhaps the most famous expounder of the philosophical system presented in the Upanishads. Little is definite about Śaṅkara’s life, although we can draw a few basic conclusions. He was born in Kalady, a village near Cochin in southwest India. It is said that he lived as a mendicant and died when he was 32 years old, and yet despite his short life, he was unusually prolific. The main emphasis of many of Śaṅkara’s writings is that consciousness is universal and unitary, and that it only appears to be individual and manifold because it shines through a countless variety of material vessels. Śaṅkara uses many analogies to illustrate this point. One well-known and oft-repeated example is that of the space (“ether”) inside and surrounding a clay jar:

There is in reality no transmigrating soul different from the Lord [(i.e., universal consciousness)]. Still the connection (of the Lord) with limiting adjuncts, consisting of bodies and so on, is [unquestioningly] assumed, just as we assume the ether to enter into connection with diverse limiting adjuncts such as jars, pots, caves, and the like. And just as in consequence of connection of the latter kind such conceptions and terms as “the hollow (space) of a jar,” &c. are generally current, although the space inside a jar is not really different from

universal space, and just as in consequence thereof there generally prevails the false notion that there are different spaces such as the space of a jar and so on; so there prevails likewise the false notion that the Lord [(i.e., universal consciousness)] and the transmigrating soul are different; a notion due to the nondiscrimination of the (unreal) connection of the soul with the limiting conditions, consisting of the body and so on.⁸

In other words, just as space is merely space, but when a jar is present, then space appears to be individualized (i.e., the space inside the jar), likewise consciousness is merely consciousness, but when the vessel of the body is present, then consciousness appears to be individualized (i.e., the body’s soul). The text quoted above is from Śaṅkara’s *Brahmasūtrabhāṣya*. Below, I set forth two additional excerpts from that text, each making essentially the same point by way of a different analogy. The first excerpt uses the analogy of the sun or moon illuminating an object in space. The second excerpt uses the analogy of the sun being reflected in a body of water. In each case, Śaṅkara argues that consciousness, which is universal and unitary, appears to be individual and manifold because it shines through a variety of material forms:

[Excerpt One:] Just as the light of the sun or the moon after having passed [invisibly] through space enters into contact with a finger or some other limiting adjunct, and, according as the latter is straight or bent, [the light] itself becomes straight or bent as it were

⁷ *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 1.4.7, translated in Hume, *The Thirteen Principal Upanishads*, p. 82.

⁸ *Brahmasūtrabhāṣya* I, 1, 5, translated in Thibaut, George, *The Vedānta-Sūtras with the Commentary by Saṅkarācārya*, in *The Sacred Books of the East*, vols. 34 and 38, edited by F. Max Müller (Oxford: The Clarendon Press 1896), vol. 34, p. 51, spelling modernized.

[(i.e., the light becomes visible as the straight or bent form of the illuminated finger)]; so Brahman [(i.e., universal consciousness)] also assumes, as it were, the form of the earth and the other limiting adjuncts with which it enters into connection. (III, 2, 15)

[Excerpt Two:] The reflected image of the sun [in water] dilates when the surface of the water expands; it contracts when the water shrinks; it trembles when the water is agitated; it divides itself when the water is divided. It thus participates in all the attributes and conditions of the water; while the real sun remains all the time the same. — Similarly Brahman, although in reality uniform and never changing, participates as it were in the attributes and states of the body and the other limiting adjuncts within which it abides; it grows with them as it were, decreases with them as it were, and so on. (III, 2, 20)⁹

The main point Śāṅkara is making in each of these passages is that the individual consciousness of the body (i.e., the body’s “soul”) does not really exist as an independent entity, just as the reflection of the sun in the water does not really exist as an independent sun. Each of these (the soul and the reflection of the sun) only seems to have individuality because of the physical medium in which it appears. In one of his most popular works, *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi* (“Crest-Jewel of Discrimination”), Śāṅkara resorts once again to the metaphor of the sun reflected in water:

When the limiting adjunct moves, the movement of [the Self’s] reflection [in that limiting adjunct] is ascribed by fools to the original, like the sun which is unmoving [appearing to move when

⁹ *Brahmasūtrabhāṣya* III, 2, 15–20, translated in Thibaut, *The Vedānta-Sūtras*, vol. 38, pp. 156–159, spelling modernized.

reflected in moving water]. Likewise, one thinks “I am the doer,” “I am the enjoyer,” “I am lost,” alas!

Whether on water or on land, let this insentient body wallow. I am not affected by their qualities, even as the space is not affected by the qualities of the pot.¹⁰

We can summarize Śāṅkara’s understanding of Vedānta in this way: The body and even the intellect are part of the material world; they move and act according to immutable laws that govern the material world.¹¹ Consciousness pervades the body and intellect, as it does all things everywhere, and ordinary people think, “I am the doer,” “I am the enjoyer.” But in truth, the body has no individual soul, and the one that knows the body’s movements and actions is the universal consciousness. Śāṅkara therefore urges: “As the space in a pot merges into the universal space, merge the individual in the great Self.”¹²

These texts, and especially the probative analogies they employ, succeed in redirecting our attention to the undivided universal consciousness that hides behind our everyday experience of being a soul piloting a body. But Śāṅkara’s writings, like the Upanishads on which they rely, are vague when it comes to explaining precisely how it is that universal consciousness comes to be filtered through so many material vessels, thus assuming the illusory form of so many individual souls. In this regard, Śāṅkara frequently invokes a stark consciousness-matter dualism, as-

¹⁰ *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi* 508–509 (GRETIL), translated in Grimes, John, *The Vivekacūḍāmaṇi of Śāṅkarācārya Bhagavatpāda: An Introduction and Translation* (Ashgate 2004), p. 255 (Samata edition, vv. 509–510).

¹¹ See *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi* 549–550 (GRETIL).

¹² *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi* 288 (GRETIL), translated in Grimes, *The Vivekacūḍāmaṇi*, p. 182 (Samata edition, v. 289).

serting that matter, although somehow derivative of Brahman, is completely distinct from consciousness. Thus, despite Śaṅkara's great renown as a nondual master of Vedānta,¹³ he does not quite succeed in closing the subject-object divide. For example, he writes:

Fire is hot indeed but [it] does not burn itself, and the acrobat, well trained as he may be, cannot mount on his own shoulders. As little could consciousness, if it were a mere quality of the elements and their products, render them objects of itself. . . . Hence in the same way as we admit the existence of that perceptive consciousness which has the material elements and their products for its objects, we also must admit the separateness of that consciousness from the [material] elements. And as consciousness constitutes the character of our Self, the Self must be distinct from the body.¹⁴

Śaṅkara is saying here that the material elements that constitute the objects of consciousness — things such as earth, water, air, and fire (energy) — could no more be conscious than an acrobat could mount his own shoulders. It seems, therefore, that Śaṅkara is more interested in asserting that all consciousness is one than he is in resolving the mind-body problem. It may be that Śaṅkara draws a sharp distinction between consciousness and matter because he wants to break our identification with the body and its mortality, but be that as it may, Śaṅkara

13 In Hindu literature, the term “nondual” (*advaita*) most often refers to the unity of the individual consciousness and the universal consciousness, not the unity of subject and object. Thus, Śaṅkara is without question properly described as a nondualist.

14 *Brahmasūtrabhāṣya* III, 3, 54, translated in Thibaut, *The Vedānta-Sūtras*, vol. 38, pp. 270–271.

repeatedly insists that any connection between consciousness and the body is false.¹⁵ Instead, he focuses our attention on the extreme subject side of the subject-object divide, making even the intellect into an object of consciousness. He urges us to think of consciousness as an infinite field of pure awareness, devoid of differentiating features and therefore one and indivisible. But Śaṅkara's method does not eliminate the subject-object divide; it only accentuates it.

The closest Śaṅkara comes to explaining the ontological basis of matter is his reiteration of the Upanishadic theory that the world is merely “name and form” (*nāmarūpa*) superimposed on Brahman due to “ignorance” (*avidyā*), which for Śaṅkara means that the world is unreal and that only Brahman is real. He says:

This entire universe, which appears to be of diverse forms through ignorance, is only the Absolute [(i.e., Brahman)] freed from all defective understanding.

A jar, though a modification of clay, is not different from it [(the clay)] as it is essentially all clay. There is no separate entity of the form of the jar apart from the clay. Why, then, call it a jar? It is merely a false imagined name.

No one is capable of showing the essence of the pot to be other than the clay. Hence, the pot is imagined only due to delusion. Clay alone is the true abiding reality of the pot.

All that is, being the effect of the Existent Absolute [(i.e., Brahman)], can be nothing but the Existent. It is pure Existence. Nothing exists other than it. If anyone says there is [something else], their delusion has not vanished and they babble like one in sleep.¹⁶

15 See, e.g., *Bhagavadgītābhāṣya* XIII, 2; *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi* 154–164 (GRETIL).

16 *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi* 227–230 (GRETIL), translated in Grimes, *The Vivekacūḍāmaṇi*, pp. 160–

Thus, Śaṅkara suggests that because the material world is merely name and form, it exists only in the human mind, implying a sort of subjective idealism. According to Śaṅkara, the material world is only an “appearance” or “semblance” (*ābhāsa*), like a magician’s trick. It is an “illusory modification” (*vivarta*), “unreal” or “false” (*mithyā*), a “mistake” (*bhrānti*) of perception, a “superimposition” (*adhyāropa*) upon Brahman, analogous to seeing a tree trunk and mistaking it for a person, or seeing mother-of-pearl and mistaking it for silver, or seeing a coiled rope and mistaking it for a snake. Indeed, Śaṅkara resolves a host of philosophical problems simply by denying the reality of the world. For example, although the characteristics of an effect necessarily tell us something about the characteristics of the cause, Śaṅkara insists that Brahman (the cause of the world) is in no sense limited, defined, or qualified by the world’s diverse characteristics because they are all illusory. He says:

[As for Upanishadic passages asserting that the material world and Brahman are the same], we refute the assertion of the cause [(i.e., Brahman)] being affected by the effect and its qualities [(i.e., the world)] by showing that the latter are the mere fallacious superimpositions of nescience[.] [A]nd the very same argument holds good with reference to reabsorption also [(i.e., just as the emergence of the unreal world does not limit, define, or qualify Brahman, so also the reabsorption of the unreal world does not limit, define, or qualify Brahman)]. — We can quote other examples in favor of our doctrine. As the magician is not at any time affected by the magical illusion produced by himself, because it is unreal, so the highest Self is not affected by the world-illusion. And as one dreaming person is

161 (Samata edition, vv. 229–232).

not affected by the illusory visions of his dream because they do not accompany the waking state and the state of dreamless sleep; so the one permanent witness of the three states (viz. the highest Self which is the one unchanging witness of the creation, subsistence, and reabsorption of the world) is not touched by the mutually exclusive three states. For [the experience] that the highest Self appears in those three states is a mere illusion, not more substantial than the snake for which the rope is mistaken in the twilight.¹⁷

The problem with this sort of subjective idealism is that for most of us, a piece of fine pottery is worth a lot more than a lump of raw clay, and if Brahman has taken the name and form of a hard rock, one had better not kick it with one’s bare foot. Therefore, name and form is not — at least at the practical level — as dreamlike and illusory as Śaṅkara’s philosophy asserts, and even Śaṅkara acknowledges that the material world is not completely false, like the “son of a barren woman.” It has a certain mundane (*vyāvahārika*) reality, but it is ephemeral, and our focus should be on the underlying eternal thing (the Self or Brahman) that is the most true (*pāramārthika*) reality.¹⁸

In summary, Śaṅkara insists on a stark dualism of consciousness and matter while also asserting that the material world is merely a cosmic *trompe l’oeil*. Thus, Śaṅkara solves the mind-body problem not by eliminating the consciousness-matter divide but by denying the outer world’s existence altogether. But even so, he adamantly rejects the subjective idealism of

17 *Brahmasūtrabhāṣya* II, 1, 9, translated in Thibaut, *The Vedānta-Sūtras*, vol. 34, pp. 311–312, spelling modernized.

18 See *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi* 350, 501, 503 (GRETIL); *Ātmabodha* 47–53, 57, 63–64.

Buddhist philosophers.¹⁹ Thus, he seems to walk both sides of the line at once.

3. The “City in a Mirror”

Śaṅkara is a master at analogies, and he typically develops his analogies for his readers, using them to powerfully illustrate his ideas. But in *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi*, Śaṅkara makes only passing mention of an intriguing analogy that gains great significance two centuries later in the texts of Kashmiri *Pratyabhijñā* Shaivism. Śaṅkara says: “That, wherein this reflection of the world is like a city in a mirror, that Absolute [(i.e., Brahman)] I am.”²⁰ The idea being expressed here, without elaboration, is that the experience we have of being a soul that observes a remote world — what we have been calling the subject-object divide — is merely an illusion. The reflection of a distant city on the flat surface of a small mirror only appears to be a remote; in truth, it is the flat surface of the mirror that one is seeing. Likewise, the observed world only appears to be separate from

oneself; in truth, it is only one’s own self that is the content of one’s consciousness.

This potent city-in-a-mirror simile is not the first time that the doctrine of reflection (*pratibimbavāda*) has played a key role in Hindu philosophical discourse. As we have already seen, Śaṅkara frequently relies on the example of the sun reflected in water to describe the way the universal consciousness is modified by various media to take the illusory form of a multitude of souls. But the city-in-a-mirror simile is fundamentally different from these other uses of the reflection metaphor, for the city-in-a-mirror simile describes the known world as the reflection, and it describes the universal consciousness (i.e., Brahman) as the medium in which the reflection appears. This reversal of the reflection metaphor can be traced to the early centuries of the Common Era, but with the simile of a city reflected in a mirror, it assumes a nondual form.

We have said that Śaṅkara does not quite close the subject-object divide, but the city-in-a-mirror simile helps narrow the gap. It informs us that the seeming separateness of the material world — its objectivity relative to a knowing subject — is an illusion, like the illusion of remoteness that characterizes objects seen in a mirror. And as it turns out, the city-in-a-mirror simile, if applied to all things, even to so-called inanimate things like rocks and clods of earth, resolves the consciousness-matter dualism that Śaṅkara has otherwise only reinforced. Moreover, it does so without denying the reality of the world. What the city-in-a-mirror simile powerfully suggests is that subject and object are really one, and therefore objects of consciousness are also conscious subjects, having the same ontological status as conscious subjects. Consciousness is not a passive and separate knower of an unreal objec-

19 On Śaṅkara’s rejection of Buddhist idealism, see, e.g., *Brahmasūtrabhāṣya* II, 2, 28–30; *Bṛhadāraṇyakoṇiṣadbhāṣya* IV, 3, 7; *Upadeśasāhasrī*, Metrical Part, ch. 16, vv. 23–29, and ch. 18, vv. 123–151.

20 *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi* 291 (GRETIL), translated in Grimes, *The Vivekacūḍāmaṇi*, p. 183 (Samata edition, v. 292). The city-in-a-mirror simile also appears, without elaboration, in the opening stanza of the *Dakṣiṇāmūrti Stotra*, a Śaiva hymn attributed to Śaṅkara: “I bow to Sri Dakṣiṇāmūrti in the form of my guru; I bow to Him by whose grace the whole of the world is found to exist entirely in the mind, like a city’s image mirrored in a glass, though, like a dream, through māyā’s power it appears outside; and by whose grace, again, on the dawn of Knowledge, it is perceived as the everlasting and non-dual Self.” *Dakṣiṇāmūrti Stotra*, stanza 1, translated in Nikhilānanda, *Self-Knowledge: An English Translation of Śaṅkarāchārya’s Ātmabodha with Notes, Comments, and Introduction* (Sri Ramakrishna Math 1947), pp. 233–234.

tive world; rather, it *is* the objective world, and it is conscious only of itself.

But to understand how that philosophical conclusion can be derived from the city-in-a-mirror simile, we need to turn to the texts of *Pratyabhijñā* Shaivism.

4. *Pratyabhijñā* Shaivism

According to legend, the sage Vasugupta (9th century c.e.) had a dream in which Śiva told him to go to a particular rock near where he lived, and there, inscribed on the underside of that rock, he would find teachings that would benefit the world. Vasugupta thus discovered the 77 *sūtras* (“aphorisms”) that constitute the *Śiva Sūtras*. This large rock sits beside a forest stream called the Harwan in what is now the Dachigam National Park near Srinagar, and the *sūtras* allegedly discovered there constitute one of the early texts that influenced the development of *Pratyabhijñā* Shaivism. Vasugupta is also credited with writing the *Spandakārikā* (“Verses on Vibration”), although the actual author of the latter work might have been one of his disciples, Bhaṭṭa Kallaṭa (9th century c.e.).

A different disciple of Vasugupta, Somānanda (10th century c.e.), wrote an important work called the *Śivadr̥ṣṭi* (“Vision of Śiva” or “Śiva’s Philosophy”), and Somānanda’s disciple, Utpaladeva (10th century c.e.), wrote a commentary on that text. Utpaladeva also wrote the *Īśvarapratyabhijñākārikā* as well as an auto-commentary to that work.

Utpaladeva’s disciple was Lakṣmaṇagupta (10th century c.e.), whose disciple was, in turn, Abhinavagupta (10th–11th centuries c.e.). The latter was perhaps the leading scholar and explicator of *Pratyabhijñā* nondualism. Abhinavagupta wrote numerous important texts and commentaries, but for present purposes, two are particularly significant:

chapter 3 of the *Tantrāloka* (“Light on the Tantra”) and the *Paramārthasāra* (“The Essence of the Supreme Truth”).

Abhinavagupta’s leading disciple was Kṣemarāja (10th–11th century c.e.). Kṣemarāja wrote important commentaries on the *Śiva Sūtras* and the *Spandakārikā*, and he also wrote the *Pratyabhijñāhrdayam* (“Heart of Recognition”), with an auto-commentary. Finally, Kṣemarāja’s disciple, Yogarāja (11th century c.e.) wrote a useful commentary on Abhinavagupta’s *Paramārthasāra*. Together, these texts provide a good introduction to *Pratyabhijñā* Shaivism, illuminating its insightful answer to the mind-body problem.

Like the Upanishads and the writings of Śaṅkara, these *Pratyabhijñā* texts use theistic terminology in their presentation of philosophical ideas. But whereas the Upanishads and Śaṅkara refer to God primarily by way of an abstract concept — Brahman (i.e., universal consciousness) — the texts of *Pratyabhijñā* Shaivism refer to God using masculine names and honorifics associated with a specific figure from Hindu mythology. These names include Śiva, Sadāśiva, Śaṃbhu, Bhairava, and Śaṅkara, but in the context of *Pratyabhijñā* Shaivism, such names should not be thought of as invoking a mythological deity. Instead, like the name Brahman in the Upanishads, these names are used to signify universal consciousness. The *Pratyabhijñā* texts also use feminine names for God — such as *Citi* and *Śakti* — and both masculine and feminine images play an important part in worship and ritual, but it would be a misinterpretation of *Pratyabhijñā* texts to imagine God in solely anthropomorphic gender-specific terms.

Moreover, the most important thing to consider in studying these texts is not their names for God but their assertions that all things, even lumps of clay, are ful-

ly conscious and that this consciousness is, in every case, consciousness of self, not consciousness of another. As we shall see, those assertions imply that the world is real, not mere illusion, and those assertions, not the names used for God, are what most distinguish *Pratyabhijñā* philosophy, aligning *Pratyabhijñā* philosophy with the ideas that Spinoza articulated seven centuries later.

We will begin with the idea that all consciousness is consciousness of self. Utpaladeva's *Īśvarapratyabhijñākārikā* states: "The objects that are manifested in the present can be manifested as external [to consciousness] only if they reside within [consciousness]."²¹ Utpaladeva's point here is that consciousness cannot somehow venture outside itself to become conscious of external objects, for if consciousness ventured outside consciousness, it would then no longer be conscious. Therefore, consciousness can only be conscious of what exists inside consciousness. In other words, consciousness can only be conscious of itself. As Utpaladeva further explains, "[c]onsciousness has as its essential nature [selfward-facing,] reflective awareness."²² This principle has profound implications as regards the mind-body

21 *Īśvarapratyabhijñākārikā* I.5.1 (KSTS, vol. 34, 2nd text, p. 14), translated in Torella, Raffaele, *The Īśvarapratyabhijñākārikā of Utpaladeva, with the Author's Vṛtti: Critical edition and annotated translation* (Motilal Banarsidass, corrected edition, 2002), p. 111.

22 *Īśvarapratyabhijñākārikā* I.5.13 (KSTS, vol. 34, 2nd text, p. 18), translated in Torella, *The Īśvarapratyabhijñākārikā*, p. 120. I have made an editorial emendation to the translation to better capture the sense of the word *pratyavamarśa*. Raffaele Torella explains that *pratyavamarśa* is "reflective awareness" or "self-consciousness" that is strongly "characterized by introjection and return to the subject." Torella, *The Īśvarapratyabhijñākārikā*, p. xxiv, fn. 32.

problem. If consciousness is, in all cases, nondual — conscious only of itself — then the subject-object divide is unreal. In other words, all conscious subjects are the objects of their own consciousness, and nothing can be an object of consciousness without also being a conscious subject. To exist, then, is to be conscious.

Most people believe that consciousness is dualistic — the subject side of the subject-object divide — and they believe it exists only as a special feature of complex living organisms. According to this way of thinking, if a great cataclysm destroyed all complex organisms, then the universe — full of swirling galaxies, stars, and planets — would continue much as before, but known by no one and nothing. On our own planet, the sun would rise in the east and set in the west, vegetation would sprout during the warm seasons, rivers would flow, wind would blow, rainstorms would drench the soil, but all without anyone or anything conscious of it.

But for Utpaladeva, consciousness is nondual — conscious only of itself — and it is the underlying stuff of all existence. According to this view, a universe known by no one and by nothing is, simply put, an impossibility, because the opposite of the word "conscious" is not "unconscious"; rather, the opposite of the word "conscious" is "nonexistent." Utpaladeva's teacher, Somānanda, was particularly clear on this point, asserting that "a clay jar, by comprehending its own self, exists."²³ Somānanda's striking assertion led a 13th century teacher of *Pratyabhijñā* Shaivism to draw this conclusion: "[T]his consciousness is called being, and this being is said to be consciousness."²⁴ But Somānanda further asserted that a thing's consciousness

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

24 *Mahārthamañjarī*, Trivandrum Sanskrit Series, no. 66, pp. 35, 39.

of itself — its being, that is — is nothing other than God’s consciousness of it, for all consciousness is one.²⁵

These are powerful ideas, and the later texts of *Pratyabhijñā* Shaivism draw from these ideas to explain the distinctive features of human consciousness, using the analogy of a city reflected in a mirror to collapse the illusion of separation that alienates us from our experiences.

a. The *Tantrāloka’s* *Pratibimbavāda*

Abhinavagupta was the great scholar and synthesizer of *Pratyabhijñā* Shaivism, and the *Tantrāloka* is his most important work. Chapter 3 of that work presents an esoteric theory of the Sanskrit alphabet, but at the beginning of the chapter, Abhinavagupta outlines his own unique version of the “doctrine of reflection” (*pratibimbavāda*). Here, Abhinavagupta presents the basic principles that underlie the city-in-a-mirror simile, and therefore these verses merit close analysis.

Abhinavagupta begins by saying,

2. Light [(i.e., the light of consciousness)] is what bestows luminosity to everything. And the universe is not distinct from it. Or, if it were [distinct,] it could not manifest.

3. For this reason, the Supreme Lord, who is unrestrained, displays in the firmament of his own self such immense manifestation of the creation and the destruction [of the universe].

4. Just as discrete [entities] such as earth and water become manifest in an uncontaminated mirror, in the same way the various dynamic aspects of the universe become manifest within the Lord of consciousness that is one.²⁶

25 See *Śivadr̥ṣṭi* 5.105–109.

26 *Tantrāloka* 3.2–4 (KSTS, vol. 28, pp. 2–4), translated in Kaul, Mrinal, *Abhinavagupta’s Theory of Reflection: A Study, Critical Edition and Translation of the Pratibimbavāda (verses 1-65)*

Thus, Abhinavagupta uses the metaphor of reflection to explain how, despite the appearance of diversity, external objects are nothing but consciousness, just as the diversity of reflected items in a mirror are nothing but mirror.

What follows next, in verses 5 through 43, is a discussion of how the sense organs of the body operate, and Abhinavagupta’s model of sensory perception is at least conceptually consistent with how we understand sensory perception today. When one sees a tree, for example, some sort of representation of the tree appears in one’s visual cortex, and it is that representation that is actually known, not the external tree. Similarly, according to Abhinavagupta, each sense organ functions very much like a mirror, but he notes that the sense organs are imperfect mirrors, for each can only reflect (or represent) that which corresponds to its nature.

Abhinavagupta analogizes consciousness to these sensory reflectors, but unlike the sensory reflectors, consciousness is a perfect mirror, capable of reflecting every possible characteristic. In other words, consciousness reflects aroma, taste, form, touch, sound, and more, and Abhinavagupta describes this universal reflectivity of consciousness as its purity (*nairmalya*) and its clarity (*svacchatā*). Abhinavagupta next explains that although the universe exists as a reflection in consciousness, nothing exists outside consciousness, acting as the source of that reflection. It is therefore not truly a reflection; rather, it is *as if it were* a reflection. (See *Tantrāloka* 3.44–65.) Abhinavagupta says:

57. This [world] is mingled with consciousness [as an image in a mirror is mingled with a mirror]. Its manifesta-

in Chapter III of the Tantrāloka with the commentary of Jayaratha (Ph.D. thesis, Concordia University, Montréal, Québec, Canada, August 2016), pp. 227–229.

tion is impossible without consciousness [as an image in a mirror is impossible without a mirror]. Is it not [therefore appropriate] that [this universe] in which there are worlds (*pura*), *tattvas* etc. is called a reflected image (*pratibimbam*) in consciousness (*bodhe*)?

....

59. [Objection:] But the existence of the reflected image (*pratibimbasya*) is impossible without the original image (*bimbam*). [Reply:] What from that? [We do not care about this] for the original image (*bimbam*) is not identical with the reflected image (*pratibimbe*).

60. And therefore, in the absence of this [original image], nothing goes wrong as regards the said definition of the [reflected image]. This question is merely confined to the cause.²⁷

Here, Abhinavagupta is explaining that because an original image and a reflected image are not the same thing, the latter can — in theory at least — exist without the former, and the “objection,” therefore, comes down to a question of causation. We usually understand the original image to be the cause of the reflected image, and therefore we conclude that the existence of the latter depends on the existence of the former, but Abhinavagupta explains that there are different types of causes, and with regard to the so-called “reflection” of the universe that appears in the mirror of consciousness, the cause is not an object external to consciousness, but simply God’s power of self-expression. (*Tantrāloka* 3.61–65.)

In the conclusion to chapter 3 of the *Tantrāloka*, Abhinavagupta briefly revisits the reflection metaphor, using it to de-

²⁷ *Tantrāloka* 3.57–60 (KSTS, vol. 28, pp. 65–68), translated in Kaul, *Abhinavagupta’s Theory of Reflection*, pp. 276–278.

scribe the awakened practitioner’s ecstatic union with God:

268. The [adept] for whom the universe — all things in their diversity — appears as a reflection in his consciousness, that one is truly the universal sovereign.

....

280. [The adept feels:] “All this proceeds from me, is reflected in me, is inseparable from me.”²⁸

In other words, the adept realizes that everything that appears to be “outside” or “other” is actually only one’s own self.

b. The *Śivasūtravimarśinī*

The *Śivasūtravimarśinī* is Kṣemarāja’s commentary on the *Śiva Sūtras*. It does not discuss the doctrine of reflection (*pratibimbavāda*), nor does it make use of the city-in-a-mirror simile. Nonetheless, it makes several important points that are relevant to the mind-body problem and thus bear on our topic. Kṣemarāja’s commentary begins with ideas familiar to us from the Upanishads and from Śaṅkara’s writings, emphasizing that God’s universal consciousness is what each person and thing experiences as the consciousness of its own soul. Kṣemarāja says: “[I]t (the *sūtra*) at first teaches — in opposition to those who hold that there is a difference between man (i.e., the human self) and Īśvara (the Supreme Lord) — that consciousness of Śiva alone is, in the highest sense, the self of the entire manifestation.”²⁹

Kṣemarāja then makes clear that this consciousness is consciousness of self, not consciousness of another. He quotes a

²⁸ *Tantrāloka* 3.268 and 3.280 (KSTS, vol. 28, pp. 246 and 253).

²⁹ Kṣemarāja’s com. to *Śiva Sūtras*, *sūtra* 1.1 (KSTS, vol. 1, p. 3), translated in Singh, Jaideva, *Śiva Sūtras: The Yoga of Supreme Identity* (Motilal Banarsidass 1979), pp. 5–6.

nondual text called the *Ucchuṣṣmabhairava Tantra*, which asserts: “The knower and the known are really the same principle.”³⁰ Similarly, he quotes the following verse from the *Spandakārikā* (verse 2.4): “It is only the experiencer who always and everywhere exists in the form of the experienced.”³¹ These ideas are, by now, familiar to us. The subject-object divide is unreal.

Kṣemarāja returns to these same ideas in his commentary to the fourteenth *sūtra*: “*drśyam śarīram*.” Kṣemarāja explains that the word *drśyam*, from the Sanskrit root *drś* (“seeing,” “viewing,” “looking at”), refers to every knowable phenomenon, whether an inner state or an outer material object. And the word *śarīram* means “body.” Therefore, the *sūtra* can be rendered as: “That which presents itself to one’s consciousness is one’s body.”³² Kṣemarāja explains:

Whatever is perceptible, whether inwardly or outwardly, all that appears to [the expert practitioner] like his own body, i.e., identical with himself and not as something different from him. This is so because of his great accomplishment. His feeling is “I am this,” just as the feeling of Sadāśiva with regard to the entire universe is “I am this.”³³

As we have said, one is aware of an external object only insofar as it is reflected and represented in one’s own being. Hence, whatever presents itself to one’s

consciousness is quite literally one’s own body (*śarīram*). Moreover, external objects only appear to be material when perceived through the mediation of the senses. Their true form (as they are in themselves) is their consciousness of self, just as one’s own true form is one’s consciousness of self. And because any divisions that appear in consciousness are themselves only consciousness, a wise person recognizes that external objects are — both epistemologically and ontologically — nothing but his or her own self. There is no such thing as other.

c. The *Spandakārikā* and the *Spanda-Nirṇaya*

The *Spandakārikā* is a collection of verses attributed to Vasugupta but perhaps written by his disciple Bhaṭṭa Kallaṭa. The title means “Verses on Vibration,” referring to the theory that “vibration” or “pulse” (*spanda*) plays a critical role in the underlying structure of the universe. For present purposes, however, the *Spandakārikā* is relevant only for what it tells us about consciousness.

The *Spandakārikā* has been explicated in several important commentaries. Kṣemarāja’s commentary is called the *Spanda-Nirṇaya*, meaning “The Comprehensive Study of Vibration.” In the *Spanda-Nirṇaya*, Kṣemarāja employs the city-in-a-mirror simile, using it to illustrate Abhinavagupta’s doctrine of reflection (*Tantrāloka* 3.1–65). Among other things, Kṣemarāja’s aim is to show that consciousness is nondual — conscious only of itself — despite appearing to stretch across an unbridgeable subject-object divide. The commentary takes the traditional form of a series of objections and replies. Kṣemarāja writes:

[Objection:] “Well, if this world has come out (i.e., separated) from that Exquisite Mass of Light [(i.e., from uni-

30 Quoted in Kṣemarāja’s com. to *Śiva Sūtras*, *sūtra* 1.1 (KSTS, vol. 1, p. 8), translated in Singh, *Śiva Sūtras*, p. 13.

31 Quoted in Kṣemarāja’s com. to *Śiva Sūtras*, *sūtra* 1.1 (KSTS, vol. 1, p. 9), translated in Singh, *Śiva Sūtras*, p. 14.

32 Jaideva Singh translates the *sūtra* as follows: “All objective phenomena, outer or inner, are like [the practitioner’s] own body.” See Singh, *Śiva Sūtras*, p. 57.

33 Kṣemarāja’s com. to *Śiva Sūtras*, *sūtra* 1.14 (KSTS, vol. 1, p. 32), translated in Singh, *Śiva Sūtras*, p. 57.

versal consciousness)], then how can it be manifest, for nothing can be manifest outside Light [(i.e., nothing exists outside consciousness)]?”

[Reply:] . . . “That (i.e., the world) has not come out from Him [(i.e., from universal consciousness)] as does a walnut from a bag. Rather, the self-same Lord — through his absolute freedom, manifesting the world, on His own background, like a city in a mirror, as if different from Him, though non-different — abides in Himself.”³⁴

The universal consciousness — called “Lord” (*bhagavān*) in this text — is always one without a second. Therefore, the world does not come into existence as something separate from universal consciousness (“as does a walnut from a bag”). Rather, the world comes into existence as a configuration of consciousness (“on His own background, like a city in a mirror”), and the separation is only apparent (“as if different from Him, though non-different”).

Later, in section 2, verse 4, the *Spandakārikā* explicitly declares the unity of subject and object. This is a text that we already encountered above in Kṣemarāja’s commentary to the *Śiva Sūtras*:

34 *Spanda-Nirṇaya*, com. to *Spandakārikā*, verse 1.2 (KSTS, vol. 42, p. 10–11), translated in Singh, Jaideva, *The Yoga of Vibration and Divine Pulsation: A Translation of the Spanda Kārikās with Kṣemarāja’s Commentary, the Spanda Nirṇaya* (SUNY Press 1992), p. 29. See also *Spanda-Nirṇaya*, com. to *Spandakārikā*, propitiatory verses (KSTS, vol. 42, p. 1), translated in Singh, *The Yoga of Vibration*, p. 2 [everything is “portrayed . . . on the canvas of Her own free, clear Self, just as a city is reflected in a mirror”]; *Spanda-Nirṇaya*, com. to *Spandakārikā*, verse 1.1 (KSTS, vol. 42, p. 3), translated in Singh, *The Yoga of Vibration*, p. 10 [“This power, though non-distinct from the Lord, goes on presenting the entire cycle of manifestation and withdrawal on its own background like the reflection of a city in a mirror.”].

[W]hether in the word, object, or thought, there is no state which is not Śiva [(i.e., universal consciousness)]. It is the experiencer himself who, always and everywhere, abides in the form of the experienced, i.e., it is the Divine Himself who is the essential experiencer, and it is He who abides in the form of the universe as His field of experience.³⁵

By asserting that the experiencer (i.e., the subject) takes the form of the experienced (i.e., the object), the *Spandakārikā* is reiterating the familiar point that consciousness is nondual, conscious only of itself. But, more subtly, by universalizing that principle — by having it apply “always and everywhere” — the *Spandakārikā* is telling us that all objects of consciousness, even those that are inanimate, are also conscious subjects. In other words, the collapse of subject and object into one — which is the central point of the city-in-a-mirror simile — implies the consciousness of all things.

The *Spandakārikā* brings these ideas to a powerful conclusion in section 2, verses 6 and 7, which state:

This only is the manifestation of the object of meditation in the meditator’s mind: that the aspirant with resolute will has the realization of his identity with that (object of meditation).

This alone is the acquisition of ambrosia leading to immortality; this alone is the realization of Self; this alone is the initiation of liberation leading to identity with Śiva.³⁶

In the South Asian religious tradition, one uses the mantra of one’s personal deity as a support in meditation, culminating

35 *Spandakārikā*, verses 2.4 (KSTS, vol. 42, p. 47), translated in Singh, *The Yoga of Vibration*, pp. 115–116.

36 *Spandakārikā*, verses 2.6–7 (KSTS, vol. 42, p. 50), translated in Singh, *The Yoga of Vibration*, p. 121.

(one hopes) in the manifestation of one's deity before oneself in physical form. But this text is boldly asserting that the manifestation of one's mantra deity occurs only in the realization that one actually *is* the deity that one has been meditating upon. Moreover, one's immortality, one's self-realization, and one's identity with Śiva are all none other than the direct experience of that subject-object unity. As Kṣemarāja declares, “[o]ne should worship Śiva by becoming Śiva.”³⁷

d. The *Pratyabhijñāhṛdayam*

The *Pratyabhijñāhṛdayam* was written by Kṣemarāja with the purpose of making the ideas of *Pratyabhijñā* philosophy accessible to non-experts. The text's second *sūtra* explains that consciousness does not give rise to the universe in a dualistic sense — as an objective universe separate from and observed by a conscious soul. Rather, as Abhinavagupta said (see *Tantrāloka* 3.3 and 3.49–50), consciousness creates the universe within consciousness. The *sūtra* states: “By the power of her own will (alone), she [(i.e., “consciousness”)] unfolds the universe upon her own screen (i.e., in herself as the basis of the universe).”³⁸ Kṣemarāja next turns to the city-in-a-mirror simile to explain his point further: “She unfolds the previously defined universe (i.e., from Sadāśiva down to the earth) like a city in a mirror, which though non-different from [the surface of the mirror] appears as different.”³⁹ Like the

reflection of a distant city in the flat surface of a mirror, objects of consciousness appear to be remote, but it is only the surface of the mirror that we are actually seeing when we look at a reflected city, and it is only our own self that is the actual content of our consciousness when we perceive an external object. Thus, the subject-object divide is only an appearance, “like a city in a mirror, which though non-different from [the surface of the mirror] appears as different.”

In his commentary to the ninth *sūtra*, Kṣemarāja goes on to explain that the illusory subject-object divide arises because we are embodied creatures that use sense organs to acquire knowledge about the surrounding world. Kṣemarāja says:

When the highest Lord, whose very essence is consciousness, conceals, by His free will, pervasion of non-duality and assumes duality all round, then His will and other powers, though essentially non-limited, assume limitation. . . . (In the case of) knowledge-power, owing to its becoming gradually limited in the world of differentiation, its omniscience becomes reduced to knowledge of a few things (only). By assuming extreme limitation, beginning with the acquisition of an inner organ [(i.e., the intellect, mind, ego, memory, etc.)] and organs of perception [(i.e., the sense organs)], [the universal consciousness] acquires *māyīya-mala*, which consists in the apprehension of all objects as different [from itself].⁴⁰

Imagine, a person who, since birth, is only permitted to see and hear through a camera and microphone located somewhere inside his or her own body. This person would inevitably view internal bodily organs as if they were external.

⁴⁰ *Pratyabhijñāhṛdayam*, com. to *sūtra* 9 (KSTS, vol. 3, p. 21), translated in Singh, *Pratyabhijñāhṛdayam*, pp. 71–72.

³⁷ *Spanda-Nirṇaya*, com. to *Spandakārikā*, verses 2.6–7 (KSTS, vol. 42, p. 50), translated in Singh, *The Yoga of Vibration*, p. 123.

³⁸ *Pratyabhijñāhṛdayam*, *sūtra* 2 (KSTS, vol. 3, p. 5), translated in Singh, Jaideva, *Pratyabhijñāhṛdayam: The Secret of Self-Recognition* (Motilal Banarsidass 1982), p. 51.

³⁹ *Pratyabhijñāhṛdayam*, com. to *sūtra* 2 (KSTS, vol. 3, p. 6), translated in Singh, *Pratyabhijñāhṛdayam*, pp. 51–52.

Likewise, when consciousness — which is infinite and universal — is conditioned by the “inner organ” (i.e., the brain) and “organs of perception” (i.e., the senses) of a particular body, it assumes the contracted form of an individual soul imagining the objects of its sensory perception to be external to it. The universal consciousness then believes “I am small” and “the external world is vast,” but it is only the perceptive capacity of the brain and sense organs that is small. In truth, the universal consciousness is unbound, and the entire world is internal to it, as the following verse from Utpaladeva’s *Īśvarapratyabhijñārikā* describes: “Indeed, the Conscious Being, God, like the yogin, independently of material causes, in virtue of His volition alone, renders externally manifest the multitude of objects that reside within Him.”⁴¹

It is difficult to imagine that we are viewing the world inside out, that the world that surrounds us is really inside us, and that it is conscious in all its parts. It is difficult to imagine that one’s own soul is the soul of the universe, ever delighting in its consciousness of its own self. It is difficult, but not impossible.

e. The *Paramārthasāra*

Kṣemarāja’s disciple, Yogarāja, wrote a commentary to Abhinavagupta’s *Paramārthasāra*, reiterating many of the foregoing themes. For our purposes, his commentary is most notable for its detailed discussion of the city-in-a-mirror simile, using it to describe the nondual nature of consciousness.

The first verse of Abhinavagupta’s *Paramārthasāra* refers to the universal consciousness as “Śaṃbhu,” an alternative

name for Śiva. Addressing Śaṃbhu in the second person, as “You” to whom “I,” the writer, come for refuge, the verse says: “To You, the transcendent, situated beyond the abyss, beginningless, unique [(i.e., one without a second)], yet who dwell in manifold ways in the caverns of the heart, the foundation of all this universe, and who abide in all that moves and all that moves not, to You alone, O Śaṃbhu, I come for refuge.”⁴² Yogarāja’s commentary explains that all things — even unmoving, inanimate objects — are conscious by the light of the universal consciousness, for nothing exists outside consciousness.

The idea that a rock or a clod of earth has a conscious self might leave some readers wondering what the rock or earth clod is thinking about. Therefore, verse 8 of the *Paramārthasāra* explains that, although all things are conscious, all things do not have anything like the subject-object consciousness of a human soul, or even an animal soul, and therefore their consciousness goes unnoticed. We already saw in our study of Kṣemarāja’s *Pratyabhijñāhṛdayam* (com. to *sūtra* 9) that nondual consciousness can assume the particularized form of an individual soul only when a physical system is constructed so as to produce within itself a representation of the outside world — as is true, for example, of a living organism with a brain and sense organs. Verse 8 of the *Paramārthasāra* makes the same point, drawing an analogy to Rāhu.

Rāhu is the ascending lunar node (i.e., the place where the moon’s orbit intersects the ecliptic when ascending from the southern ecliptic hemisphere to the

41 *Īśvarapratyabhijñārikā* I.5.7 (KSTS, vol. 34, 2nd text, p. 16), translated in Torella, *The Īśvarapratyabhijñārikā*, p. 116. See also *Īśvarapratyabhijñārikā* I.6.7.

42 *Paramārthasāra*, verse 1 (KSTS, vol. 7, p. 2), 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. 63.

northern ecliptic hemisphere). In astronomy, this node is merely a location in space, but if the moon happens to be “full” (i.e., directly opposite the sun, on the far side of the earth) when this intersection occurs, we on earth experience it as a lunar eclipse (i.e., the shadow of the earth passes across the moon). In Vedic astrology, which focuses on how things appear to an earthly viewer, this ascending lunar node is thought to be an invisible planet that becomes visible during the eclipse. Using that invisible planet as an analogy, Abhinavagupta states in verse 8 of the *Paramārthasāra*: “Just as Rāhu, although invisible, becomes manifest when interposed upon the orb of the moon, so too this Self [(i.e., consciousness)], although [invisibly] present in all things, becomes manifest in the mirror of the intellect, by securing [similarly] a basis in external objects.”⁴³

Consciousness, in other words, is “present in all things,” but what makes the consciousness of an inert lump of clay different from that, say, of a person is the absence, in the former case, of a brain and sense organs that enable the consciousness to manifest itself “in the mirror of the intellect.” Moreover, it is only through subject-object consciousness — that is, “by securing a basis in external objects” — that this revelation of consciousness occurs. In other words, we can become aware of consciousness only as the knower of some object. Without objects of consciousness, consciousness itself remains invisible, like light passing through empty space, without anything to illuminate. The implication of this point is profound. Although the true essence of all consciousness is nondual consciousness of self, consciousness only reveals itself in the dualistic illusion of a

43 *Paramārthasāra*, verse 8 (KSTS, vol. 7, p. 24), translated in Bansat-Boudon, *An Introduction to Tantric Philosophy*, pp. 96–97.

subject knowing an object.

In commenting on this verse, Yogarāja distinguishes between the absolute “I” and the relative “I.” The relative “I” is the “I” that appears in the sentence: “I hear sounds.” This relative “I” exists as a subject in relation to a perceived object, and it depends on the perception of the object for its existence. When an object is known, even if that object is only a mental image, then the relative “I” is also known, but when there is no object of knowing, as in dreamless sleep, the relative “I” disappears. In short, the relative “I” is the “I” of subject-object consciousness. By contrast, the absolute “I” is the nondual consciousness that constitutes one’s true self. It never disappears, even in dreamless sleep, and according to verse 8, it is “present in all things,” but invisibly so, like Rāhu when there is no moon to eclipse. Yogarāja explains:

Moreover, when [this Self] becomes a matter of awareness in the [cognitive] experience of the “first person,” . . . — an experience that occurs to every cognizer endowed with a subtle body whenever objects of sense such as sound, viewed as objects to be known, are apprehended in the mirror of intellect, or, in the mirror of intuition — then, that same Self, its form now fully manifest, is apprehended⁴⁴

Significantly, Yogarāja — who, along with his teachers, insists that all things are conscious — is quite restrictive regarding the experience of subject-object consciousness, saying that it occurs only when sense objects are perceived “in the mirror of intellect” of “every cognizer endowed with a subtle body.” Although everything, everywhere, is conscious, only

44 Yogarāja’s com. to *Paramārthasāra*, verse 8 (KSTS, vol. 7, p. 25), translated in Bansat-Boudon, *An Introduction to Tantric Philosophy*, pp. 97–98.

organisms that have a brain and sense organs are constructed in such a way that their consciousness (their absolute “I”) assumes the form of an individual soul that is the knower of objects of perception (a relative “I”). Yogarāja says:

[Nevertheless,] even though [consciousness] is there in the lump of clay, etc., it is widely taken as not being there, in virtue of [the clay’s] abounding in *tamas* [(“darkness,” “dullness”)], just like Rāhu in the sky [when not appearing on the orb of the moon].

....

But, ultimately, from the point of view of the Supreme Lord, no usage distinguishes the sentient from the insentient.⁴⁵

Several verses later, the *Paramārthasāra* employs the city-in-a-mirror simile, using it to illustrate that consciousness is really nondual — conscious only of itself — despite manifesting itself in the dualistic form of a subject knowing an object. Verses 12 and 13 state:

As, in the orb of a mirror, objects such as cities or villages, themselves various though not different [from the mirror’s flat surface], appear [there, in the mirror,] both as different from each other and from the mirror itself, so appears this world [in the mirror of the Lord’s consciousness], differentiated both internally and vis-à-vis that consciousness, although it is not different from [that universal] consciousness most pure, the supreme Bhairava.⁴⁶

Yogarāja’s commentary explicates these important verses in great detail, but Yo-

⁴⁵ Yogarāja’s com. to *Paramārthasāra*, verse 8 (KSTS, vol. 7, pp. 25–26), translated in Bansat-Boudon, *An Introduction to Tantric Philosophy*, pp. 98–99.

⁴⁶ *Paramārthasāra*, verses 12–13 (KSTS, vol. 7, p. 35), translated in Bansat-Boudon, *An Introduction to Tantric Philosophy*, p. 112.

garāja’s commentary also describes the *limitations* of the city-in-a-mirror simile, at least when that simile is applied to the totality of all consciousness, not just to the individual consciousness of a particular person. Yogarāja states:

Nevertheless, between the Light of consciousness — endowed as it is with the state of wonder — and the light of the mirror, there is the following difference — viz., the city, etc., that is judged to be different [from the mirror] as a reflection [in the mirror], appears in the perfectly pure mirror [only as an external form], but [an actual city] is in no way created by the mirror. Thus the conclusion that “this is an elephant” [as applying to what is seen] in the mirror would be erroneous[, for it is a reflection of an elephant, and the actual elephant is outside the mirror].

On the other hand, Light [viz., consciousness], whose essence is the marvelous experience of itself [(i.e., the essence of consciousness is nondual)], makes manifest on its own surface, and out of its own free will, the [actual] universe, whose material cause is that same consciousness, [as is known] by considering that [the universe] is not different [from that consciousness].⁴⁷

The point being made here is that the reflection of a city that appears in a physical mirror is just an image, not an actual bricks-and-mortar city, whereas the universe that appears in the mirror of consciousness is an actual universe. Moreover, the reflection of a city that appears in a physical mirror is caused by an actual city that exists outside the mirror, whereas the universe that appears in the mirror of consciousness is caused only by

⁴⁷ Yogarāja’s com. to *Paramārthasāra*, verses 12–13 (KSTS, vol. 7, pp. 38–39), translated in Bansat-Boudon, *An Introduction to Tantric Philosophy*, pp. 115–116.

consciousness itself. There is no inert universe, outside consciousness, that becomes known when it is reflected in a conscious soul somewhere. Rather, consciousness manifests actual cities and the like on the “canvas” of consciousness, without there being anything outside consciousness that is the source of those manifestations, and consciousness is then conscious of those manifestations by reason of being conscious of itself.

But as Yogarāja has previously explained, the mirror simile also describes the subject-object consciousness that occurs when sense objects are perceived in the intellect-mirror of embodied beings, and needless to say, things do exist outside the “intellect-mirror” of a particular physical body. Indeed, this point is explicit in chapter 3 of the *Tantrāloka*, wherein Abhinavagupta describes the sense organs as reflecting various aspects of the surrounding world and performing their perceiving function by means of that reflection. (See *Tantrāloka* 3.5–43.) At the individual level, therefore, the city-in-a-mirror simile applies without qualification. Whatever physical thing one might be perceiving through one’s bodily senses, one is actually only conscious of one’s own self in which that thing is being reflected and represented. Hence, one’s sense of being separate from the content of one’s consciousness is merely an illusion, like the illusion of depth that characterizes the reflection of a distant city in the flat surface of a mirror.

Moreover, according to the *Paramārthasāra*, the nondual consciousness of self that is illustrated by the city-in-a-mirror simile describes the consciousness of *all things*. And because even a clay jar is fully conscious, verse 74, discussing a person who is a knower of truth — a *jñānin* — states that “[t]he divine abode [(i.e., the locus of consciousness)] for him is his own body . . . or [if not his own, then] the

body of another, or even an object, such as a jar.”⁴⁸ Yogarāja elaborates this verse as follows: “Not only is the body [for the *jñānin*] the abode of the deity inasmuch as it is the dwelling place of consciousness, but as well, whatever [other] objects there are that are governed by consciousness, all of them are abodes of the deity for him [the *jñānin*].”⁴⁹

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. Thus, if *Pratyabhijñā* Shaivism is categorized as idealism, it is very different from the unsettling notion that all things are merely the dream images of a remote dreamer. Rather, all things are the dream images of themselves, having their own intrinsic being despite being nothing but consciousness. This form of idealism, in other words, is a *diffuse* non-reductive idealism, and it can just as well be categorized as materialism.

Śaṅkara’s Vedānta urged us to withdraw to the extreme subject side of the subject-object divide, identifying with a pure consciousness that had no form (*arūpa*) and no qualities (*nirguṇa*), and Śaṅkara declared that the objective world of differentiation was merely an unreal appearance (*ābhāsa*). But *Pratyabhijñā* philosophy instead eliminates the subject-object divide, declaring all objects to be conscious subjects, and all conscious subjects to be objects of their own consciousness. The result is a world that is every bit real, but whose underlying being is consciousness.

48 *Paramārthasāra*, verse 74 (KSTS, vol. 7, p. 140), translated in Bansat-Boudon, *An Introduction to Tantric Philosophy*, p. 252.

49 Yogarāja’s com. to *Paramārthasāra*, verse 74 (KSTS, vol. 7, p. 142), translated in Bansat-Boudon, *An Introduction to Tantric Philosophy*, p. 254.

But if the world is real, then all its diversity is also real, and that diversity must have a source in God's own being. Drawing from the pre-Śāṅkaran theories of Bhartṛhari (5th century c.e.), *Pratyabhijñā* philosophy posits a God that is Speech (*vāc*) and Word (*śabda*), thus giving specific form and content to God's inner being. As I explain in Part Seven of my book, all the dynamic diversity of the world exists outside time as God's eternal unchanging essence, and in the time dimension, that essence plays out as the pulse (*spanda*) of creation and dissolution, a pulse that occurs both on a cosmic scale and in the arising and subsiding of every thought.

5. Baruch Spinoza

By decree of the angels and by the command of the holy men, we excommunicate, expel, curse and damn Baruch de Espinoza Cursed be he by day and cursed be he by night; cursed be he when he lies down and cursed be he when he rises up. Cursed be he when he goes out and cursed be he when he comes in. The Lord will not spare him, but then the anger of the Lord and his jealousy shall smoke against that man, and all the curses that are written in this book shall lie upon him, and the Lord shall blot out his name from under heaven. And the Lord shall separate him unto evil out of all the tribes of Israel, according to all the curses of the covenant that are written in this book of the law. But you that cleave unto the Lord your God are alive every one of you this day.

— Decree of Excommunication against Baruch Spinoza (Amsterdam, July 27, 1656 c.e.)⁵⁰

50 Nadler, Steven, *Spinoza: A Life* (Cambridge Univ. Press 1999), p. 120.

a. Baruch Becomes Benedictus

Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677 c.e.) was a philosopher who saw truth in things that are counterintuitive, and like other innovative thinkers before him, he was criticized and rejected for his ideas. But notwithstanding the local community's curse that "the Lord shall blot out his name from under heaven," Spinoza's name is today known and respected throughout the world. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832 c.e.) praised Spinoza as "a sedative for my passions," adding that Spinoza seemed to open up for him "a great and free outlook over the sensible and moral world." In poetry, Albert Einstein wondered at the extent of his great love for Spinoza, exclaiming, "How I love this noble man. More than I can say with words." David Ben-Gurion sought to have the decree of excommunication against Spinoza rescinded, and people from all backgrounds continue to read Spinoza's books and letters, they contemplate and discuss his ideas, and they admire the simple austerity of his way of life.

Spinoza was a Dutch Jew whose family immigrated to Holland from Portugal, where they had been forced to practice their Jewish faith in secret. Spinoza was raised and educated in a traditional Jewish manner, but even as a young man, he proved to be a revolutionary thinker, resulting in his excommunication at age 23. He then changed his name from Baruch (Hebrew for "blessing") to Benedictus (Latin for "blessing") and quickly became famous for his expertise in Cartesian philosophy. But Spinoza was not an uncritical follower of René Descartes (1596–1650 c.e.). Rather, he recognized the problems that beset Descartes's thought-matter dualism, and he boldly asserted that thought and matter are the same thing. In other words, Spinoza's answer to the mind-body

problem was very similar to what we have already encountered in *Pratyabhijñā* Shaivism.

The *Pratyabhijñā* texts persuasively argue that consciousness is universal, not individual; that it is nondual, not riven in two by an unbridgeable subject-object divide; and that it is the underlying being of all things, not just that of human souls. And Spinoza's ideas so closely conform to those same principles that one might wonder whether he had access to South Asian sources, perhaps as a result of contacts between European Jews and Jews living in Persia. It is intriguing to speculate about such connections, but I think multiple independent discovery better explains the close parallel between *Pratyabhijñā* nondualism and the nondual ideas of the great 17th century Dutch-Jewish philosopher.

What is most relevant to us, however, is that Spinoza picks up where *Pratyabhijñā* Shaivism leaves off, filling in numerous details and adding a measure of precision and logical rigor that is sometimes lacking in the Sanskrit texts. Therefore, whether Spinoza arrived at his ideas independently or drew them indirectly from South Asian sources, his contribution to nondual thought cannot be discounted.

b. Spinoza's Answer to the Mind-Body Problem

Spinoza's primary philosophical work, the *Ethics*, presents his theories in the form of a mathematical proof. Writing to his friend Henry Oldenburg, secretary of the Royal Society, Spinoza said: "But I can think of no better way of demonstrating these things clearly and briefly than to prove them in the Geometric manner and subject them to your understanding." (Letter 2 [IV/8/10–20].) In the *Ethics*, this "geometric manner" of proof comes to its full fruition, complete with definitions,

axioms, propositions, demonstrations, corollaries, lemmas, and postulates. Using these tools, Spinoza makes his way, point by point, from first principles to the most profound philosophical conclusions, attempting to apply only irrefutable logical reasoning at each step. But the language Spinoza employs is specially and precisely defined, and his conclusions are often counterintuitive when compared to the Cartesian dualism of everyday human experience. As a result, a student of Spinoza can spend a day, or a lifetime, studying a single paragraph of the *Ethics*.

As noted, Spinoza was one of the leading experts of his time on Cartesian philosophy, and he employs many Cartesian terms and ideas in his own philosophical works, albeit with a few important distinctions. Both Descartes and Spinoza use the term "substance" (*substantia*), but contrary to Descartes, Spinoza concludes that only one infinite, eternal, and self-sufficient substance exists, and that it is God. (*Ethics*, IP11 and IP14.) Specifically, Spinoza defines "substance" as that in which other things inhere but which itself inheres in no other thing. Spinoza says: "By substance I understand what is in itself and is conceived through itself, i.e., that whose concept does not require the concept of another thing, from which it must be formed." (*Id.*, ID3.) In other words, substance is the ground of being. Modes, by contrast, are "the affections of a substance" (*id.*, ID5); they are the things that inhere in substance. One could say that the relationship of modes to substance is analogous to the relationship of waves to water, or that of a clay jar to raw clay, or that of a gold ornament to molten gold, and all these analogies might bring to mind the analogies Śāṅkara uses to describe the relationship of the diverse world to Brahman. On this basis, many scholars

have persuasively argued that Spinoza's divine "substance" and Śāṅkara's Brahman are one and the same.

But Śāṅkara and Spinoza draw different conclusions from the dependent relationship implied by inherence. Śāṅkara would argue that because waves inhere in water, only the water is real, and the waves — which are temporal — are unreal. By contrast, Spinoza would argue that both the water and the waves are perfectly real, although he would agree that the waves are temporal. Spinoza, like the *Pratyabhijñā* philosophers, understands the ever-changing dynamic diversity of the world to be an expression, in the dimension of time, of God's eternal essence. Hence, the modes are real because they are God, or "substance," comprehended in temporal terms. He says: "The difference between Eternity and Duration arises from this. For it is only of Modes that we can explain the existence by Duration. But of Substance [we can explain the existence] by Eternity . . ." (Letter 12 [IV/54/15–55/5].) We have seen that Śāṅkara identifies God, or Brahman, with the extreme subject side of the subject-object divide. Thus, Brahman is pure consciousness, without form (*arūpa*) and without qualities (*nirguṇa*), and the ever-changing objective world is an unreal appearance (*ābhāsa*) in that consciousness. By contrast, Spinoza gives form and content to God's inner being, and by doing so, he gives reality to the ever-changing world.

Following Descartes, Spinoza uses the term "extension" (i.e., spatial dimension) to describe the material world in the abstract, and he uses the phrase "mode of extension" to describe, among other things, distinct material objects. He uses the term "body" in a broad sense, including within the scope of that term inorganic things such as planetary bodies. A body,

for Spinoza, is a thing that moves or rests as a unified whole (see *Ethics*, IIP13, L1), and Spinoza accepts, too, that a body might be built up from other smaller bodies (*id.*, IIP13, L3, "Definition").

Spinoza uses the term "idea" for a distinct thought. He says: "By idea I understand a concept of the Mind that the Mind forms because it is a thinking thing." (*Ethics*, IID3.) He also sometimes uses the phrase "mode of thinking" in a similar way, especially when discussing abstract concepts like time.

As noted, Spinoza's most profound point of departure from Cartesian philosophy is his assertion of thought-matter equivalence. More specifically, Spinoza argues that thought and matter are not distinct "substances" (i.e., the "thinking substance" and the "extended substance") but rather two "attributes" of the same substance — two ways, that is, of comprehending a single thing.⁵¹ And because thought and matter are really one, the world of thought and the world of matter are perfectly isomorphic. In other words, every thought is also a material thing, and material thing is also a thought. Therefore, in the *Ethics*, Spinoza writes:

The order and connection of ideas [(i.e., thoughts)] is the same as the order and connection of things [(i.e., material things, etc.)]. (*Ethics*, IIP7.)

[T]he thinking substance [(i.e., thought)] and the extended substance [(i.e., matter)] are one and the same

51 On hearing that Spinoza considered thought and matter to be "attributes" of a single "substance," some experts in Hindu philosophy will immediately think of Rāmānuja's *Viśiṣṭādvaita* school of Vedānta. But Spinoza uses these terms in a way that is quite different from Rāmānuja's usage, and therefore, despite a superficial similarity, Spinoza's philosophy is not at all like that of Rāmānuja. I discuss the distinction briefly in my book.

substance, which is now comprehended under this attribute, now under that. So also a mode of extension [(i.e., a distinct material object)] and the idea of that mode [(i.e., the thought that corresponds to that object)] are one and the same thing, but expressed in two ways. (*Id.*, IIP7, Schol.)

In the above quotation, after the phrase “a mode of extension,” I added, as a clarification, “a distinct material object,” and after the phrase “the idea of that mode,” I added “the thought that corresponds to that object.” The latter emendation needs to be explained. Some casual readers of Spinoza might argue that the phrase “the idea of that mode” refers to the mental image a person has of a particular object when observing that object. Thus, if “a mode of extension” is an apple, then “the idea of that mode” is the apple-thought in the mind of a person observing the apple. Although that reading of Spinoza has a certain intuitive appeal, most scholars reject it.

Thought-matter equivalence does not mean that a person’s apple-thought is the same thing as a material apple sitting in a bowl of fruit on a table; rather, it means that a person’s apple-thought is the same thing as a physical brain representing an apple in the form of neural spiking frequencies. Indeed, if Spinoza were claiming an equivalence between a person’s apple-thought and a material apple sitting in a bowl of fruit, his philosophy would be incoherent. After all, many people might simultaneously observe the same material apple, and each would then have a different mental image of that apple, which would be incompatible with the one-to-one correspondence Spinoza claims to exist between thought and matter.

In order to appreciate more ful-

ly Spinoza’s assertion of thought-matter equivalence, one needs to stop thinking in terms of subject-object consciousness and recall that all consciousness is really consciousness of self. One does not know any external thing except by its reflection in one’s own being. One is conscious of only one’s own self, but one perceives one’s own self as a vast and diverse external world. As Spinoza explains, “[t]he human Mind does not perceive any external body as actually existing, except through the ideas of the affections of its own Body.” (*Ethics*, IIP26.) Because consciousness is nondual in this way, the only “idea” (i.e., thought) that corresponds to a material apple is the apple’s thought of itself, not the thought some remote person might be having of it, and the only “mode of extension” (i.e., material thing) that corresponds to a person’s apple-thought is the person’s own brain, which is configured to represent an apple. In short, when Spinoza asserts that “a mode of extension and the idea of that mode are one and the same thing” (*Ethics*, IIP7, Schol.), he is necessarily making a statement about the thought a material thing has *of itself*, not the thought a remote observer might be having of it.

With the benefit of that clarification, we are ready to consider Spinoza’s answer to the mind-body problem. Spinoza discusses “the object of the idea constituting the human mind.” (*Ethics*, IIP12.) Here, for reasons just explained, he cannot possibly be referring to some remote object — such as an apple — that the human mind might be thinking about. Rather, based on the theory of thought-matter equivalence, Spinoza is necessarily referring to something that actually *is* the human mind but in a material form. In other words, he is referring to some material thing whose thought of itself gives rise to the human mind, meaning that whatever occurs

physically in that material thing necessarily corresponds to a thought in that mind. As Spinoza puts it, “[w]hatever happens in the object of the idea constituting the human Mind . . . there will necessarily be an idea of that thing in the Mind; i.e., if the object of the idea constituting a human Mind is a body, nothing can happen in that body which is not perceived by the Mind.” (*Ethics*, IIP12.) And what could such a “body” be if not a *human* body, or some component of a human body, such as the brain and nervous system? Therefore, Spinoza concludes: “The object of the idea constituting the human Mind is the [human] Body, or a certain mode of Extension which actually exists, and nothing else.” (*Ethics*, IIP13.) That powerful statement resolves the mind-body problem by boldly asserting that the mind *is* the body (or some component of it).

Thus, Spinoza completely rejects the consciousness-matter dualism that Śaṅkara so strongly insisted upon. Śaṅkara focused on the extreme subject side of the subject-object divide. On that basis, he asserted that consciousness is one and indivisible, and that it appears to be differentiated only because it illuminates different material vessels. But Śaṅkara further argued that consciousness and matter are completely distinct, and derivatively, he argued that the mind and body are also distinct. He said: “[T]he characteristics of the Spirit [(i.e., consciousness)] do not attach themselves to the body nor do those of the body to the Spirit.”⁵² Spinoza asserts exactly the opposite. For Spinoza, the mind *is* the body.

52 *Bhagavadgītābhāṣya* XIII, 2, translated in Warrier, A.G. Krishna, *Srīmad Bhagavad Gītā Bhāṣya of Sri Saṅkarācārya, With Text in Devanagiri & English Rendering, and Index of First Lines of Verses* (Sri Ramakrishna Math, 3d impression, 1983), p. 407.

Moreover, because thought and matter are actually the same thing comprehended in two different ways, Spinoza universalizes his assertion of mind-body equivalence. All material bodies, everywhere, have minds, at least when the word “mind” is understood in the broadest possible sense. Thus, all things are in some sense conscious, but Spinoza qualifies that assertion, noting that the perceptive capacity of any particular “mind” depends on the suppleness (i.e., the receptivity) of the material thing that has that mind. Spinoza explains:

For the things we have shown so far are completely general and do not pertain more to [human beings] than to other Individuals, all of which, though in different degrees, are nevertheless animate. . . . And so, whatever we have said of the idea of the human Body must also be said of the idea of any [material] thing. [¶] . . . [I]n proportion as a Body is more capable than others of doing many things at once, or being acted on in many ways at once, so its Mind is more capable than others of perceiving many things at once. And in proportion as the actions of a body depend more on itself alone, and as other bodies concur with it less in acting, so its mind is more capable of understanding distinctly. (*Ethics*, IIP13, Schol.)

Finally, Spinoza asserts that insofar as a material thing has the suppleness and receptivity that makes its mind more perceptive, its mind also becomes more aware of itself. As Spinoza puts it,

[t]he Mind does not know itself, except insofar as it perceives the ideas of the affections of the Body. (*Ethics*, IIP23.)

On the other hand, he who has a Body capable of a great many things, has a Mind which considered only in itself

is very much conscious of itself, and of God, and of things. (*Id.*, VP39, Schol.)

By way of summary, a “mind” according to Spinoza is the thought a material thing has of itself, and it only becomes a thought about some external thing when, by force of evolution, it sees past itself to draw inferences about the world that surrounds it. But Spinoza also recognizes that even the 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 some material thing. Spinoza closes that gap by asserting that the thought and the material thing are one and the same; they are two attributes of a single “substance,” which Spinoza equates with God.

If we go just one step further — a step that Spinoza doesn’t take, but one that fits — we can say that Spinoza’s “substance” is what we have been referring to as “nondual consciousness of self.” But we have to be careful here because Spinoza uses the word “conscious” (*conscia*), as we do in English, to refer to subject-object consciousness. (See, e.g., *Ethics*, VP31, Schol., VP39, Schol., VP42, Schol.)⁵³ When I say that Spinoza’s “substance” is nondual consciousness of self, I am not referring to the subject side of the subject-object divide. Rather, I am referring to a direct consciousness of self that is based on being, not on knowing. I am referring, in other words, to what Jean-Paul Sartre called “*conscience non positionnelle (de) soi*.”⁵⁴ 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.

53 On Spinoza’s use of the word “conscious,” see Garrett, Don, *Nature and Necessity in Spinoza’s Philosophy* (Oxford Univ. Press 2018), pp. 396–397, 404–405, 408–410, 415–423.

54 Jean-Paul Sartre’s use of this phrase is discussed in my book.

c. Comparison to *Pratyabhijñā* Shaivism

The parallel between Spinoza’s answer to the mind-body problem and *Pratyabhijñā* Shaivism is striking. 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.) But seven centuries earlier, Somānanda had already articulated the same thought-matter equivalence, saying, “a clay jar, by comprehending its own self, exists.”⁵⁵ According to Somānanda, the existence of a thing is nothing other than its thought of itself, and he added that a thing’s thought of itself is nothing other than God’s thought of it.⁵⁶ And the latter point, too, is one Spinoza made: “[And f]or of each thing there is necessarily an idea in God, of which God is the cause in the same way as he is of the idea of the human Body. And so, whatever we have said of the idea of the human Body [(i.e., that it is the human mind)] must also be said of the idea of any thing [(i.e., that it is the mind of that thing)].” (*Ethics*, IIP13, Schol.) Thus, according to both Somānanda and Spinoza, God’s thought of a thing suffices to make that thing conscious, or put another way, each thing’s consciousness of itself is the same thing as God’s consciousness of it.⁵⁷

And as we have seen, Yogarāja elaborated Somānanda’s philosophical 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

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

56 See *Śivadr̥ṣṭi* 5.105–110.

57 See Garrett, *Nature and Necessity*, pp. 393–414, esp. 410.

consciousness takes the form of an individual soul knowing an external material world.

If Spinoza had been schooled in 11th century Kashmir, his ideas could not have tracked Yogarāja's ideas more closely. Spinoza, like Yogarāja, concluded that everything has a mind. (*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 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 . . ." ⁵⁸

58 Yogarāja's com. to *Paramārthasāra*, verse 8 (KSTS, vol. 7, p. 25), translated in Bansat-Bou-

But as we will recall, Abhinavagupta emphasized the inevitable inadequacy of empirical knowledge. He noted that the sense organs are necessarily imperfect mirrors, for each can only reflect (or represent) that which corresponds to its nature. (See *Tantrāloka* 3.5–43.) Moreover, this distortion is the underlying reason we experience subject-object duality where there is none, a point that Kṣemarāja also explained in his *Pratyabhijñāhṛdayam*:

When the highest Lord, whose very essence is consciousness, conceals, by His free will, pervasion of non-duality and assumes duality all round, then His will and other powers, though essentially non-limited, assume limitation. . . . By assuming extreme limitation, beginning with the acquisition of an inner organ [(i.e., the intellect, mind, ego, memory, etc.)] and organs of perception [(i.e., the sense organs)], [the universal consciousness] acquires *māyīya-mala*, which consists in the apprehension of all objects as different [from itself]. ⁵⁹

Not surprisingly, Spinoza, too, emphasized the inadequacy of empirical knowledge: Because we know external things through the impression they make on our sense organs (*Ethics*, IIP26), and because such information is partial, mediated, and inferential, it is necessarily imperfect. Spinoza, who made his living as a lens grinder, providing spectacles and scientific instruments to the Dutch community, was keenly aware of the inadequacy of the information we receive by way of the eyes and other sense organs. He therefore asserted: "The idea of any affection of the human Body does not involve adequate knowledge of an external body."

don, *An Introduction to Tantric Philosophy*, p. 98.

59 *Pratyabhijñāhṛdayam*, com. to *sūtra* 9 (KSTS, vol. 3, p. 21), translated in Singh, *Pratyabhijñāhṛdayam*, pp. 71–72.

(*Ethics*, IIP25.) Moreover, the effects a particular external thing has on our sense organs is muddled up with effects from many sources at once. Therefore, Spinoza added: “The ideas of the affections of the human Body . . . are not clear and distinct, but confused.” (*Ethics*, IIP28.) And one result of this inadequate and confused knowledge of the world is the dualistic notion that we are immaterial thinking things and that the world is a material non-thinking thing, and that the two are ontologically distinct.

Spinoza’s philosophical system is set forth and defended in exquisite detail in the *Ethics*, but Spinoza also summarized his philosophy in a letter he wrote to his friend Henry Oldenburg. In that letter, he described the entire universe as a single body with a single mind, and he described the human body and human mind as a finite participant in that infinite universal being. Here are Spinoza’s words:

[A]ll bodies are surrounded by others, and are determined by one another to existing and producing an effect in a fixed and determinate way, the same ratio of motion to rest always being preserved in all of them at once, [that is, in the whole universe]. From this it follows that every body, insofar as it exists modified in a definite way, must be considered as a part of the whole universe, must agree with its whole and must cohere with the remaining bodies. . . .

. . . .
You see, therefore, how and why I think that the human Body is a part of Nature [(i.e., an interdependent and inseparable component of the whole)]. But as far as the human Mind is concerned, I think it is a part of Nature too. For I maintain that there is also in nature an infinite power of thinking, which, insofar as it is infinite, contains in itself objectively the whole of Na-

ture, and whose thoughts proceed in the same way as Nature, its object, does. Next, I maintain that the human Mind is this same power, not insofar as it is infinite and perceives the whole of Nature, but insofar as it is finite and perceives only the human body. For this reason I maintain that the human Mind is a part of a certain infinite intellect. (Letter 32 [IV/172a/15–174a/10].)

As this letter describes, Spinoza understood the universe to be a single interdependent unity that is infinite, thus actualizing every possibility. And just as every individual thing has a mind (i.e., a thought of itself), likewise the universe, in its entirety, has a mind (i.e., a thought of itself). Spinoza called this universal mind the “infinite power of thinking,” and he also called it the “infinite intellect of God,” and whatever we might choose to call it, it necessarily exists because the material universe exists, and thought and matter are one.

And as for the human mind, it, according to Spinoza, is the fraction of that “infinite intellect” that has only the human body (or perhaps merely the human brain) as the direct content of its thought, being forced to infer things outside the body by interpreting their effects within the body.

Of course, Spinoza’s assertion that the human mind is a part of the universal mind is familiar to us from *Pratyabhijñā* Shaivism. It aligns with Somānanda’s assertion that an object’s thought of itself is nothing other than Śiva’s thought of it,⁶⁰ and it likewise aligns with Kṣemarāja’s assertion that the “consciousness of Śiva alone is, in the highest sense, the self of the entire manifestation.”⁶¹ And because “the whole of nature is one Individual” (*Ethics*,

60 See *Śivadr̥ṣṭi* 5.105–109.

61 Kṣemarāja’s com. to *Śiva Sūtras*, *sūtra* 1 (KSTS, vol. 1, p. 3), translated in Singh, *Śiva Sūtras*, pp. 5–6.

IIP13, L7, Schol.), each part affecting other parts and affected by other parts, there can be no reasoned basis for declaring any one part to be separate from the whole. Therefore, the human body is not really an independent entity, and for like reason, the human mind is not an independent entity. It only appears to be a distinct mind, but in truth, its thoughts are part of and determined by an infinite system of thought.

In summary, we find in Spinoza's writings all the principles that we have found 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, the mind-body problem disappears, and the riddle of consciousness is solved.

d. Neutral Monism — A Dream World That Is Real

Scholars have noticed numerous similarities between Spinoza's philosophy and Śaṅkara's Vedānta.⁶² But despite these important similarities, we have seen that Spinoza's philosophy sharply differs from Śaṅkara's Vedānta as regards the status of the objective world. As Bina Gupta put it in her 1984 article for the *India Philosophical Quarterly*,

[t]he intuitive knowledge of God which Spinoza seeks is a way to understand the world as it really is. It is not a flight from the material world, but a celebration of its essential nature and oneness. The pursuit of Brahman, on the other hand, implies repudiation of the world: it is a realization that Brahman is the only reality; the world is merely an appearance and the [individual soul] and Brahman are non-different.⁶³

62 I summarize this body of scholarship in an appendix to my book.

63 Gupta, Bina, "Brahman, God, Substance and Nature: Samkara and Spinoza," in *India Philo-*

Gupta's observation is a valid one, but it is worth noting that in drawing this distinction between Spinoza's philosophy and Śaṅkara's Vedānta, Gupta and others identify the precise point that makes Spinoza's philosophy similar to *Pratyabhijñā* philosophy. Spinoza's philosophy, like *Pratyabhijñā* Shaivism, offers a synthesis of materialism and idealism, validating both. In both these philosophical systems, the physical world is real in every significant sense, adhering to immutable physical laws and expressing a real essence of God. But even so, every particle of this physical world corresponds to a thought of itself, and thought and matter are dual aspects of a nondual core.

Significantly, this "neutral monism" (neutral between materialism and idealism) resolves many of the problems often associated with other solutions to the mind-body problem. First, by denying the reality of thought-matter dualism, it solves the problem of how something immaterial (a mind) can have a causal effect on something material (a body). Thoughts cause thoughts, and material events cause material events, but the two progressions describe the same progression — their difference being only one of aspect.

In addition, neutral monism answers ontological questions about matter, space, and time, questions that the materialist leaves unanswered. Matter and thought are the same thing, and space and time are merely information.

Finally, neutral monism parries the accusation of solipsism that is often directed against idealism. The idealism that the *Pratyabhijñā* masters and Spinoza present to us is a *diffuse* non-reductive idealism in which perceived things have intrinsic being because they are themselves the locus of the consciousness that constitutes their

sophical Quarterly, vol. XI, no. 3 (1984), p. 281.

existence. They are not just dream images; they are also dreamers. The universal nondual consciousness delights in its consciousness of itself, and it is conscious of itself from countless perspectives, so as to delight in itself all the more.

In closing, I would like to relate the striking insights of this article to the theme of this edition of *Dogma*: “Metamorphosis and Perception.” In devotional legend, it is said that Śaṅkara entered the body of King Amaruka in order to master the science of sexual love. But we might wonder, is it possible for an individual soul to enter the body of another — to see through that body’s eyes, to touch through that body’s fingers, etc. — but to remain otherwise unchanged and unaffected?

If all consciousness is consciousness of self, then the answer to that question is most certainly no. If, for example, “a clay jar, by comprehending its own self, exists” (Somānanda), and if “[c]onsciousness has as its essential nature [selfward-facing,] reflective awareness” (Utpaladeva), and if “[t]he object of the idea constituting the human Mind is the [human] Body . . . and nothing else” (Spinoza), then it must be that physical metamorphosis is inseparable from spiritual metamorphosis. And likewise, if thought and matter are the same thing, then becoming the body of another means becoming the soul of another and ceasing to be the soul that one previously was. But even so, at the highest level, all souls are one consciousness. Śaṅkara and King Amaruka were never really separate beings.

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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.

James H. Cumming (Bachelor of Arts, Columbia University; Juris Doctor, *magna cum laude*, University of Pennsylvania) is a senior research attorney at the California Supreme Court, where he is an expert in philosophy of law. He has also been a scholar of religion for over 40 years. He began by studying Sanskrit and Indian scripture, specializing in the nondual philosophy of Kashmir. Later, he learned Hebrew and completed a comprehensive study of Jewish mysticism. In 2019, he published *Torah and Nondualism: Diversity, Conflict, and Synthesis* (Ibis Press). This article is excerpted from his second book, *The Nondual Mind: Vedānta, Kashmiri Pratyabhijñā Shaivism, and Spinoza*, which is still in manuscript, and which can be accessed on Academia.edu.

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FREEDOM IN A DETERMINISTIC UNIVERSE

by James H. Cumming

neriawilliam@yahoo.fr



My recently completed book, *The Nondual 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. In previous editions of *Dogma*, I published three excerpts from that book. I will not now try to summarize those articles in detail, although they provide the foundation for the present article. In those articles, I elaborated 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 and representation inside one’s own being. When the realization becomes firm that all consciousness is really nondual consciousness of self, the mind-body problem disappears, and the riddle of consciousness is solved.

Significantly, the philosophy presented in my previous articles does not characterize the world as a mere illusion or dream image. Rather, the world is real in every significant sense, adhering to immutable physical laws that can be inventively applied to predict real events and to devise real

answers to real problems. But if everything is governed by immutable physical laws, with each event having a physical cause fully sufficient to explain its occurrence, then it seems to follow that everything in the dimension of time is fixed, merely waiting for its moment to occur. In other words, the laws of physics imply a world that is deterministic in every detail.

The present article constitutes a fourth excerpt from my book. In it, I address the difficult problem of what it means to be free in a deterministic universe.

1. Fables and Fantasies

But if you believe that God speaks more clearly and effectively through sacred Scripture than through the light of the natural intellect, which he has also granted us, and which, with his Divine Wisdom, he continually preserves, strong and uncorrupted, then you have powerful reasons for bending your intellect to the opinions you attribute to sacred Scripture.¹

— Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677 c.e.)

1 Letter 21 [Gebhardt, Carl (ed.), *Spinoza Opera*, 4 vols. (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1925), IV/126/15–25]. The translations of Spinoza’s writings that appear in this article 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.

As philosophies go, determinism doesn't win many popularity contests. No one wants to be controlled. It cuts us to the core, for if we are controlled, then we have no agency, and if we have no agency, then we do not really exist, at least not in the individual sense that we find meaningful. And if we have no agency *even as to our thoughts*, then we have no agency at all. Determinism implies ego death, and the ego doesn't want to die. If one examines the question closely, one realizes that it is the ego (the constructed "I") that most resists determinism.

But as Spinoza points out, "it is no obstacle to the truth of a thing that it is not accepted by many."² We don't decide philosophical questions by majority vote. Rather, we need to realign our conception of self to make the truth less unappealing. The famous 20th century nondualist Nisargadatta Maharaj (1897–1981 c.e.) taught that enlightenment is as simple as "That art thou" (*tat tvam asi*); the difficult part is *believing* it. Significantly, many people who reject determinism, insisting vehemently that they have absolute freedom to choose any course of action at any moment, are quite comfortable with the idea of divine foreknowledge. They are quite comfortable, that is, with the idea that God knows in advance *what* course of action they will choose.

The laws of physics imply a fully deterministic universe, and both Vedānta and *Pratyabhijñā* Shaivism embrace that principle, albeit with some nuance, as we shall see. Spinoza, however, is particularly explicit and unambiguous on the point. He asserts, for example: "In nature there is nothing contingent, but all things have

been determined from the necessity of the divine nature to exist and produce an effect in a certain way." (*Ethics*, IP29.) And he adds: "Things could have been produced by God in no other way, and in no other order than they have been produced." (*Id.*, IP33.) But Spinoza — for whom thought and matter are the same thing — goes even further. He argues that determinism applies even in regard to the psyche's flow of thoughts and desires: "In the Mind there is no absolute, or free, will, but the Mind is determined [(i.e., caused)] to will this or that by a cause which is also determined by another, and this again by another, and so to infinity." (*Id.*, IIP48; accord, *id.*, IP32, with Dem. and Cor. 2.)

Few people are ready to accept Spinoza's uncompromising determinism, a determinism that makes one's thoughts and desires as rule-bound and inevitable as $E = mc^2$. For most people, free will undergirds and defines the very thing they imagine themselves to be. Teachers of moral philosophy often urge their followers to be less egotistic, and many people readily accept the validity of that advice, but few consider what relinquishing the ego really implies. It implies a loss of personal agency. Not many people are willing to take moral philosophy that far. So, unless Spinoza can replace the self he takes away from us with one more magnificent, most people prefer the lie of free will over the truth of determinism. And, you might ask, why do I say that free will is the "lie" and determinism is the "truth"? Because the laws of physics govern the neurons of the human brain just as surely as they do the planets in the sky.

Here, however, a clarification is necessary. Some philosophers argue that free will on the one hand and determinism

² *Short Treatise on God, Man, and His Well-Being*, part II, ch. xxvi, para. 10.

on the other represent a false dichotomy. They argue that the opposite of free will is external compulsion, and the opposite of determinism is indeterminism (i.e., uncaused randomness), and therefore free will and determinism are not actually opposed to one another. According to these philosophers, a person's will manifests his or her own essential nature, and a person whose thoughts and actions are determined solely by that inner essential nature, not by some external compulsion, is "free" despite the fact that the person's thoughts and actions could not possibly have been different. I embrace this limited version of free will below, albeit with the qualification that this so-called "freedom" is necessarily a matter of degree, and it continually changes based on circumstances beyond a person's control. For present purposes, however, I think it is most useful to define the term "free will" in an absolute sense, that is, as the state of being free to choose any course of action at any moment, determined by nothing at all, whether external or internal. By focusing on that stronger definition of "free will," we will see that free will is not something we really want, but more importantly, we will see that determinism isn't such a bad philosophy after all.

The sense we have of unconstrained personal agency is directly related to the Cartesian paradigm of a soul piloting a body. But if we consider that the observable universe is a single interdependent unity that cannot logically be divided into parts, then our resistance to determinism slowly dissolves in favor of a much nobler conception of who we are and what it means to be free. In short, the separate individual that we imagine ourselves to be doesn't actually exist, and therefore the

question of its freedom is simply irrelevant. Ramana Maharshi, the South Indian sage who attracted many people to nondual philosophy, taught about "destiny" (i.e., determinism) that one should "enquire for whom is this destiny and [one should thus] discover that *only the ego is bound by destiny* . . . and that *the ego is non-existent*."³

There is no point in arguing about whether the wings on a pig are covered with hair or feathers, because pigs don't really have wings. Similarly, there is no point in arguing about whether the individual soul of a person is free or bound, because people don't really have individual souls, at least not in the Cartesian sense of something independent that can act as an uncaused cause of future events. And even if one defines "individual soul" in terms of one's unique essential nature, it is still not the independent, fully autonomous thing that absolute free will implies. Rather, as explained, it is an interdependent part of a universal physical system, and its ability to express itself is limited and changing based on shifting external circumstances. It is a cog in a machine — a very sophisticated cog, but a cog nonetheless. And as for one's true self, which is universal nondual consciousness, it alone is supremely independent and free, much more so than any individual soul could ever be. But to arrive at that new construction of self, the illusory ego-self must die, and the ego-self doesn't want to die, so people resist determinism, and they cling to fables and fantasies that reinforce their false (i.e., Cartesian) construction of who they are. And some of those fables and fantasies have even become the daily fare of religion.

3 Mudaliar, Devaraja, *Day by Day with Bhagavan* (Sri Ramanasramam 2002), p. 266, italics added.

Spinoza was not opposed to religion or to religious life.⁴ Rather, he greatly appreciated the ability of prophets, acting by means of the imagination, to inspire and motivate people toward lives of piety and moral rectitude. The rituals, ceremonies, holidays, iconography, cosmogony, moral theories, and lore of religion all add a special richness to life, and these metaphorical teaching tools educate in ways that dry philosophical prose does not. Like poetry and music, they reach deep into the human psyche and communicate at that profound level. For Spinoza, their validity is not their philosophical truth; rather, it is their motivating power.

And Spinoza also recognized that, for most people, religion fills a psycho-spiritual gap left open by a widespread misunderstanding of determinism. When people hear about determinism, they think that it eliminates the justification for praise and blame. In a world that functions solely in accordance with deterministic physical laws, they ask, how can we say that any action has a moral quality, whether good or bad? Of course, every act has consequences, but in a fully deterministic world, what basis is there for imagining *moral* consequences? Most people intuitively recoil from the nihilism that determinism seems to imply, and for them, faith in a moralistic God provides a much-needed bulwark against the rising tide of nihilism that they associate with modern culture. Indeed, it was with a desire to fill that psycho-spiritual gap — that is, to validate human moral behavior in a deterministic universe — that Spinoza wrote the *Ethics*.

Many people love God because they

⁴ In his *Theological-Political Treatise*, Spinoza distinguished between philosophy and religion, arguing that each had its appropriate role and that they were mutually compatible.

imagine God to have idealized anthropomorphic qualities like kindness, compassion, self-sacrifice, providence, justice, and just a bit of righteous anger. Neither Vedānta's "universal Self," nor *Pratyabhijñā* Shaivism's "nondual consciousness," nor Spinoza's divine "substance" is likely to evoke tears of heartfelt devotion or to inspire a selfish man to repent. But in place of these dry philosophical conceptions of God, religion offers us a God that has an inner psychology very much like our own. It offers us a loving and just God that we can emulate. It offers us a personal God that the great philosopher-saints — whether Śaṅkara (8th century c.e.), Abhinavagupta (10th–11th centuries c.e.), or Spinoza — dare not take away.

Thus, religion meets people where they are, and it speaks to the doubts and fears they feel in that place. And, as noted, people imagine themselves to be an individual soul piloting a body, and they don't want to wake up from that dream. And for a person who is dreaming that dream, nothing reinforces the dream more powerfully than the belief that one can exercise one's absolute free will to choose any course of action at any moment, and nothing disturbs the dream more powerfully than the body's inevitable mortality. Thus, the two greatest fears that most people have are (1) loss of personal agency and (2) bodily death. The first implies that we do not really exist as independent individuals, and the second implies that our existence as independent individuals is fleeting, relatively meaningless, and will end too often in pain.

It is no accident, then, that the two main concerns of most religions are moral choice and the immortality of the soul.

The raw material of religion is the stories that people like to tell, and people like to tell stories about heroes who, exercising their free will, navigated extremely difficult moral dilemmas. And they like to tell stories about the wonderful adventures of the soul before its birth in a body or after the body's death. And they even like to tell a few stories that might wake a person up from the dream of personhood.

2. You Cannot Find the Chooser

If the moon, in the act of completing its eternal way around the earth, were gifted with self-consciousness, it would feel thoroughly convinced that it was traveling its way of its own accord on the strength of a resolution taken once and for all. . . . [¶] . . . If one thinks out to the very last consequence what one exactly knows and understands, there will be hardly any human being who will be impervious to this view, provided his self-love does not ruffle up against it. Man defends himself from being regarded as an impotent object in the course of the Universe. But should the lawfulness of events, such as unveils itself more or less clearly in inorganic nature, cease to function in front of the activities in our brain?⁵

— Albert Einstein (1879–1955 c.e.)

The reader, when confronted by Spinoza's deterministic view of the universe, might immediately object, as did the mathematician Ehrenfried Walther von Tschirnhaus (1651–1708 c.e.), that one has the daily experience of making choices — exercising one's absolute freedom, that is

⁵ Einstein, Albert, "About Free Will," in Chatterjee, Ramananda (ed.), *The Golden Book of Tagore: A Homage to Rabindranath Tagore from India and the World in Celebration of His Seventieth Birthday* (The Golden Book Committee 1931), pp. 11–12.

— and that this direct experience suffices to disprove determinism. "For who," Tschirnhaus asked, "would deny, except by contradicting his own consciousness, that I can think, in my thoughts, that [now] I want to write, and that [now] I do not want to write[?]" (Letter 58 [IV/267/5–15].) But Spinoza responded that this feeling of exercising one's absolute freedom is merely an illusion. Surely, when one is making a choice, there exists some physical brain-event corresponding to the thought one is having, and if so, then a very expert neuroscientist could, at least in theory, trace the physical causes of that brain-event, and those physical causes would be wholly sufficient to explain why the event occurred and, therefore, why the corresponding thought occurred. There is, then, no need for an individual soul that has absolute free choice. The physical brain, operating according to immutable laws of physics, is perfectly capable of doing all the choosing by itself. Moreover, in a physical system that is causally complete and closed, each event occurring of necessity based on all the events that precede it, there is simply no wiggle room — no non-inevitability — that allows for the exercise of absolute freedom.

And quantum physics offers no solution to the puzzle because quantum physics is fully constrained by fixed probabilities. Therefore, it, too, leaves no room for the exercise of absolute freedom. Hence, according to Spinoza, Tschirnhaus's experience of exercising his so-called freedom — now choosing to write, now choosing not to write — proves nothing more than "that the mind is [not] always equally capable of thinking of the same object." (Letter 58 [IV/267/20–25]; see also *Ethics*, IIP2, Schol.)

So, let's stop and consider: What if Spinoza is correct? What if the laws of physics really are making all the choices one imagines oneself to be making? What if all the deliberations that go into a decisionmaking process have a physical substratum and are physically determined? What if one is merely the knower of the decisionmaking process, not its decider? It certainly *feels as if* one is choosing, but the decision is an inevitable and necessary consequence of all that precedes it, or, perhaps, a fixed probability based on all that precedes it. Yes, one faces a choice, and yes, one makes the decision, but only in a mechanistic sense, for every step in the decisionmaking process is governed by physical laws.

An anecdote about Albert Einstein illustrates this point.⁶ Einstein was once seen on Nassau Street in Princeton, looking pensive as he waited to cross the street. A student asked him, "Prof. Einstein, what are you contemplating?" The student supposed that the famous scientist was struggling with some difficult question of theoretical physics, but Einstein gestured across the street to the popular Baltimore Dairy Lunch and said with a twinkle in his eye, "Whether to have chocolate or vanilla."

So, let us imagine, as a thought experiment, that you, the reader, are contemplating a binary decision — perhaps, whether to have chocolate or vanilla ice cream at "The Balt" in Princeton, New Jersey, in 1950. Imagine further that the desirability of both options is more or less equal in your estimation, and therefore the choice between the two is not an obvious

one. You contemplate the chocolate; then you contemplate the vanilla. Perhaps you even imagine the experience of each based on memories of past visits to The Balt. And then a thought appears in your mind: Chocolate. You step forward to the counter and say, "I'll have a scoop of the chocolate, please," and you think to yourself, "I *chose* the chocolate."

But you didn't choose anything, except in a mechanistic sense, for with what meta-mind did you choose which thought would enter your mind as you chose which ice cream to order? And if there is such a meta-mind, with what meta-meta-mind did you choose *its* thoughts? And the question can be asked *ad infinitum*. What actually happened when you chose the chocolate is that you were conscious of two options, and then you were conscious of a selection that took the form of a strong thought in favor of one of the two options, and then you asserted ownership of that selection, declaring mentally that you had chosen the chocolate, after which you were conscious of, and reveled in, a sense of personal agency. But if the vanilla-thought had come instead of the chocolate-thought, then vanilla would have been your choice, and then you would have said about *that* choice that you had chosen the vanilla, and again you would have reveled in a sense of personal agency.

And that is the point Spinoza made in his letter responding to Tschirnhaus:

But let's examine created things, which are all determined by external causes to exist and to produce effects in a definite and determinate way. To clearly understand this, let's conceive something very simple. Suppose a stone receives, from an external cause which strikes against it, a certain quantity of motion, by which

⁶ This story was related to the present author by his father, who was a student at Princeton in the mid-1950s. It was circulating on campus at the time.

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.

Next, conceive now, if you will, that while the stone continues to move, it thinks, and knows that as far as it can, it strives to continue moving. Of course, since the stone is conscious only of its striving, and not at all indifferent, it will believe that it is very free, and that it perseveres in motion for no other cause than because it wills to. *This is that famous human freedom everyone brags of having, which consists only in this: that men are conscious of their appetite and ignorant of the causes by which they are determined.* So the infant believes that he freely wants the milk; the angry boy that he wants vengeance; and the timid, flight. . . .

. . . For though experience teaches quite abundantly that there is nothing less in man's power than to restrain his appetites, and that often, when men are torn by contrary affects, they see the better and follow the worse, they still believe themselves to be free (Letter 58 [IV/266], italics added.)

What Spinoza is explaining in this letter is that the laws of physics are the actual causes of all our choices, but our ignorance

of the precise cause-and-effect sequence that underlies those choices leads us to believe (wrongly) that we are making "free" (i.e., indeterministic) choices.

Spinoza makes the same point more formally in the *Ethics*. He writes:

[People] are deceived in that they think themselves free, an opinion which consists only in this, that they are conscious of their actions and ignorant of the causes by which they are determined. This, then, is their idea of freedom — that they do not know any cause of their actions. (*Ethics*, IIP35, Schol.; see *id.*, IP33, Schol. 1.)

And as mentioned, the same determinism can be found in the literature of Vedānta. The *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* explains that our actions give rise to our character and desires, and our character and desires give rise to our actions, in an ongoing cause-and-effect cycle that is fully sufficient to explain human behavior. Specifically, the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* states:

According as one acts, according as one conducts himself, so does he become. The doer of good becomes good. The doer of evil becomes evil. One becomes virtuous by virtuous action, bad by bad action. [९] . . . [And] as is his desire, such is his resolve; as is his resolve, such the action he performs; what action (*karma*) he performs, that he procures for himself.⁷

7 *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 4.4.5, translated in Hume, Robert Ernest, *The Thirteen Principal Upanishads: Translated from the Sanskrit, with an Outline of the Philosophy of the Upanishads and an Annotated Bibliography* (Oxford Univ. Press 1921), p. 140. See also *Kena Upaniṣad* 1.1, Hume, p. 335 ["By whom impelled soars forth the mind projected?"].

Thus, it is the flow of cause and effect, and the accumulated force of one's resulting habits, not absolute free will, that governs our character and hence our actions. Likewise, the *Kauṣītaki Upaniṣad* says:

This one [(i.e., God)], truly, indeed, causes him whom he wishes to lead up from these worlds, to perform good action. This one, also, indeed, causes him whom he wishes to lead downward, to perform bad action.⁸

Similarly, in the *Bhagavad Gītā*, we read:

None indeed, even for a moment, remains without doing [actions]. All, being dependent, are made to [act] by the constituents of *Prakṛti* [(i.e., by the natural forces)].

[Actions] are being done in all ways by the constituents of *Prakṛti* [(i.e., by the natural forces)]. He whose mind is deluded by egoism thinks, “I am the agent.”

Even a man of knowledge behaves according to his nature. All living beings conform to nature. What can repression avail?⁹

These verses from the *Bhagavad Gītā* are so similar to what Spinoza says about human behavior that it merits quoting Spinoza here:

But these turmoils [of current events] move me, neither to laughter nor even to tears, but to philosophizing and to observing human nature better. For I do

⁸ *Kauṣītaki Upaniṣad* 3.8.33–34, translated in Hume, *The Thirteen Principal Upanishads*, p. 328.

⁹ *Bhagavad Gītā* 3:5, 3:27, and 3:33, translated in Warrior, A.G. Krishna, *Srīmad Bhagavad Gītā Bhāṣya of Sri Saṁkarācārya, With Text in Devanagiri & English Rendering, and Index of First Lines of Verses* (Sri Ramakrishna Math, 3d impression, 1983), pp. 106, 121, 125.

not think it right for me to mock nature, much less to lament it, when I reflect that men, like all other things, are only a part of nature (Letter 30 [IV/166/10–15].)

Śaṅkara, not surprisingly, holds a similar view regarding the strict determinism implied by the laws of nature. In his commentary on the last of the three *Bhagavad Gītā* verses quoted above, Śaṅkara says:

[The reference to] “nature” means impressions of work, righteous and unrighteous, done already, which manifest themselves in the present life or later. According to that nature, every living being — even one who has knowledge — behaves; let alone the foolish. Therefore all living beings conform to nature.¹⁰

And the way out of this inevitable “conform[ity] to nature” is not to deny determinism but rather to change one's sense of self. Śaṅkara says:

Indeed it is the ignorant who mistake for selves “the fruit and its cause” [(i.e., the deterministic sequence of cause and effect)], which are non-selves; the enlightened never do so. Perceiving the otherness of the Self from “the fruit and its cause,” it is inconsistent for the enlightened to mistake the latter for the real Self.¹¹

And Śaṅkara makes a similar point in his *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi*. Equating determinism with the physical body, he says:

The body of one who is liberated moves here and there, [compelled] by

¹⁰ *Bhagavadgītābhāṣya* III, 33.1, translated in Warrior, *Srīmad Bhagavad Gītā Bhāṣya of Sri Saṁkarācārya*, p. 125.

¹¹ *Bhagavadgītābhāṣya* XIII, 2.11, translated in Warrior, *Srīmad Bhagavad Gītā Bhāṣya of Sri Saṁkarācārya*, p. 412.

the vital airs, just as the slough of a snake [is blown about by the wind].

Just as a piece of wood is tossed by the current to high or low ground, so too a body is carried here and there by destiny as determined by the momentum of its past actions.¹²

We find a similar deterministic model of the universe in the texts of *Pratyabhijñā* Shaivism, which describe choice as a mechanistic process that we erroneously take to be an exercise of absolute free will. A passage from Kṣemarāja's *Spanda-Nirṇaya* speaks of the "senses," a technical term that does not refer merely to the five senses of perception (the *tanmātras*) and their corresponding sense organs (the *jñānendriyas*), but also to the *organs of action* by which we engage the world through the senses (the *karmendriyas*). Kṣemarāja says:

[T]hat [divine] *Spanda* principle not only moves the senses [(*karaṇāni*; lit.: "instruments of action")] but rather by infusing consciousness into the supposed experiencer makes him capable of effecting the movement, etc. of the senses by virtue of which he is full of the erroneous conception, "I am directing the senses." He himself is nothing without the infusion of the [divine] *Spanda* principle into him. Therefore, it is perfectly right to say that one should examine that principle which provides consciousness to both the senses and the perceiver by the impenetration of the forth-going rays of its own light. [¶] If it is maintained that one directs the senses by an internal sense which uses a goad called

desire, then that sense called desire, being itself of the nature of the directed, would require another sense for setting it in motion, and that in its turn would require another, and so on. Thus there would be a *regressus ad infinitum*.¹³

This text is difficult, but Kṣemarāja is saying that we do not actually choose our desires or our actions; rather, we are caused to desire and to act, and then, after witnessing the desire and the action, we imagine that we have made the choice so to desire and so to act. And that, of course, is exactly what Spinoza explained in his letter answering Tschirnhaus's doubt.

All these passages, in different ways, deny the reality of the individual soul's subjective sense of absolute freedom. But the quotation from Kṣemarāja's *Spanda-Nirṇaya* also points out the impossibility of searching within oneself and finding the chooser. As Kṣemarāja explains, if one maintains that there is a special faculty by which one forms the desire that goads one's senses and one's actions, then with what special faculty does one form the desire that goads one's desire? In other words, one has merely rephrased the problem, not answered it. And if one cannot find the chooser, then one cannot find an individual soul that has absolute freedom, and if one cannot find an individual soul that has absolute freedom, then one cannot find a soul that resembles the soul of Cartesian dualism.

The Buddhists call that experience "emptiness" (*śūnyatā*), and whether one is a physicist or a Buddhist (or both), emp-

12 *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi* 549–550 (GRETIL), translated in Grimes, John, *The Vivekacūḍāmaṇi of Śaṅkarācārya Bhagavatpāda: An Introduction and Translation* (Ashgate 2004), p. 265 (Samata edition, vv. 550–551).

13 *Spanda-Nirṇaya*, com. to *Spandakārikā*, verse 1.8 (KSTS, vol. 42, p. 22), translated in Singh, Jaideva (ed. and transl.), *The Yoga of Vibration and Divine Pulsation: A Translation of the Spanda Kārikās with Kṣemarāja's Commentary, the Spanda Nirṇaya* (SUNY Press 1992), p. 59.

teness can be an unsettling realization, for if “non-self” (*anātman*) is true, then what remains of a person?¹⁴ You don’t get to write the script; you don’t even get to pick the show; but you get a front row seat in the theater, and the story is guaranteed to be a good one.

3. What Does It Mean To Be Free?

I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, . . . then it is no longer I that do it, but sin which dwells within me. . . . I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, [then, again,] it is no longer I that do it, but sin which dwells within me. . . . For I delight in the law of God, in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin which dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?

— The New Testament, Rom 7:15–24 (RSV)

Poor Paul. Consider the foregoing passage from Paul’s famous letter to the church in Rome. Paul has split himself in two by deciding he does not like some of the things that inevitably occur in God’s deterministic world. And because it is all God’s world and because Paul has decided he likes only part of that world, Paul must be devoted to a made-up god of his imag-

14 The Buddhist concepts of “emptiness” (*śūnyatā*) and “non-self” (*anātman*) are considerably more complex than described here. The precise usage of these terms in Buddhism is beyond the subject matter of this article.

ination, not the God that actually is. And it is no answer to blame the devil for Paul’s “sin,” for either the devil is a second god in competition with God, in which case God is not truly God (i.e., one without a second and free from all external constraint), or the devil is only doing God’s bidding, in which case it is all God’s marvelous show, and Paul has decided he hates part of God’s show, calling it evil and wretched. Poor Paul.¹⁵

Paul’s all-too-familiar dilemma leads us to ask, What does it really mean to be free? There is, of course, the freedom *to gratify* one’s passions, but if we think “freedom” means a sort of libertarian (libertine?) “freedom to indulge,” we are in grave error. The freedom to indulge implies only the absence of artificial constraints such as those imposed by parents, community, or government, but it doesn’t imply absolute freedom. Quite the contrary. A person who indulges passions lives under the sovereignty of those passions. Far from being free, such a person is tossed this way and that by external influences, rarely expressing his or her own essential nature. Thus, the person has only substituted one form of external control (parents, community, or government) for another (the objects of

15 On Paul having split himself in two, see Freud, Sigmund, “Instincts and Their Vicissitudes,” in Strachey, James (ed. and transl.), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XIV* (Hogarth Press, reprint 1955), p. 136 [“In so far as the objects which are presented to [the ego] are sources of pleasure, [the ego] takes them into itself . . . ; and, on the other hand, it expels whatever within itself becomes a cause of unpleasure . . . ”]. The present article does not attempt to explicate the theology of Paul’s letter to the Roman church, which is one of the greatest and most theologically rich texts of the ancient world. Paul may eventually have arrived at an understanding not unlike that proposed herein. See, e.g., Rom 3:20, 8:1.

passionate desire). But as we shall presently see, the freedom *from* one's passions also does not imply that a person has absolute freedom.

Suppose a free being freely chooses what is good. Is that freedom? One would think so. But if this free being freely chooses good, then, assuming this being is not acting based on mere random chance, it must be good by nature because, being free, its choice of good cannot have been compelled by something outside itself. And if this free being is good by nature, then it has always done good, it is now doing good, and it will always do good. In other words, this being is bound fast — by reason of its inner essential nature — to doing good. In what sense is that freedom? How, after all, can we speak of an actual capacity to do evil if, due to an immutable and binding predisposition, evil can never be done?

Perhaps, therefore, we need to reassess what it means to be free, focusing on *relative* freedom instead of *absolute* freedom. Relative freedom is not one's imagined freedom to choose any course of action at any moment; rather, it is the freedom to express one's inner essential nature unimpeded by external influences. Relative freedom, in other words, is the freedom to be the sole cause of an action rather than its concurrent cause; it is the freedom to have one's actions arise from who or what one is, not from some external compulsion. Of course, a person is a finite being, and a finite being is never completely independent of external influences, so this relative freedom is necessarily a matter of degree. Moreover, this relative freedom waxes and wanes as circumstances change. One can certainly increase it by striving to do so, but sometimes to no avail, as Paul's dilem-

ma makes clear. And even if one's actions arise from who or what one is, they are no less deterministic for that fact. Thus, this relative freedom is fully compatible with determinism, and for that reason reliance on it as a vindication of human freedom is called "compatibilism." The same doctrine is also sometimes called "soft determinism." It is "determinism" because everything that one does is governed by immutable laws of physics, and one does it by absolute necessity, compelled to act by one's own essential nature. It is "soft" because it involves a limited sort of free will. One's "will" (i.e., one's innate striving to express one's essential nature) is, to a limited extent, "free" (i.e., not overcome by external compulsion). One is not a puppet dangling from the strings of external circumstances, forced to dance to their tune. One is rule-bound and controlled, but for at least a short time, one is controlled from within, not from without.¹⁶

Some people reject this limited definition of freedom. They want their free actions to be something they somehow make up on the spot, out of nothing, an uncaused cause rather than a deterministic expression of an inner essential nature. But it is not clear why they prefer the former to the latter. In the former case, one's freedom is a spontaneous new creation, expressing nothing other than the whim of the moment. In the latter case, one's freedom is an opportunity for self-expression, and hence the person who strives to ease suffering or to promote justice reveals thereby his or her innate goodness. Is it somehow preferable to live in a world in which at any moment a good person might — by reason of being free in the

¹⁶ On this distinction, see Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book III, section 1.

absolute sense — do something hurtful and cruel? It doesn't seem so, and yet that is implied if one's "freedom" is not deterministically grounded in one's essential nature.

But all this implies that the freedom we so much desire is not absolute freedom (i.e., the freedom to choose any course of action at any moment); rather, it is the freedom to express our own essential nature. As Spinoza explains,

we neither strive for, nor will, neither want, nor desire anything because [by the exercise of absolute freedom] we judge it to be good; on the contrary, we judge something to be good because [due to our essential nature] we strive for it, will it, want it, and desire it. (*Ethics*, IIP9, Schol.)

And because we desire this freedom to act solely based on who or what we are in our essential nature, we also desire that our reasoning powers should prevail over our unreasoned bodily impulses, for the latter are strongly affected by external stimuli, and the former, which depend instead on the underlying logic of the universe, reveal to us what is true. Hence, Paul's indictment of his body: "I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind Who will deliver me from this body of death?" (Rom 7:23–24.)

Paul, who very much wanted to do good, complains that he finds himself instead doing the "sin" that he "hates." But because Paul cannot control his bodily impulses, he concludes that it is not *he* who does the sin, but the *sin* that dwells in him. In Paul's view, his reasoning powers were proof of his connection to God (and to immortality), and by contrast, he saw his bodily impulses as a sort of imprison-

ment, explicitly associating "sin" with the mortality of his flesh.

But if Paul was incapable of resisting the impulse to do the thing he had reasoned not to do, then, as he says, it was not *he* that did it (in the sense of an individual soul having absolute free will). Rather, it was the forces of nature acting upon him. And the converse, too, is true. If Paul could sometimes resist the thing he had reasoned not to do, then in that moment, the forces of nature permitted Paul's essential nature to express itself. Paul rightfully strove to resist the things he had reasoned not to do, but regardless of whether or not he succeeded, it was all nothing but God's marvelous show.

So, at last, we are equipped to answer the question we asked at the outset of this section. Suppose a free being freely chooses what is good. This free being — which is good by nature — has always done good, is now doing good, and will always do good. This being is bound fast — by reason of its good nature — to doing good. Is that freedom? Yes, that is freedom. But it is not *absolute* freedom; it is not freedom in the sense of being something that is unconstrained and indeterministic. Rather, it is the freedom to express one's essential nature unimpeded, and that is the only freedom anyone should ever desire.

4. Effortless Effort

As for what [your friend] has maintained next: *that if we were compelled by external causes, no one could acquire the habit of virtue*, I don't know who has told him that it can't happen from a fatal necessity, but only from a free decision of the Mind, that we should have a firm and constant disposition.¹⁷

— Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677 c.e.)

¹⁷ Letter 58 [IV/267/30–35].

“But wait a minute!” you might object. “If absolute freedom is an illusion, then why should I struggle to fulfill my duties and my moral obligations? If everything is determined by the laws of physics and if what I do right now cannot change the future even a bit, then I will spend the day sleeping and the night carousing.” The mistake in that sort of fatalistic thinking is the line “what I do right now cannot change the future even a bit.” Go ahead and sleep all day and carouse all night if your essential nature is so weak and easily overcome by external forces, but you are mistaken if you think that such behavior is somehow implied by determinism. Only a fool’s version of determinism fatalistically imagines that good things will come without effort or that hardship will come despite it. If good is “fated,” then why not effort, too? Determinism does not somehow delete the role of personal effort (striving) in the efficient functioning of the universe. Put in practical terms, it is very often the case that, in the fullness of time, the people who have pleasant things happen to them are *not* the same people who “spend the day sleeping and the night carousing.” Rather, they are the people whose essential nature is so strong that they cannot help but strive in every moment, regardless of short-term results. Determinism asserts that everything is fixed by the law of cause-and-effect, but what one does right now is an integral part of that cause-and-effect sequence, and therefore what one does right now is the measure of one’s future experience.¹⁸

18 See, e.g., *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 4.4.5 [discussing the law of *karma*]; *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi* 549–550 [same]. Consider also that one of the core teachings of the *Bhagavad Gītā* is to unite action (effort, striving) with surrender of the results of action (determinism). See *Bhagavad Gītā* 3:7–9,

People tend to think that determinism means fatalism and that free will (in the absolute sense) is necessary to make a person hardworking, self-restrained, and morally upright. And therefore, you would need to look long and hard to find a moral theologian who preaches determinism to a general audience. Rather, moral theologians generally assert that one has the freedom to choose any course of action at any moment and that one should exercise one’s God-given agency by choosing what is noble and rejecting what is harmful. For as the moral theologian knows, such teachings strongly motivate people, especially people who are immersed in Cartesian dualism, imagining themselves to be souls piloting bodies.

But a wise philosopher knows that there is no shortage of personal effort in a deterministic universe, especially when we consider those people who achieve great things. Hence, Vedānta, *Pratyabhijñā* Shaivism, and Spinoza all teach that one should embrace effort but renounce personal *ownership* of that effort. A fool, by contrast, renounces the effort itself and bemoans the practical difficulties that follow.

But what does it mean to renounce personal *ownership* of effort? Ramana Maharshi was once asked by a seeker, “Are only important events in a man’s life, such as his main occupation or profession, predetermined, or are trifling acts in his life, such as taking a cup of water or moving from one place in the room to another, also predetermined?”

“Yes, *everything* is predetermined,” responded the famous South Indian sage.

“Then . . . what free will has man?” queried the incredulous seeker.

13, 19–30; 4:14–23, 41; 5:7–14; 18:2–12, 23, 26, 49.

“What for . . . does the body come into existence?” Ramana asked rhetorically, and he then taught the same non-identification with the body that we earlier encountered in Śaṅkara’s commentary on the *Bhagavad Gītā*. Ramana said:

[The body] is designed for doing the various things marked out for execution in this life. The whole programme is chalked out. . . . *As for freedom for man, he is always free not to identify himself with the body and not to be affected by the pleasures or pains consequent on the body’s activities.*¹⁹

In other words, the body must perform various actions and make various efforts, but by calling such actions and efforts “*my action*” and “*my effort*,” a person steps out of universal nondual consciousness and reinforces the “You are here” arrow that empiricism has placed at the center of his or her world map. A passage from Kṣemarāja’s *Spanda-Nirṇaya* expresses a similar principle, using the name Śaṅkara to refer to Śiva (i.e., God), or the universal nondual consciousness:

Śaṅkara is one who does *śam*. By *śam* is meant the grace which consists in enabling the aspirant to recognize the vast expanse of His (Śiva’s) Consciousness, which is non-dualistic and is the Highest Bliss inasmuch as it calms the heat of all the afflictions. Such Śaṅkara, who is our own essential nature, do we laud. Here, the sense of [the term] “lauding” is that, by considering Him as excelling the entire cosmos, we enter into His being by obliterating the state of assumed agency [(*pramātr*; lit.: “the agent of knowing”)].²⁰

19 Mudaliar, *Day by Day with Bhagavan*, pp. 91–92, italics added.

20 *Spanda-Nirṇaya*, com. to *Spandakārikā*, verse

In this passage, Kṣemarāja is saying that by renouncing one’s false sense of agency, one realizes one’s true identity with something much greater, to wit, the universal nondual consciousness. But Kṣemarāja also describes this state as “Highest Bliss,” making clear that when the idea of “*my action*” and “*my effort*” dissolves, “the heat of all the afflictions” dissolves with it.

That, then, is what it means to renounce personal ownership of effort. One renounces the idea of being a *person who makes* the effort. Consider the case of an athlete who, after intently pursuing victory on the playing field, notices an abrasion on the leg but is unable to recall when or how it occurred. The injury caused pain, no doubt, but the athlete did not accept ownership of the pain; instead, the athlete’s mind was directed elsewhere, and the pain was never recorded into memory. In like manner, a wise philosopher renounces ownership of effort, doing so by refusing to record the effort into a remembered narrative about a person who suffered that effort.

Everything that occurs in this world is governed by physical laws, but when those laws of physics brought you, the reader of this article, into the world, did those laws create a weak-natured fool who would cease all effort upon learning that, for finite human beings, absolute freedom is an illusion? Unlikely. Therefore, if you feel some internal resistance to effort, you should ask yourself, *Who* is resisting? Vedānta, *Pratyabhijñā* Shaivism, and Spinoza all teach that it is your false self that is resisting, the self that thinks it has absolute free will, the self that keeps a careful tally of merits and injustices, the self that clings

1.1 (KSTS, vol. 42, p. 3), translated in Singh, *The Yoga of Vibration*, p. 9.

to a constructed narrative. Why pay that false self any attention if it is just a concept? Why give it power over you? There is no resistance to the effort required to indulge a pleasure, as the example of the athlete on the playing field shows. Therefore, resistance to effort is merely a matter of having rejected some part of God's perfect world. For you, that resistance is mere static that needs to be tuned out in favor of expressing your essential nature in every moment.

Here, it must be stressed that if one is going to function effectively in the world, allowing optimal decisions to unfold, one must always indulge the *feeling* that one is exercising one's power of free choice, including any feeling of effort that goes along with it. In other words, even after recognizing that, for finite human beings, absolute freedom is an illusion, one must play along as if it were real, for we evolved as entities that imagined themselves to have that freedom, and we operate best based on that self-conception. Indeed, what we experience as the exercise of reasoned choice is none other than the striving of our own essential nature to express itself, and the stronger our essential nature happens to be, the more we will have that experience. Therefore, the only practical difference between a person who knows the truth and a person who does not is that the former makes choices *as if* absolute freedom were a reality, whereas the latter makes choices *believing* absolute freedom to be a reality. But that difference is a meaningful one, for a person gains great peace of mind when the endless stream of regrets associated with "should have," "would have," and "could have" lose their sting.

So, let the moral theologians preach about the freedom to choose any course

of action at any moment, and let them beseech their listeners to exercise their freedom of choice in favor of industriousness, self-restraint, and moral rectitude. Such teachings are suitable for the general congregation. But for you, the thoughtful philosopher, the realization that absolute freedom is an illusion does not cause you to cease your effort to promote the moral good in every moment. Rather, it spurs you to greater effort because, for you, effort is effortless, and moral good is the gentle path.

5. Punishment

As for what [your friend] adds next: *that if we affirmed [determinism], all wickedness would be [morally] excusable*, what of it? For evil men are no less to be feared, nor are they any less harmful, when they are necessarily evil.²¹

— Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677 c.e.)

Perhaps the primary reason we cling to the dogma of absolute free will is to justify reward for those who comply with society's precepts and punishment for those who don't. Is it fair, after all, for society to impose punishment on a violent felon if the felon had no control over the course of events that resulted in his or her criminal behavior? We have all experienced moments when, in the throes of hot passion or the flights of misguided deliberation, we did something we later wished we had not done. If, however, we go over the event in our mind, we recognize that in the moment of acting, we were absolutely convinced that the action was correct, and we could not, therefore, have acted in any other way. And if that is true for us, who are very thoughtful and law abiding by nature, is it not equally true for the rapist and the murderer? Wasn't he, too, acting under

²¹ Letter 58 [IV/268/1–5].

the influence of an irresistible impulse or a wrong-headed conviction? We all know he *was*, for why else would he have done what he did? But how then can we justify his imprisonment or execution? We do so, very often, by invoking the dogma that he had freedom of choice, and therefore he can be held morally responsible for his conduct.

In considering the problem of punishment in a deterministic universe, our earlier discussion of Paul's letter to the Romans is particularly relevant because there we saw that to be "free" in the relative sense means to have one's thoughts and actions determined from within (by one's own essential nature), not from without (by external influences). Consider, for example, the statement, "John is good." The speaker probably doesn't mean that John's actions are all randomly generated and that, by rare chance, they all happen to be good. If that were the intention underlying the statement, then John's very next action would be no more likely to be good than a rolled pair of dice is likely to come up boxcars. What the speaker is saying, therefore, is that John's *essential nature* — the inner something that governs his actions when he is acting autonomously — is good. And if that is so, then the speaker must admit that it is not John's absolute freedom that empowers John to be good; rather, it is the way John is constructed at the core of his being that does so. In other words, our ability to evaluate a person's moral character implies that there is something essential in a person that governs behavior when external influences are absent, which, in turn, implies soft determinism (i.e., compatibilism), not absolute freedom.²²

²² By the phrase "essential nature," I do not mean a person's usual character, thus excusing people who commit terrible crimes that are "out

And, of course, the word "good" in the statement "John is good" is not significant to the foregoing analysis; the adjective could just as well be "reliable," "steadfast," "kind," "moral," or any of their opposites. Whatever the adjective used, the speaker is saying that something about John's essential nature has caused his behavior — either something qualitative (i.e., the *character* of his essential nature) or something quantitative (i.e., the *power* of his essential nature). Therefore, one who relies on human freedom as a justification for punishment is faced with a choice: Either (1) human beings have no essential nature that governs their behavior, in which case a person's past actions tell us nothing about his or her future conduct, and punishment serves no purpose; or (2) human beings have an essential nature that governs their behavior, in which case we can legitimately judge a person's future conduct based on his or her past actions, but then we must concede determinism, not absolute free will.

Indeed, absolute free will (i.e., indeterminism) would imply the absence of any governing principle directing a person's behavior, in which case the person's choices would all be random and therefore blameless. It seems, then, that *determinism*, not the freedom to choose any course of action at any moment, is what actually justifies punishment. We can justly punish a person because we accept that the person's actions are governed by his or her essential nature, not by mere lottery.

of character" for the person. Rather, by "essential nature," I mean only that the person has some internal disposition that determines his or her "free" choices, and thus that the person is never actually free in the absolute sense. See Moore, Michael S., "Choice, Character, and Excuse," in *Social Philosophy and Policy*, vol. 7, issue 2 (1990), pp. 43–44, 53.

Therefore, what is relevant for purposes of punishment is not whether a person's wrongful act was devoid of deterministic causes; rather, what is relevant is whether, at the moment of acting, the person had "both the capacity and the opportunity to exercise the practical reasoning that is distinctive of his personhood,"²³ meaning that the person's act revealed something about his or her essential nature. As we have already explained, the freedom to express one's essential nature unimpeded by external influences is fully compatible with determinism; it is the label we give to determinism when actions are determined from within, not from without. But the latter distinction is an important one. Spinoza used the phrase "power of acting" to refer to the measure of a thing's ability to be the sole cause of an event rather than its concurrent cause, and Spinoza further argued that an increase in this "power of acting" — this ability to self-actualize — is the key to true happiness, salvation, and blessedness. (*Ethics*, IID2; IIP11, with Schol; VP36, Schol.; and VP42, Dem.) In other words, human autonomy, although never absolute, is an important value that is not contradicted by determinism, and allocating criminal responsibility to those who, with the capacity and opportunity

23 See Moore, Michael S., "Causation and the Excuses," in *California Law Review*, vol. 73 (1985), pp. 1132–1137, 1148–1149. See also Hart, Herbert L.A., *Punishment and Responsibility: Essays in the Philosophy of Law* (Clarendon Press 1968), pp. 152–153. Of course, "the capacity and the opportunity [for] practical reasoning" does not mean "the capacity and the opportunity [for] flawless reasoning," since flawless reasoning is incompatible with wrongdoing. Rather, the consideration of the person's "capacity" for "practical reasoning" is meant to address special cases such as children, the cognitively disabled, and those who do wrongful acts based on hallucinations, delusions, or similar mental aberrations.

for practical reasoning, choose to commit crimes recognizes and serves the autonomy interests of both the criminal and the noncriminal — autonomy interests that are denied in a system that exonerates the criminal by ascribing all human behavior to social and environmental factors.²⁴

That said, society only has an interest in controlling antisocial behavior at its real source. A person acting under provocation or duress is obviously not the sole or even the primary author of his or her actions. And it may be that most wrongdoers act under the influence of external forces, some immediate (such as provocation or duress) and others more remote (such as upbringing or community).²⁵ Some people are unusually weak natured, easily swayed by bad company or the pull of destructive habits. Others have been the victims of widespread injustice and therefore have no social obligation. And still others are misinformed, and that misinformation may have hardened into a false conviction or a deep-seated distrust, distorting the person's judgment and influencing his or her behavior. Indeed, Spinoza went so far as to argue that *all* wrongdoers act under

24 See Pillsbury, Samuel H., "The Meaning of Deserved Punishment: An Essay on Choice, Character, and Responsibility," in *Indiana Law Journal*, vol. 67, issue 3 (1992), esp. pp. 735, 752; Weinreb, Lloyd L., "Desert, Punishment, and Criminal Responsibility," in *Law and Contemporary Problems*, vol. 49, no. 3 (1986), pp. 73–80; Moore, "Causation and the Excuses," pp. 1148–1149; Morris, Herbert, "Persons and Punishment," in *The Monist*, vol. 52, no. 4 (Oct. 1968), pp. 475–501; Hart, *Punishment and Responsibility*, pp. 181–183.

25 See Delgado, Richard, "'Rotten Social Background': Should the Criminal Law Recognize a Defense of Severe Environmental Deprivation?," in *Law and Inequality*, vol. 3 (1985), pp. 9–90; Kadish, Sanford, "Excusing Crime," in *California Law Review*, vol. 75 (1987), pp. 257–289.

the influence of external forces. In his view, a perfectly free person — that is, a person whose own essential nature is the sole cause of his or her actions (see *Ethics*, ID7) — will always act based on reason and virtue (see *id.*, IIP3, IVD8, IVP18, Schol., IVP24, IVP66, Schol., and IVP72, Dem.), although no finite being can be perfectly free in that sense. Thus, for Spinoza, all wrongdoing is attributable to weakness rather than to some inherent evil quality of a person's nature. In many cases, the external forces that influence a wrongdoer may be viewed as too remote to constitute a legal excuse for the person's actions, and some form of punishment may be justified (see *Ethics*, IVP51, Schol.), but it may also be that punishment supplemented by other remedies (including a commitment to social reform) would better serve society's valid interest in preserving the peace and promoting the common good, while fairly distributing the benefits and burdens of collaborative living.

6. Theodicy

Indeed, they seem to conceive man in nature as a dominion within a dominion. For they believe that man . . . has absolute power over his actions, and that he is determined only by himself. And they attribute the cause of human impotence, not to the common power of nature, but to I know not what vice of human nature, which they therefore bewail, or laugh at, or disdain, or (as usually happens) curse. . . .

. . . .

But . . . nothing happens in nature which can be attributed to any defect in it, for nature is always the same, and its virtue and power of acting are everywhere one and the same, i.e., the laws and rules of nature, according to which

all things happen, and change from one form to another, are always and everywhere the same. . . .²⁶

— Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677 c.e.)

In Spinoza's assessment, God didn't create a universe that has any evil in it at all. But people nevertheless imagine evil, projecting their human conception of what ought to be upon the events they witness, and then — like modern-day versions of the prophet Job — they puzzle about evil, and they question God. Why, they ask, is there evil if God is all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-good? Why are there Holocausts? Why earthquakes? Why epidemic diseases? Why wars?

It does not seem to occur to such people that their god is as much a human invention as the good and evil they assign to the events they are witnessing. They fashion a mental idol that shares their human measure of what is good, and then, because many things in the world fall short of that measure, they begin to doubt the idol they have fashioned. And, finally, they invent a second idol, at war with their beloved first idol, and they blame the second idol for everything they dislike, reassuring themselves that, in the end, the first idol will prevail over the second idol. But Spinoza saw the matter differently. He argued that, however we might legitimately define good for purposes of regulating human society and fostering human happiness (see, e.g., *Ethics*, IVP18, Schol.), the only valid measure of good for purposes of judging God's creation is what actually is.²⁷

Many things are evil relative to human beings, and as human beings, we can and should fight against such things. But

²⁶ *Ethics*, III, Preface.

²⁷ See Babylonian Talmud, *Menachot* 29b.

regardless of the outcome of such efforts, the universe remains perfect, for if it is not perfect, then God, its author, is not perfect. Spinoza says it this way:

[T]hings have been produced by God with the highest perfection, since they have followed necessarily from a given most perfect nature. Nor does this convict God of any imperfection, for his perfection compels us to affirm this. Indeed, from the opposite, it would clearly follow . . . that God is not supremely perfect; because if things had been produced by God in another way, we would have to attribute to God another nature, different from that which we have been compelled to attribute to him from the consideration of the most perfect Being. (*Ethics*, IP33, Schol. 2.)

Not surprisingly, the Upanishads, too, deny the existence of anything that is evil in the absolute sense. In the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, for example, we read the following about a “brahmin,” meaning a person who knows “Brahman” (i.e., God): “Evil does not overcome him; he overcomes all evil. Evil does not burn him; he burns all evil. Free from evil, free from impurity, free from doubt, he becomes a brahmin.”²⁸ And in the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*, we read:

Now, the Soul (*Ātman*) is the bridge [or dam], the separation for keeping these worlds apart. Over that bridge [or dam] there cross neither day, nor night, nor old age, nor death, nor sorrow, nor well-doing, nor evil-doing. [¶] All evils turn back therefrom, for that Brahman-world is freed from evil.²⁹

28 *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 4.4.23, translated in Hume, *The Thirteen Principal Upanishads*, p. 144. See also *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 4.3.22.

29 *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 8.4.1–2, translated in Hume, *The Thirteen Principal Upanishads*, p. 265,

Likewise, in the *Taittirīya Upaniṣad*, we read:

Such a one, verily, the thought does not torment: “Why have I not done the good (*sadhu*)? Why have I done the evil (*pāpa*)?” He who knows this, saves (*sprṇute*) himself (*ātmānam*) from these [thoughts]. For truly, from both of these he saves himself — he who knows this! [¶] Such is the mystic doctrine (*upaniṣad*)!³⁰

And finally, in the *Kauṣītaki Upaniṣad*, we read:

There [in the Brahman-world] he shakes off his good deeds and his evil deeds. His dear relatives succeed to the good deeds; those not dear, to the evil deeds. Then, just as one driving a chariot looks down upon the two chariot-wheels, thus he looks down upon day and night, thus upon good deeds and evil deeds, and upon all the pairs of opposites. This one, devoid of good deeds, devoid of evil deeds, a knower of Brahman, unto very Brahman goes on.³¹

[In regard to] he who understands [Brahman] — by no deed whatsoever of his is his world injured, not by stealing, not by killing an embryo, not by the murder of his mother, not by the murder of his father; if he has done any evil (*pāpa*), the dark color departs not from his face.³²

textual emendations by the translator.

30 *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* 2.9, translated in Hume, *The Thirteen Principal Upanishads*, p. 289.

31 *Kauṣītaki Upaniṣad* 1.4 (TITUS), translated in Hume, *The Thirteen Principal Upanishads*, pp. 304–305.

32 *Kauṣītaki Upaniṣad* 3.1 (TITUS), translated in Hume, *The Thirteen Principal Upanishads*, p. 321. See also *Maitrāyaṇīya Upaniṣad* 6.18, Hume, pp. 435 and 436; *Bhagavad Gītā* 4:36, 18:17.

Consistent with these Upanishadic passages, Śāṅkara, too, describes an ultimate state in which the knower of absolute truth transcends moral distinctions.³³ But the practitioners of nondual Kashmiri Shaivism go even further. Moral transcendence, for them, justifies backroom theurgic rituals that transgress religious and social norms. And here, nondual Shaivism becomes a subject of criticism. The point being made by scriptural passages that validate moral transcendence is not that a person can or should act as a self-indulgent libertine or that moral ideals serve no legitimate function. On the contrary, all actions (even hidden ones) have consequences, and moral ideals evolved and are sustained because they regulate human behavior in ways that serve our common interests. Hence, an intelligent person will certainly pursue the moral good. The point being made by these scriptural passages is that one is never alienated from God on account of anything one may have done.

But, one might ask, can the world really be perfect if it has Holocausts, earthquakes, epidemics, and wars? As said, a wise person will certainly seek to avoid such calamities, but a wise person sees no absolute cosmological evil in them. Our sense organs allow us to perceive only a minute fraction of the universe, and we perceive it only by way of a distorted and indistinct representation. How, then, can we judge something to be evil in the absolute sense? Spinoza says:

[W]hatever [a person] thinks is troublesome and evil, and moreover, whatever seems immoral, dreadful, unjust, and dishonorable, arises from the fact that he

³³ See, e.g., *Brahmasūtrabhāṣya* II, 1, 22; II, 3, 48; III, 3, 26–28; *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi* 433, 503, 545.

conceives the things themselves in a way that is disordered, mutilated, and confused. For this reason, [a moral person] strives most of all to conceive things as they are in themselves, and to remove the obstacles to true knowledge, like Hate, Anger, Envy, Mockery, Pride, and the rest (*Ethics*, IVP73, Schol.)

Relative to our human personhood, suffering and death are certainly evil, and we must resist and avoid them, but the fact remains that human bodies die — if not after 20 years, then after 90 or more. Consciousness, however, is eternal.

7. The Perfect Freedom of God

I say that a thing is free if it exists and acts solely from the necessity of its own nature, and [that it is] compelled if it is determined by something else to exist and produce effects in a fixed and determinate way. E.g., even though God exists necessarily, still he exists freely, because he exists from the necessity of his own nature alone. . . . You see, then, that I place freedom not in a free decree, but in a free necessity.

. . . .

Finally, I'd like your friend . . . to tell me how he conceives the human virtue which arises from the free decree of the Mind to be consistent with God's preordination. If he confesses, with Descartes, that he doesn't know how to reconcile these things, then he's trying to launch against me the same weapon which has pierced him.³⁴

— Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677 c.e.)

God created a magnificent universe that is an outward expression of God's own eternal essence. It is constructed in perfect

³⁴ Letter 58 [IV/265/20–30 and IV/268/5–15].

accord with elegant physical laws, and it plays itself out across the time dimension like an ever-turning kaleidoscope, each new configuration necessarily determined by, and every bit as beautiful, as the one that came before. Some people are troubled by that model of the universe. They don't like imagining time to be a fixed landscape, analogous to one of the spatial dimensions. For them, determinism seems to reduce the infinite possibilities associated with free choice to the single possibility associated with the laws of physics. Is not God more powerful than the laws of physics? Thus, determinism seems to constrain God's freedom.

The truth is that most people imagine that they exist at the vanguard of time, creating the future by their free choices. Therefore, the only type of freedom most people can appreciate is the freedom they imagine they have to make decisions about the future as they proceed forward through the time dimension. And if God lacks that freedom, most people believe, then God is not free at all, which calls into doubt God's omnipotence.

Reasoning in this way, most people insist that God must be able to change creation at any moment, making adjustments (large or small) to what the laws of physics would otherwise demand — even parting the Red Sea when necessary. Thus, they place God inside time. They cannot imagine a God that is outside time, the creator of time, existing changelessly throughout all time. Instead, they imagine a god that, like themselves, is an actor on the stage of time.³⁵ Spinoza joked that a circle, if it could

35 Rabbi Moses ben Maimon (the "Rambam") (12th century c.e.) pointed out that because God exists outside time, any interruption of the laws of physics that occurs at a particular point in time must have been created by God outside time. And

if that is so, then that particular interruption of the laws of physics is itself one of the laws of physics. See discussion of Aristotle in Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed* II.29.

speaking, would assert that God is a perfect circle, and likewise human beings imagine God to be a perfect human being. (Letter 56 [IV/260/5–10].) They find themselves to be subject to time, and so they imagine that God, too, must be subject to time. But by placing God inside time, they make time ontologically prior to the god they are worshiping, thus ignoring the God that is the source of time.

At the heart of this error may be the devotee's strong belief in the efficacy of prayer. God's devotee may feel that if God is not an actor on the stage of time, capable of intervening in history at any moment, then prayer is futile. But determinism doesn't make prayer futile any more than it makes effort futile. As explained above, the fact that all things are a deterministic expression of God's eternal essence doesn't somehow negate the role each of us must play in producing favorable outcomes for ourselves, and sometimes that role might include prayer. The essence of prayer is intention, and if thought and matter are the same thing, then intention is as integral to the efficient functioning of the physical universe as fermions and bosons are. Determinism tells us that we live in an orderly world governed by the law of cause-and-effect, but it doesn't tell us that prayer can't be one of the causes producing a particular desired effect. And if, in that situation, we imagine otherwise, deeming prayer to be unnecessary, then we are like a person who fatalistically expects water to boil without lighting the stove. In a deterministic world, tomorrow might bring healing and salvation, but if healing and salvation are ordained for tomorrow, then

if that is so, then that particular interruption of the laws of physics is itself one of the laws of physics. See discussion of Aristotle in Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed* II.29.

why not prayer for today? and why can't the former depend on the latter? According to both *Pratyabhijñā* Shaivism and Spinoza, the human mind is not an insular isolated thing; rather, it participates in many larger systems of thought (minds), and ultimately it participates in a universal system of thought that the teachers of *Pratyabhijñā* Shaivism called "Śiva" and that Spinoza called the "infinite intellect of God." And if that is so, then determinism doesn't prevent the universe from heeding our prayers any more than it prevents a mother from heeding the cries of her child. Thus, our prayers are heard, they are answered, and they are necessary, but they cannot change or affect God even slightly, for they are an *expression* of what God is, not a *determinant* of what God is. And if we think about it, we wouldn't want it to be any other way, for if we could change or affect God with our prayers, then God wouldn't be God (i.e., one without a second and free from all external constraint).

Therefore, one should certainly pray, and likewise one should thank God. If all the vast forces of the universe align in unseen ways to offer guidance and protection, why not feel grateful? and why not express that gratitude? But a wise person will also be grateful for what appears on the surface to be undesirable, for otherwise one's god is a mere creature of one's imagination.

Interestingly, the same people who reject Spinoza's strict necessitarianism, insisting on God's ability to intervene in history, are usually not bothered by imagining God as the creator of the physical universe. But if God can create a *three-dimensional* universe, giving a unique spatial location to each object, without thereby compromising divine freedom

and omnipotence, then certainly God can instead make a *four-dimensional* universe, giving a unique temporal location to each event, without thereby compromising divine freedom and omnipotence. In other words, the ability to make choices in the dimension of time is not the measure of God's freedom. Rather, the measure of God's freedom is the ability to actualize every possibility implied by God's own eternal essence. Spinoza explains:

[N]othing can be or be conceived without God, but . . . all things are in God. So there can be nothing outside him by which he is determined or compelled to act. (*Ethics*, IP17, Dem.)

God alone is a free cause. For God alone exists only from the necessity of his nature, and acts [only] from the necessity of his nature. (*Id.*, IP17, Cor. 2.)

But since the divine nature has absolutely infinite attributes, each of which also expresses an essence infinite in its own kind, from its necessity there must follow infinitely many things in infinite modes (i.e., everything which can fall under an infinite intellect). (*Id.*, IP16, Dem.)

In *Pratyabhijñā* Shaivism, the Sanskrit word *svatantrā* connotes this same understanding of divine freedom, one in which the world is understood to be a free and perfect expression of God's own eternal essence (*citiḥ svatantrā viśvasiddhihetuḥ*).³⁶ As such, God can't be an actor on the stage of time, intervening in history in response to transient human needs, because if God ever needed to intervene to make some adjustment as time unfolded,

36 *Pratyabhijñāhṛdayam*, *sūtra* 1 (KSTS, vol. 3, p. 2), translated in Singh, Jaideva (ed. and transl.), *Pratyabhijñāhṛdayam: The Secret of Self-Recognition* (Motilal Banarsidass 1982), p. 46.

then such an intervention would necessarily imply that God's eternal essence had changed, which is logically nonsensical.

In making this point, I am fully cognizant of the harsh criticism that both Spinoza and Einstein faced for denying that God intervenes in history. As already noted, it is quite natural and psychologically healthy for most religious people to imagine God in anthropomorphic or, at least, anthropopathic terms. For them, God is an all-powerful personal companion and a model of human moral values, acting in ways that an idealized human being would act. That is the only God most people know, and so to deny the existence of that God is tantamount to preaching atheism. Moreover, to do so would be highly destabilizing in present-day society, leading some people to categorically deny moral obligation and others to lose the emotional strength by which they daily face severe hardship. Let me therefore be clear. I do not deny the validity and critical importance of a personal deity. But here we are considering the issue solely from the perspective of science and philosophy. If God is eternal (i.e., outside time), and if the universe freely expresses, in the dimensions of space and time, God's eternal unchanging essence, then the universe needs no temporal interventions from God to make it more God-like, and if somehow it *did* need such interventions, then God's eternal essence would need to have changed, which, as said, is nonsensical.³⁷

37 It is no answer to argue that human free will introduces evil into the world and that God must continuously intervene to counteract human evil, for that theory turns human free will into a second power alongside God, in which case God is not one without a second. It merits noting that Vedānta, too, struggles with the tension between the absolute detachment associated with the God

From this we see that although our prayers might be indispensable prerequisites to the occurrence of certain events, they cannot change or affect God in any way. Rather, God's absolute "freedom" (*svatantrā*) connotes the complete absence of any impediment to or limitation upon God's perfect self-expression,³⁸ a self-expression that includes our prayers as well as their effects. In the *Spanda-Nirṇaya*, Kṣemarāja describes this absolute freedom, using the name Śaṅkara for God:

Of that — i.e., of Śaṅkara — who is a compact mass of Light and Bliss and who is everyone's own being, there is nowhere — i.e., in no space, time, or form — any obstruction — i.e., any impediment — in His free advance, because nothing can veil His nature.³⁹

In the context of this discussion, it is useful to consider the "many worlds" theory of quantum mechanics.⁴⁰ This debated theory proposes that whenever there is entanglement between a quantum system and its environment, every possible outcome of that entanglement actually exists in some version of the world. Moreover, because in our own version of the world, we observe only one outcome (with all its effects), it follows that in other versions of of philosophy (*brahman*) and the active engagement associated with the God of popular religion (*īśvara*).

38 See Singh, *Pratyabhijñāhṛdayam*, p. 122, n. 14.

39 *Spanda-Nirṇaya*, com. to *Spandakārikā*, verse 1.2 (KSTS, vol. 42, p. 9), translated in Singh, *The Yoga of Vibration*, p. 27.

40 The "many worlds" theory was proposed by Bryce Seligman Dewitt and R. Neill Graham based on Hugh Everett's 1956 doctoral thesis at Princeton University. See Dewitt, Bryce Seligman, and Neill Graham (eds.), *The Many Worlds Interpretation of Quantum Mechanics* (Princeton Univ. Press 1973).

the world, other versions of ourselves are observing other outcomes (with all their effects). The result is decoherence among the different versions of the world. The universe “splits” into multiple versions of itself. Therefore, according to this theory, it is only the first-person perspective (the “You are here” arrow) that we impose on the universe that causes us to measure a subatomic particle as having a particular property. Everything that according to the laws of physics can possibly occur actually does occur, somewhere, at some time, in some version of the universe, but because of the limitations imposed by our sense organs, we experience the unfolding of only one of those possibilities.⁴¹

In other words, in God’s infinite universe, all possibilities are *actualities*, and it is only the limits of human perception that prevent a person from experiencing more than one of those actualities. As humans who are subject to time, we equate choice with freedom, but choice would actually *limit* God’s freedom, forcing God to choose one possibility and to reject all the others. Infinity, not choice, is the measure of God’s freedom, as Spinoza explains:

Others think that God is a free cause because he can (so they think) bring it about that the things which we have said follow from his nature (i.e., which are in his power) do not happen or are not produced by him. . . .

. . . .

41 Put in more technical terms, the brain that observes the measured property of a particular electron is in a superposition of possible states of observation, and because all consciousness is consciousness of one’s own self, the consciousness of that superpositional brain necessarily becomes fragmented. Thus, the so-called “collapse” of the wave function is merely a limitation of perspective, like seeing a circle and not realizing that one is really looking at a sphere.

But I think I have shown clearly enough . . . that from God’s supreme power, *or* infinite nature, infinitely many things in infinitely many modes, i.e., all things, have necessarily flowed So God’s omnipotence has been actual from eternity and will remain in the same actuality to eternity. And in this way, at least in my opinion, God’s omnipotence is maintained far more perfectly.

Indeed — to speak openly — my opponents seem to deny God’s omnipotence. For they are forced to confess that God understands infinitely many creatable things, which nevertheless he will never be able to create. . . . Therefore to maintain that God is perfect, they are driven to maintain at the same time that he cannot bring about everything to which his power extends. I do not see what could be feigned which would be more absurd than this or more contrary to God’s omnipotence. (*Ethics*, IP17, Schol.; see also *id.*, IP32, Cor. 2.)

Freedom, for the *Pratyabhijñā* masters and also for Spinoza, is the ability to choose every possibility, not just one. Prof. Einstein can have both the chocolate and the vanilla. Indeed, if his choice between the two was entangled with some quantum system, then he *did* have both, each in a separate version of the world that actually exists.

James H. Cumming (Bachelor of Arts, Columbia University; Juris Doctor, *magna cum laude*, University of Pennsylvania) is a senior research attorney at the California Supreme Court, where he is an expert in philosophy of law. He has also been a scholar of religion for over 40 years. He

began by studying Sanskrit and Indian scripture, specializing in the nondual philosophy of Kashmir. Later, he learned Hebrew and completed a comprehensive study of Jewish mysticism. In 2019, he published *Torah and Nondualism: Diversity, Conflict, and Synthesis* (Ibis Press). This article is excerpted from his second book, *The Nondual Mind: Vedānta, Kashmiri Pratyabhijñā Shaivism, and Spinoza*, which is still in manuscript, and which can be accessed on Academia.edu.

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TIME AND ETERNITY

by James H. Cumming

neriawilliam@yahoo.fr



My recently completed book, *The Nondual 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. In previous editions of *Dogma*, I published several excerpts from that book. The first three articles explain that all things are conscious, and that all consciousness is consciousness of self. The fourth article addresses the difficult problem of what it means to be free in a deterministic universe. The present article discusses two ways of thinking about immortality, one based on the circularity of time, and the other based on eternity. But to better introduce the topic of the present article, I will briefly review some of the ideas about time and divine freedom that appear at the end of my fourth article.

God created a magnificent universe that is an outward expression of God’s own eternal essence. It is constructed in perfect accord with elegant physical laws, and it plays itself out across the time dimension like an ever-turning kaleidoscope, each new configuration necessarily determined by, and every bit as beautiful, as the one that came before. Some people are troubled by that model of the universe. They don’t like imagining time to be a fixed landscape, analogous to one of the spatial dimensions. People imagine that they exist

at the vanguard of time, creating the future by their free choices. Therefore, the only type of freedom most people can appreciate is the freedom they imagine they have to make decisions about the future as they proceed forward through the time dimension. And if God lacks that freedom, most people believe, then God is not free at all, which calls into doubt God’s omnipotence. Reasoning in this way, people insist that God must be able to change creation at any moment, making adjustments (large or small) to what the laws of physics would otherwise demand — even parting the Red Sea when necessary. Thus, they place God inside time. They cannot imagine a God that is outside time, the creator of time, existing changelessly throughout all time. Instead, they imagine a god that, like themselves, is an actor on the stage of time. But by placing God inside time, they make time ontologically prior to the god they are worshiping, thus ignoring the God that is the source of time.

In truth, the ability to make choices in the dimension of time is not the measure of God’s freedom. Rather, the measure of God’s freedom is the ability to actualize every possibility implied by God’s own eternal essence. If God is eternal (i.e., outside time), and if the universe freely expresses, in the dimensions of space and time, God’s eternal unchanging essence,

then the universe needs no temporal interventions from God to make it more God-like, and if somehow it did need such interventions, then God's eternal essence would need to have changed, which is nonsensical. As humans who are subject to time, we equate freedom with choice, but choice would actually limit God's freedom, forcing God to choose one possibility and to reject all the others. Infinity, not choice, is the measure of God's freedom.

At the root of this confusion about divine freedom is the inability of most people to distinguish between "inside time" and "outside time." Time is so seemingly inevitable, so deeply integrated into human thought processes, that we tend to accept it unquestioningly. We treat it as something preexistent, a brute fact, binding on both man and God alike. Thus, it becomes the ground on which we construct our metaphysics. But in truth, the universe can be understood from two perspectives, one temporal, and the other eternal. Each is equally real, and each has something to tell us about our finite human condition.

1. The Circularity of Time

I ask you, my friend, to consider that men are not created, but only generated, and that their bodies already existed before, though formed differently.¹

— Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677 c.e.)

¹ Letter 4 [Gebhardt, Carl (ed.), *Spinoza Opera*, 4 vols. (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1925), IV/14/15–20]. The translations of Spinoza's writings that appear in this article are from Curley, Edwin (ed. and transl.), *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, vols. I & II (Princeton Univ. Press 1988 and 2016), sometimes with minor edits. Spinoza's friend and confidant, Ehrenfried Walther von Tschirnhaus (1651–1708 c.e.), asserted that Spinoza believed in "a sort of Pythagorean transmigration." In this article, I show how that belief might be harmonized with Spinoza's theory of mind-body equivalence.

In light of the theory of universal nondual consciousness set forth in the texts of both *Pratyabhijñā* Shaivism and Spinoza, what can we say about death? First, the notion of an immortal individual soul that floats away from the dying body and journeys to a new beatified body in heaven or to a new human body on earth is a simplistic fantasy that must be set aside. There is no bubble-like soul that exists independent of matter, steers the ship of the body, and emerges, specter-like, when the body dies. Thought and matter are the same thing; the human soul *is* the human brain, or some component of it. The human brain (or some component of it) is conscious of itself directly, by being itself. It has the thought of itself, and it infers an external world from effects it observes within itself. Therefore, although nondual consciousness is both universal and eternal, the unique characteristics of a specific human mind depend on the complex configuration of a specific human body. The destruction of that body results in a dispersal of the system that gave rise to that human mind, and what remains is only the consciousness of self associated with the dispersed parts.

Nonetheless, the universal nondual consciousness is what one always was. And because that consciousness is the ground of being, nothing can extinguish it. It cannot be extinguished as a whole, and it cannot be extinguished in its parts, for that would imply the theoretical possibility of extinguishing it as a whole. Therefore, the death of a person does not affect that universal consciousness even a bit. The universe was sparkling with consciousness before the person's death, and it continues to do so no less brightly, no less beautifully, after the person's death.

Immortality, according to this way of thought, is a matter of identifying with

an immortal thing. Hive insects sacrifice themselves for the sake of the continuing vitality of the hive, and people sometimes identify so strongly with children, family, or clan that they value the continuing vitality of those social groups over their own individual existence.

Moreover, in all the effects that one's self-expressive actions have had on the course of events in the universe, there is a sort of memory — a "soul print," one might say — of one's unique character. Kṣemarāja (10th–11th centuries c.e.) says, for example: "It is never witnessed that [(i.e., it never occurs that)] the produced product, such as the [clay] jar, can conceal the nature of the agent, such as the potter, etc."² Rather, the jar is a *soul print* of the potter, and all one's soul prints contribute to an endless chain of causes and effects, giving rise to a kind of immortality. To limit oneself to a particular thing in that chain — a human body having a particular form at a particular time — is rather arbitrary.

Consider, too, that all things in the universe proceed in cycles, human history being no exception. If so, the impressions one has made in the ripples of time may disperse for a while, but their effects will remain, and the complex forces that previously converged to bring a particular human body into existence will do so again, producing another body in a similar form. And when that occurs, the new body will give rise to an individual soul very much like one's own. And thus, one will be reborn, even though one's individual soul had no continuous existence.

² *Spanda-Nirṇaya*, com. to *Spandakārikā*, verse 1.2 (KSTS, vol. 42, p. 10), translated in Singh, Jaideva (ed. and transl.), *The Yoga of Vibration and Divine Pulsation: A Translation of the Spanda Kārikās with Kṣemarāja's Commentary, the Spanda Nirṇaya* (SUNY Press 1992), p. 28.

The *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* expresses this idea metaphorically, making reference to the roots of a tree:

As a tree of the forest,
Just so, surely, is man.
His hairs are leaves,
His skin, the outer bark.

....

A tree, when it is felled, grows up
From the root, more new again;
A mortal, when cut down by death —
From what root does he grow up?

....

If with its roots they should pull up
The tree, it would not come into being
again.

A mortal, when cut down by death —
From what root does he grow up?³

What this poetic passage tells us by way of metaphor is that, after being "cut down by death," a person will rise up again, like a new tree growing up from the roots of a felled tree. But the passage adds that this return of the body can only take place if the person has left "roots" in the ground, meaning that it can only take place if the person has left soul prints in the world.

Still, many people are uncomfortable with the idea that at the moment of death, they will disperse into relative oblivion and then form again at some future time with no specific recollection of their former existence. They do not want the "weak immortality" of a future iteration of themselves; rather, they want the "strong immortality" of an individual soul that survives the body's death and proceeds

³ *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 3.9.28, translated in Hume, Robert Ernest, *The Thirteen Principal Upanishads: Translated from the Sanskrit, with an Outline of the Philosophy of the Upanishads and an Annotated Bibliography* (Oxford Univ. Press 1921), p. 126. See also *Bhagavad Gītā* 15:1–4.

without interruption to a new existence. In short, they want *continuity of self* from one incarnation to the next, just as they have continuity of self from one day to the next.

The truth is, however, that if we are talking about the individual soul, we don't even have that continuity of self from one moment to the next, and yet we are not bothered by that fact. A thought experiment will help illustrate this point. Suppose a powerful god has the ability to create human beings out of clay and breathe life into them. Further suppose that this god plans to create Peter and Paul, deciding in advance every trait that Peter and Paul will have. This god first creates Peter. Then, after some time, this god says to Peter, "I will kill you and create Paul in your place." Peter immediately objects. Despite the promise regarding the creation of Paul, Peter rightly feels that he is going to die.

But suppose, instead, that this powerful god takes the list of, say, ten thousand Petrine traits and the corresponding list of ten thousand Pauline traits, and after creating Peter, this god slowly, one trait per day, changes Peter's traits into Paul's traits. Yesterday, Peter liked railroad travel; today, he finds that he prefers driving a car. Yesterday, Peter had green eyes; today, they look brown. In this manner, Peter is incrementally transformed, trait by trait, over the course of some twenty-seven years into Paul, and finally, one fine morning during the middle of the twenty-eighth year, Peter says, "I think I'll call myself Paul from now on; I like that name." Peter no longer feels he has been killed and that Paul has been created in his place, and the reason Peter does not object is that the change from Peter to Paul happened slowly, and Peter was given a chance to identify with each new Pauline trait as it arose.

The point here is not to deny that one has some sort of ongoing individual existence;

rather, the point is to show that the continuum of one's individual existence might be quantized, like frames in a movie, rather than an actual unbroken continuum, and ten thousand tiny deaths just don't seem as bad as one big death. The fact is that in each and every moment one is changing, both physically and mentally. Cells die and new cells replace them; one forgets some things and learns others; and even space-time itself might be quantized rather than continuous. So, what then can we say about an individual soul? The continuity of self that one hopes for after the body's death does not exist *before* the body's death. So, if one is not scared to live, then why be scared to die?

Consider another thought experiment, and here we will draw from ideas presented in the *Star Trek* television series. Imagine the existence of a teleportation device like the *Star Trek* "transporter." This device can scan one's body in an instant and determine the precise characteristics of every particle, atom, and molecule (type, spin, charge, relative location, momentum, etc.), thus converting one's entire material existence into data. The scanning process destroys one's body, but because one's exact form is recorded as data, the device can transfer the data to a distant location, and there it can somehow construct one's perfect replica out of the dust of that location. Moreover, because this reconstructed body is a perfect replica of the original scanned body, the new body is alive and conscious with the same memories and thoughts as the original, and it has all the same abilities that the original had. Needless to say, building this device would be no small achievement, but let us assume such a device exists.

If one were to submit to being teleported in this way, one's regenerated self in the distant location would *seem* to be continuous with one's former self, but

there would be no actual direct continuity. In other words, the version of oneself that appeared in the distant location would be materially distinct from one's former self, but one would *feel* subjectively that one was the same person, now teleported to a new location.

And if that is so, then perhaps the continuity of self — the “strong immortality” — that most people desire is actually not as important as having the *feeling* of such continuity. After a few trips in the transporter, noncontinuous existence no longer seems so bad. We are no longer afraid to have our body destroyed, reduced to mere data, and then reconstructed in a distant place, and we no longer worry that the reconstructed body, which has no direct continuity with our former body, constitutes a different person. Thus, after a few trips in the transporter, we no longer cling to the idea of an individual soul that must journey from one body to the next. Intermittent existence, it turns out, is not so bad after all; it just takes a little getting used to. And, of course, the cycles of time that characterize the universe can be thought of as a giant teleportation device that converts a person into data and then reconstructs that person at a future time, albeit with only a nonspecific recollection of the past. Should we want more?

Many people find comfort in the models of immortality taught by the major world religions. Hindu, Buddhist, Jewish, and non-canonical Christian scriptures suggest that the consciousness of a person can reincarnate in a new mortal body in this world.⁴ And Jewish, Christian, and Muslim scriptures add that the soul can

4 For Hinduism, see *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 5:3–10; *Bhagavad Gītā* 2:11–53, 4:5. For Buddhism, see *Majjhima Nikāya* 136. For Judaism, see Isa 26:19; Ezek 37; Job 19:25–26, 33:22–30; Eccles 1:9–10. For Christianity, see 1 Clem 24–26.

also acquire an immortal body.⁵ But these scriptural discussions of the afterlife are often quite vague about the newly embodied soul's recollection of the past. In the case of reincarnation, for example, it is generally understood that the soul retains the *wisdom* it gained from past experiences, but no specific memories.⁶ And if that model of immortality is comforting for those who are attracted to traditional religion, then the memory of every detail of one's past life is not an essential feature of the immortality we are seeking. Indeed, even during the life of one's present body, memory is a relatively low-resolution sketch of what has actually transpired, and over the long term, what one primarily carries into the future is a set of accumulated values and convictions. And there is no reason why a record of those values and convictions cannot somehow survive one's bodily death, ready to be accessed in a future time.⁷

In summary, the cycles of time (*samsāra*) offer us a perfectly acceptable form of immortality. The complex forces that previously converged to bring a par-

5 For Judaism, see Pss 23:6, 49:15–16, 73:23–28; Dan 12:1–3. For Christianity, see 1 Cor 15:35–58; 2 Cor 5. For Islam, see *Qur'an* 2:82, 4:122, 41:8, 64:9, 98:7–8.

6 See *Bhagavad Gītā* 4:5.

7 The Sanskrit term *apūrva* literally means “unprecedented,” but in Hindu philosophy, the term is used to refer to a super-sensible thing which comes into existence when one does an action, thus enabling the action to produce an effect across space and time. See Halbfass, Wilhelm, “Karma, *Apūrva*, and ‘Natural’ Causes: Observations on the Growth and Limits of the Theory of *Samsāra*,” in O’Flaherty, Wendy Doniger (ed.), *Karma and Rebirth in Classical Indian Traditions* (Univ. of California Press 1980), pp. 268–302; Potter, Karl H., “The Karma Theory and Its Interpretation in Some Indian Philosophical Systems,” in O’Flaherty, *Karma and Rebirth*, pp. 241–267.

ticular human body into existence will do so again. In metaphorical terms, a new tree will grow up from the roots of the felled tree. That is the immortality we get, and it is enough. We need not insist on the “strong immortality” of a soul that travels from body to body; instead, the “weak immortality” of cyclical time will do the job just fine. Beings arise and subside in the universal nondual consciousness. Each has its natural arc of life. Perpetuating what has reached its natural end serves no purpose. But the universal nondual consciousness is eternal. The only thing that dies is the narrative one has authored about a person who lived in a particular place at a particular time. But not to worry. There will be other narratives — unless, that is, one has gone *outside* time.

2. Eternity

There are, assuredly, two forms of Brahman: Time and the Timeless. That which is prior to the sun is the Timeless (*a-kāla*), without parts (*a-kala*). But that which begins with the sun is Time, which has parts [for the sun metes out time]. Verily, the form of that which has parts [(i.e., time)] is the year [(i.e., the solar cycle)]. From the year, in truth, are these creatures [(i.e., living organisms)] produced. Through the year, verily, after having been produced, do they grow. In the year they disappear. Therefore, the year, verily, is Prajāpati, is Time, is food, is the Brahman-abode, and is *Ātman* [(“Soul”)]. For thus has it been said: —
 ’Tis Time that cooks created things,
 All things, indeed, in the Great Soul.
 In what, however, Time is cooked —
 Who knows that, he the Veda knows!⁸
 — *Maitrāyaṇīya Upaniṣad*

8 *Maitrāyaṇīya Upaniṣad* 6.15, translated in Hume, *The Thirteen Principal Upanishads*, p. 434.

Albert Einstein is reported to have defined time by saying that “time is what a clock measures,”⁹ and likewise according to the *Maitrāyaṇīya Upaniṣad*, time exists in relation to the periodic change of some observed object — and the movement of the sun relative to earth, because of its unmistakable prominence in our lives, expresses that principle metaphorically. Moreover, time, according to the *Upaniṣad*, is circular, unfolding in planetary cycles that realign in ever-new ways. The *Maitrāyaṇīya Upaniṣad* uses the word *saṃsāra* (from the Sanskrit root *saṃsṛ*, meaning “to revolve,” “to cycle”) to describe this circularity of time (see *Maitrāyaṇīya Upaniṣad* 1.4), and knowledge of the highest truth (*jñāna*) is presented as the means by which *one can escape the cycle*.¹⁰

For most of us, a lifetime of 90 years seems far too short, but for an elderly person with a weak, pain-ridden body, a lifetime that continues forever might seem almost wearisome. In our quest for immortality, “forever” is not really what we are seeking; rather, what we are seeking is to transcend time. It is *time* that we need to overcome, not death. We need a new perspective that allows us to feel that time does not contain us — rather, that we contain time. Then, there is no “90 years,” and there is no “forever.” Then, there is only existence, consciousness, and bliss (*saccidānanda*). But how do we “transcend time”?

Some religious-minded people imagine that there was once a vast expanse of empty space and that, at a particular point in time, God created a universe in that

9 Cf. Einstein, Albert, “Zur Elektrodynamik bewegter Körper,” in *Annalen der Physik*, vol. 322 (1905), p. 893.

10 See also *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 6.2; *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 5.3–10.

space, and it has existed ever since, evolving into what we find before us today. But according to the field theory of physics, how can space exist without matter, and how can time exist without a change in the relation between two things? Space and time are relative. They exist only if matter exists, and they vary depending on one's point of observation. Therefore, without a created universe, there is no space or time, which means that God must be doing all this creating *outside time*.

Of course, once a universe exists, we can measure time from that moment forward. And, from the perspective of modern physics, we can also unwind the progression of time and imagine a "beginning" — a "Big Bang" — when all matter was confined to a single point so small that the laws of physics become meaningless.¹¹ But even if we declare the Big Bang to be "time zero" and conjecture a God that created the universe (and time) by way of that Big Bang, we still have the problem that God is doing all this creating *outside time*, and if so, then God didn't just create a universe way back when; God also created one right now and always (i.e., at all times and at no time).¹²

11 Cf. Hawking, Stephen W., *A Brief History of Time: From the Big Bang to Black Holes* (Bantam 1988), pp. 136–141 [discussing the "no boundary" theory].

12 Several classical discussions of time and how it relates to God's creative act have made a similar point. See Plato, *Timaeus*, 37C–39E [e.g.: "Now the nature of that Living Being was eternal, and this character it was impossible to confer in full completeness on the generated thing. But he took thought to make, as it were, a moving likeness of eternity; and, at the same time that he ordered the Heaven, he made, of eternity that abides in unity, an everlasting likeness moving according to number — that to which we have given the name Time. For there were no days and nights, months and years, before the Heaven came into being" (transl. by Francis MacDonald Corn-

We read in the book of Psalms: "This is the day that yhvh made; let us be glad and rejoice in it." (Ps 118:24.) God (yhvh) created *this* very day, this very moment, whatever it may hold. And Spinoza makes a similar point. He asserts:

God is not only the cause of things' beginning to exist, but also of their persevering in existing, *or* (to use a Scholastic term) God is the cause of the being of things." (*Ethics*, IP24, Cor.)

Things have no being, no persevering in existence, without God as their cause in every moment, and that fact makes God's act of creation an eternal act. And "in eternity, there is neither *when*, nor *before*, nor *after*" (*id.*, IP33, Schol. 2), because "eternity can neither be defined by time nor have any relation to time" (*id.*, VP23, Schol.). In eternity, there is only God's unchanging essence and all that it eternally implies. As Spinoza says,

[w]e conceive things as actual in two ways: either insofar as we conceive them to exist in relation to a certain time and place, or insofar as we conceive them to be contained in God and to follow from the necessity of the divine nature. But the things we conceive in this second way as true, or real, we conceive under a species of eternity, and to that extent they involve the eternal and infinite essence of God. (*Id.*, VP29, Schol.)

ford)]; Augustine, *Confessions*, book XI, secs. 12–16 [e.g.: "Your years[, God,] do not come and go. Our years pass and new ones arrive only so that all may come in turn, but your years stand all at once, because they are stable Your years are a single day, and this day of yours is not a daily recurrence, but a simple 'Today,' because your Today does not give way to tomorrow, nor follow yesterday. Your Today is eternity" (transl. by Maria Boulding)].

This principle that the world we live in is an expression, in the dimensions of space and time, of God's eternal essence is critically important because it means — in contrast to what Śaṅkara (8th century c.e.) taught — that the world is *real*, as real as God is real. *Pratyabhijñā* philosophy describes God's eternal essence using the metaphors of "Speech" (*vāc*) and "Word" (*śabda*), and it asserts that this eternal Speech/Word spreads forth in the dimensions of space and time as the diverse and changing world we know.¹³ Abhinavagupta (10th–11th centuries c.e.), for example, writes about the highest level of emanation, from which all the phonemes of speech emerge. About that highest level, he says:

Of these phonemes, the [highest] plane that has just been described is that of the supreme Word where they are in the form of pure consciousness, non-conventional, *eternal, uncreated*. . . . In effect, everything moving or unmoving abides [first] in a supreme and *invariable form*, the essence of pure power, in Consciousness: the Self of the venerable Lord Bhairava — as is shown by all that is to be perceived of the infinite diversity of the world manifested in Consciousness in a manner first indistinct, then progressively more distinct.¹⁴

And Kṣemarāja makes a similar point, invoking the concept of *spanda*. The Sanskrit word *spanda* means a "stirring" or a

13 See Isayeva, Natalia, *From Early Vedanta to Kashmir Shaivism: Gaudapada, Bhartrhari, and Abhinavagupta* (SUNY Press 1995), pp. 133–145; Padoux, André, *Vāc: The Concept of the Word in Selected Hindu Tantras* (SUNY Press 1990), pp. 78–85, 172–188.

14 *Parātrīśikā Vivaraṇa*, KSTS, vol. 18, pp. 102–103, translated in Padoux, *Vāc: The Concept of the Word*, p. 306, italics added, second textual emendation by the translator. Similar ideas appear in chapter 3 of the *Tantrāloka*.

"slight movement," but in the context of Kṣemarāja's *Spanda-Nirṇaya*, it means an "oscillation," a "vibration," or a "pulse," and the *Spanda-Nirṇaya* explains that this "pulse," despite appearing to be a succession (*krama*) of different phases, is actually eternal and unchanging:

In reality, however, nothing arises and nothing subsides. We shall show that it is only the divine *spandaśakti* (the divine creative pulsation) which, though free of succession, appears in different aspects as if flashing in view and as if subsiding.¹⁵

If one considers the matter deeply, one realizes that temporal periodicity (*spanda*) is merely a way of describing a circle with time as one of the circle's two dimensions, and outside time, that same periodicity is just the eternal idea of a circle. And because God's eternal essence includes an infinite number of such circles (or ellipses, perhaps), each slightly different in character, there is no phase synchronicity among the countless periodic things that populate the universe. And from that absence of phase synchronicity arises the forward progression of linear time — cycles of time that constantly realign in new ways.

There is, therefore, no point in speaking of a particular moment in linear history when God created the universe. Instead, we would do better to refer to God's eternal essence and its actualization. God's eternal essence is nothing other than the unchanging principles — the mathematics — from which everything in the universe is logically derivable. And the actualization of that eternal essence is the unfolding, in the dimensions of space and time, of all that is logically implied by those unchanging principles. As Spinoza explains,

15 *Spanda-Nirṇaya*, com. to *Spandakārikā*, verse 1.1 (KSTS, vol. 42, p. 5), translated in Singh, *The Yoga of Vibration*, p. 13.

by *Natura naturans* [(“nature natur-ing”)] we must understand what is in itself and is conceived through itself, or such attributes of substance as express an eternal and infinite essence, i.e., God, insofar as he is considered as a free cause. [¶] But by *Natura naturata* [(“nature natured”)] I understand whatever follows from the necessity of God’s nature, or from any of God’s attributes (*Ethics*, IP29, Schol.)

My previous article for *Dogma*, which discusses what it means to be free in a deterministic universe, refers to the “essential nature” of a person, arguing that a person’s essential nature determines his or her actions when the person acts autonomously. But in that context, the person’s essential nature is presented as being a changeable thing, qualitatively constant but quantitatively variable, now a bit stronger, now a bit weaker, depending on shifting external circumstances. Spinoza explains, however, that a person also has an eternal essence that transcends the changes imposed by time. That eternal essence never changes, never comes into existence, and never ceases to exist. Thus, it can be likened to a mathematical definition. Spinoza gives the example of a triangle. Whether or not an actual material triangle exists in a certain place at a certain time, triangles are consistent with the laws of physics, and from the mathematical definition of a triangle of a certain size, all the properties of that triangle can be logically derived. Thus, the definition of the triangle is an eternal thing, whereas the actual material existence of the triangle is a temporal thing. In the same way, all things that arise in the dimension of time have an eternal essence from which all their properties can be logically derived.

Inside time, new iterations of one’s body and mind will appear and disappear, but they can do so only if they also exist as an eternal essence outside time, unaffected by the changes time implies. Hence, Spinoza says, “we . . . feel that our mind is . . . eternal.” More specifically, he says:

[I]n God there is necessarily an idea that expresses the essence of this or that human Body, under a species of eternity. (*Ethics*, VP22.)

Therefore, though we do not recollect that we existed before the body, we nevertheless feel that our mind, insofar as it involves the essence of the body under a species of eternity, is eternal, and that this existence it has cannot be defined by time or explained through duration. (*Id.*, VP23, Schol.)

Spinoza also explains that through the power of reason, we come to know the world as God knows it, and our mind partakes of God’s own mind. But God knows all things as the logical and necessary implications of eternal principles, and thus all God’s thoughts are eternal. So, when our mind partakes of God’s own mind, our mind also partakes of God’s eternity, giving rise to a form of human immortality. (See *Ethics*, VP29, with Dem. and Schol., VP30, with Dem., VP38, with Dem. and Schol., and VP40, Cor. and Schol.) But this immortality is not a sempiternity of the person conceived as an actor on the stage of time. Rather, it is a merging of the person into God’s eternal essence.¹⁶

16 Despite this merging into God, there is one sense in which the person’s individuality remains. Spinoza explains that a person’s eternal mind is the idea (i.e., a mode of thought) that corresponds to the eternal essence of the person’s body (i.e., a mode of extension). (*Ethics*, VP22 and VP23, with Schol.) Therefore, one person’s eternal mind is distinguishable

Death can affect a mind that contemplates temporal things, but death cannot affect a mind that contemplates only eternal things. (See *Ethics*, VP42, Schol.) Therefore, to the extent that one is self-directed and deliberative, guided by reason, and virtuous in one's relations, fostering harmony and understanding in society, one is, to that same extent, *eternal*. Indeed, because a person's "force of existence" determines his or her ability to act and not merely to react, and because a person's power of acting enables the person to express his or her inner rational nature, and because a person's rational nature is the foundation of his or her virtuous conduct, it follows that for a human being, virtuous conduct is eternal existence itself. Virtue and eternal existence are the same thing. In Hebrew scripture (Mal 3:6), we read: "For I, yhvh , I have not changed" — God (yhvh) is outside time, changeless, and eternal — "and you, the sons of Jacob, you have not been consumed" — you, too, are outside time, changeless, and eternal.

*
* *

James H. Cumming (Bachelor of Arts, Columbia University; Juris Doctor, *magna cum laude*, University of Pennsylvania) is a senior research attorney at the California Supreme Court, where he is an expert in philosophy of law. He has also been a scholar of religion for over 40 years. He

from another person's eternal mind by the unique reasoning capacities achieved by that person's body (i.e., brain) during the person's lifetime. (See *id.*, VP31, Schol., VP39, with Schol., and VP42, Schol.) But despite retaining this remnant of individuality, one's eternal mind is not an independent being; rather, one's eternal mind is a part of God's eternal mind. (See *id.*, VP40, Schol.)

began by studying Sanskrit and Indian scripture, specializing in the nondual philosophy of Kashmir. Later, he learned Hebrew and completed a comprehensive study of Jewish mysticism. In 2019, he published *Torah and Nondualism: Diversity, Conflict, and Synthesis* (Ibis Press). This article is excerpted from his second book, *The Nondual Mind: Vedānta, Kashmiri Pratyabhijñā Shaivism, and Spinoza*, which is still in manuscript, and which can be accessed on Academia.edu.

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ŚAṆKARA, SPINOZA, AND ACOSMISM

by James H. Cumming

JamesHCumming@gmail.com



My recently completed book, *The Nondual 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. In previous editions of *Dogma*, I published several excerpts from that book. The present article, drawn from the same book, surveys the scholarly literature comparing Śaṅkara’s Vedānta (8th century c.e.)¹ to the philosophy of Spinoza, and in that context, the article clarifies Spinoza’s view that the external world is real, an issue that has divided Vedānta scholars who have studied Spinoza. Moreover, this precise issue — the ontological status of the external world — is what most distinguishes Spinoza’s philosophy from Śaṅkara’s Vedānta, making *Pratyabhijñā* Shaivism the closer comparison.

1. Studies Comparing Hindu Philosophy to Spinoza

Other writers before me have noticed the parallels between “Spinozism” — if

¹ The term “Vedānta” can refer to any philosophical system based on the Upanishads. I generally use the term to refer to Śaṅkara’s nondual interpretation of the Upanishads, but the term also includes several competing interpretations, most notably the qualified nondualism of Rāmānuja (ca. 1017–1137 c.e.) and the dualism of Madhva (1238–1317 c.e.).

I may be allowed that sometimes mis-used term — and Eastern philosophy. Indeed, this comparison was made just two decades after Spinoza’s death, at a time when Eastern philosophy was little known (and even less understood) in the West. In 1697, Pierre Bayle’s *Dictionnaire Historique et Critique* included an article on Spinoza that compared Spinoza’s philosophy to that of a Chinese religious sect that Bayle called “Fo.” It is unclear what particular sect Bayle had in mind. The sect seems to have practiced some variant of Chinese Buddhism, but Bayle’s purpose was not to expound the teachings of this East Asian religious denomination; rather, it was to criticize Spinoza’s philosophy for the monism it and the East Asian denomination allegedly had in common.

Like Bayle, several other philosopher’s — including several in recent times — have found close parallels between Spinoza’s nondual philosophy and Buddhism. These analyses are fascinating and informative, particularly in elaborating the problem of ethical duty in a monistic system. Buddhist philosophy is, however, beyond the scope of the present article. Rather, the focus of this article is the parallel between Spinoza’s nondual philosophy and Hindu nondualism, a comparison that I find particularly fruitful.

In the mid-19th century, Sanskrit scholar Theodore Goldstücker recognized the close parallel between Spinoza's philosophical system and Hindu Vedānta, saying, "[H]ad Spinoza been a Hindu, his system would in all probability mark a last phase of the Vedānta philosophy."² In support of this assertion, Goldstücker relied on the acosmist interpretation of Spinoza put forward by Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831 c.e.).³ As will become clear, I do not embrace Hegel's assertion that Spinoza was an acosmist, but Goldstücker correctly observed that some of the criticisms that have been directed at Vedānta can also be said of Spinoza's system.

Another prominent 19th century Sanskrit scholar, Friedrich Max Müller, noticed the same resemblance between Vedānta and Spinoza's philosophy. Müller was not only one of the most esteemed Indologists of his time, but he had also completed a dissertation on Spinoza's *Ethics*, so he was well qualified to compare the two systems. In lectures on Vedānta

delivered at the Royal Institution in 1894, Müller briefly pointed out the similarities that he thought were most significant.⁴ In particular, Müller noted the similarity between Vedānta's "Brahman" (God) and Spinoza's infinite and eternal divine "substance" (*substantia*).

Sir Monier Monier-Williams — Müller's rival in the 1860 election for Oxford's Boden Professor of Sanskrit — agreed with his colleague about the similarity between Vedānta and Spinozism. Monier-Williams even boldly asserted that "the Hindus were Spinozites more than 2,000 years before the existence of Spinoza."⁵ What he meant, presumably, was that he saw in the Sanskrit classical works a foreshadowing of the same ideas that Spinoza would articulate in Western philosophical terms more than two millennia later. And in the years since Monier-Williams's provocative comment, many scholars have tried to flesh out the details of his assertion.

If one studies this scholarly corpus, one observes a tendency to distort Spinoza's theories in an effort to make Spinoza seem either more or less Hindu, depending on the scholar's personal bias. Ironically, however, I find these distortions very valuable and informative. They tend to reveal the areas in which Spinoza's philosophy is most often misunderstood and most hotly contested, and by comparing Hindu approaches to the same philosophical problems, we are led to a deeper understanding of Spinoza. Does Spinoza contend

2 Goldstücker, Theodore, *Literary Remains of the Late Professor Theodore Goldstücker*, vol. II (W.H. Allen & Co. 1879), p. 33.

3 As Yitzhak Melamed has shown, Hegel was not the first to characterize Spinoza as an acosmist, although Hegel certainly did much to reinforce that characterization. The idea was already put forward by the German philosopher Ernst Platner in 1776, who said: "Spinoza does not actually deny the existence of the Godhead, but rather the existence of the world." The specific expression "acosmism" in relation to Spinoza's philosophy derives from Solomon Maimon's writings, which Hegel probably read. On this topic, see Melamed, Yitzhak Y., "Salomon Maimon and the Rise of Spinozism in German Idealism," in *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, vol. 42, no. 1 (2004), pp. 76–79. See also Melamed, Yitzhak Y., "Why Spinoza is Not an Eleatic Monist (Or Why Diversity Exists)," in Goff, Philip (ed.), *Spinoza on Monism* (Palgrave 2011), pp. 210–211.

4 Müller, Friedrich Max, "Three Lectures on the Vedānta Philosophy Delivered at the Royal Institution in March, 1894," in *Collected Works of the Right Hon. F. Max Müller*, vol. XVI (Longmans, Green, and Co. 1904), pp. 123–126.

5 Monier-Williams, Monier, *Brahmanism and Hinduism: Religious Thought and Life in India, as Based on the Veda and Other Sacred Books of the Hindus* (John Murray, 4th edition, 1891), p. xii.

that thought and extension (i.e., mind and matter) are merely subjective ascriptions superimposed on divine substance (*substantia*)? Or, does Spinoza contend that thought and extension are objective realities? Is Spinoza an acosmist? Is he a covert idealist? And most importantly, who is asking the question — a mind or a brain? This article will give the answers.

We begin with Maganlal Amritlal Buch, who was a professor of philosophy at Baroda College in Gujarat, India. In 1921, Buch published a book aimed at popularizing the teachings of Vedānta, and in particular those of Śāṅkara (8th century c.e.), and he included a brief section comparing Vedānta to Spinoza's philosophy.⁶ The discussion does not go into depth, but it is one of the first systematic efforts to compare Śāṅkara's Vedānta to Spinozism, and it identifies several of the more obvious similarities. Among other things, Buch notes that Spinoza's divine "substance" (*substantia*) corresponds to Śāṅkara's "Brahman," each being the totality of all existence, and each being conceived only through itself. In addition, both philosophers assert (1) that the source of evil and unhappiness is not desire ("wrong willing") but ignorance ("wrong knowing"); (2) that the world is law-bound, and absolute free will is illusory; (3) that true freedom lies in knowing that the body, mind, intellect, and ego are not who or what one really is; and (4) that God is the cause of all things, although not a transitive cause.

In addition, Buch addresses Spinoza's theory that thought and extension (i.e., mind and matter) are different "attributes" of — different ways of comprehending — the divine "substance." Adopting a subjective interpretation of the "attributes," Buch argues that in Spinoza's system, as in

Śāṅkara's, the differentiated world of finite subjects and objects is only something we *ascribe* to God's being; it is not itself real.⁷ Here, Buch's reading of Spinoza, like that of Goldstücker and others, makes the world into a figment of the human imagination, effectively prioritizing the attribute of thought over the attribute extension. Doing so, however, ignores the fact that Spinoza gave equal ontological status to both thought and extension, refusing to reduce one to the other.

Another relatively early comparison of Vedānta to Spinoza's philosophy is *Spinoza and the Upanishads*, which was Mahadev Sakharam Modak's 1928 doctoral thesis at the University of London. Modak's dissertation is well researched and analytically thoughtful. Modak asserts that in both philosophical systems, consciousness is treated as self-evident,⁸ and knowledge of God is in some sense the same as unity with God.⁹ Also, both systems recognize three grades of knowledge, although Śāṅkara rejects rational analysis as a means of knowing ultimate reality (i.e., God). Modak argues that for Śāṅkara, in contrast to Spinoza, knowledge of God is super-rational, not an outgrowth of rational inquiry.¹⁰

Modak next discusses Spinoza's answer to the mind-body problem¹¹ and the corresponding mind-body theories of the Upanishads.¹² Modak notes that both philosophical systems make metaphysics their starting point, and both teach spe-

7 Buch, *The Philosophy of Shankara*, pp. 201–203.

8 Modak, M.S., *Spinoza and the Upanishads: A Comparative Study* (Nagpur Vidyapeeth Mudranalaya 1970), pp. 6–9.

9 Modak, *Spinoza and the Upanishads*, pp. 14–16.

10 Modak, *Spinoza and the Upanishads*, pp. 10, 18–23, 118.

11 Modak, *Spinoza and the Upanishads*, pp. 24–43.

12 Modak, *Spinoza and the Upanishads*, pp. 43–54.

6 Buch, Maganlal Amritlal, *The Philosophy of Shankara* (A.G. Widgery 1921), pp. 198–206.

cific methods for gaining peace of mind. In addition, both systems argue that knowledge leads to freedom. Modak also notes that Spinoza rejects Cartesian “seat of the soul” theories (i.e., the theory that the soul is an independent entity localized somewhere in the brain), and likewise the Upanishads sometimes speak of the soul as being the equivalent of infinite space, although the Upanishads are not consistent in that regard.¹³

One of Modak’s primary points is that Spinoza’s God is distinguishable from the Upanishads’ “Brahman” because Spinoza’s God is not different from the cosmic system itself, whereas Brahman, although being the ontological basis of the physical universe, transcends it and remains distinct from it.¹⁴ In other words, Brahman is the cause of the world, but Brahman (the cause) does not lose itself in the effect (the world).¹⁵ Rather, the world is Brahman’s *māyā*, which Modak prefers to translate as “powers,” not as “illusion.” Modak denies that, according to Upanishadic thought, the world is completely unreal; instead, he argues that the world has a relative reality, dependent on Brahman while not being necessary or essential to Brahman. It is the latter point that, according to Modak, distinguishes Brahman from Spinoza’s God, since for Spinoza the world is a necessary expression of God’s own essence.¹⁶ Of course, in this regard, Spinoza’s philosophy aligns with *Pratyabhijñā* Shaivism, a point my previous articles for *Dogma* explain in detail.¹⁷

13 Modak, *Spinoza and the Upanishads*, pp. 54–60.

14 Modak, *Spinoza and the Upanishads*, pp. 63–69.

15 Modak, *Spinoza and the Upanishads*, pp. 76–77.

16 Modak, *Spinoza and the Upanishads*, pp. 73–77, 81–83. See also *id.*, p. 19 [noting that Upanishadic thought distinguishes between empirical existence (*vyāvahārika*) and illusion (*prātibhāsika*)].

17 See, e.g., Cumming, James H., “Hindu Non-dual Philosophy, Spinoza, and the Mind-Body

Modak next notes that the Upanishads and Spinoza are similar in regard to ethical philosophy. In both systems, ethical precepts are valid relative to the human experience. Ethical behavior leads in Spinoza’s philosophy to the intellectual love of God, and it leads in Vedānta to self-realization. Both systems also emphasize rational self-control, and both systems prioritize rational self-control over excessive renunciation. In addition, according to both systems, the “self” that the practitioner hopes to realize or actualize is the idealized self whose thoughts correspond to God’s own thoughts. Hence, the goal of self-realization or self-actualization is not a *selfish* goal; rather, it is a *selfless* goal.¹⁸

Modak also points out that the Upanishads and Spinoza are similar in their attitude toward theistic religion. Devotional scriptures are the work of human hands, albeit inspired by God, and their primary function is to teach and inspire good conduct. In both systems, however, the pursuit of truth is given greater emphasis, and knowledge of God (described as identity with God, or the intellectual love of God) is considered the highest stage of religious experience.¹⁹

In summary, the primary distinction that Modak identifies between the two philosophical systems is that according to the Upanishads, Brahman is a transcendent cause of the world, whereas according to Spinoza, God is an imminent cause of the world. In the former case, the existence of the world depends on Brahman but has no *effect* on Brahman, whereas in the latter case, the existence of the world not only depends on God, but it also *expresses* and

Problem,” in *DOGMA, Revue de Philosophie et de Sciences Humaines*, Édition No. 19, printemps 2022, pp. 20–48.

18 Modak, *Spinoza and the Upanishads*, pp. 84–104.

19 Modak, *Spinoza and the Upanishads*, pp. 105–113.

characterizes God.²⁰ Modak's dissertation is the first scholarly in-depth comparison between the philosophy of the Upanishads and that of Spinoza, and it remains a valuable resource.

Among the more superficial comparisons between Spinoza's philosophy and the philosophy of the East is Samuel Max Melamed's 1933 book entitled *Spinoza and Buddha: Visions of a Dead God*. S.M. Melamed's book is more an expression of Jewish pride than it is a work of serious scholarship. His facts are sometimes inaccurate, his argument is sometimes inconsistent, and he punctuates his analysis with so much generalization, stereotype, and outright bigotry that it is hard to take the work seriously. For example, in the opening portion of a section entitled "The Man and His Race," S.M. Melamed has this to say:

All of white man's culture can be divided into two categories, two types, one which is born of the ear and the other of the eye. [¶] . . . Semitic culture is that of the ear, while Aryan culture is that of the eye. All myth, like all plastic arts [(i.e., sculpting, molding, etc.)], originates in vision. Hence Semitic culture is without a mythology, without a pantheon, and without a plastic art. . . . Aryan culture, on the other hand, is overwhelmed with myth, populated with gods and goddesses, and saturated with plastic art.²¹

20 Modak, *Spinoza and the Upanishads*, pp. 114–118. It is worth contrasting Modak's interpretation of Spinoza to that of Maganlal Buch, described above. As noted, Buch interpreted Spinoza as saying that the differentiated world of finite subjects and objects is only something that the human intellect *ascribes* to God's being — it is not itself real. Modak interprets Spinoza as holding that the world is real and that as such, it tells us something about the nature of God, its cause.

21 Melamed, Samuel Max, *Spinoza and Bud-*

Continuing the same theme, we next encounter this observation:

The stone knows no fear [(i.e., awe)]. Plants already have an inkling of fear, while the animal is positively fearful. Only the stupid is fearless. The higher the intelligence, the greater the fear [(i.e., awe)]. Love, however, has nothing to do with intelligence. . . . The Jew says 'fear' [(i.e., awe)] because he is a rationalist, an incorrigible intellectualist. The Aryan says 'love' because he is an incorrigible emotionalist.²²

Later in his book, S.M. Melamed turns his critical eye to Hinduism and Buddhism, which he treats as more or less equivalent, setting forth a race-based theory of intellectual achievement that elevates "Aryans" and "Jews" above other peoples. He says:

Long before the Aryans invaded [India] from the northwest, the Ganges land was populated by a variety of tribes. [But o]nly with the appearance of the Aryan invaders did a culture grow out of the Indian soil. In Palestine a similar phenomenon can be observed. Many tribes and races inhabited the country prior to the coming and after the going of the Jews from that land. However, Palestine's fame and position in history as the land which gave birth to two great religions were determined not by the Canaanites or Moabites, but by the Hebrews.²³

But lest we think that India's "Aryans" are the Jews' equal, S.M. Melamed goes on to explain that "the Aryan invaders of India surrendered their physical energy, virility, and aggressiveness in that tropic

dha: Visions of a Dead God (Univ. of Chicago Press 1933), p. 118.

22 Melamed, *Spinoza and Buddha*, p. 121.

23 Melamed, *Spinoza and Buddha*, p. 235.

land,”²⁴ and he describes them as a “tropical people made indolent by a tropical heat.”²⁵ He adds:

Just as no sweeping revolutionary movement ever arose in ancient India, so was no scientific discovery of any magnitude ever made in that land. Political revolutions require energy and interest in the state and in man, while scientific inventions require curiosity. The ancient Hindu lacked these qualifications.²⁶

By contrast, the “Western Aryans” were not, in his view, so environmentally debilitated:

The Western Aryans were more fortunate in selecting lands of temperate climates for their dwelling-places. Their bodies were not weakened by a tropical sun and their will to live was not undermined by a fever-infested jungle. Their gods were not only living but actually frolicking.²⁷

S.M. Melamed’s book is full of such commentary from beginning to end. But the passage just quoted, which mentions that the gods of the West are “living,” provides a good example of one of S.M. Melamed’s primary themes, a theme that is also captured in the book’s subtitle *Visions of a Dead God*. S.M. Melamed argues that the God of Spinoza, like the God of Eastern philosophical thought, is unified with nature, bound by the laws of physics, and therefore “dead,” whereas the God of the West, and in particular the God of Judaism, is separate from nature, free, and therefore “living.” He says: “The

God of Eastern Aryan religiosity is a dead God within a bad world; the God of the Old Testament is a living God outside of a good world.”²⁸ In the background of this argument is a criticism of Spinoza’s philosophy that goes back to Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716 c.e.) and before. Many of Spinoza’s detractors — S.M. Melamed included — cannot imagine a God that exists *outside time*. For them, God must be an actor on the stage of time, which of course is what they imagine themselves to be. Therefore, they see Spinoza’s God as powerless, even dead. This point is elaborated in my article entitled “Freedom in a Deterministic Universe.”²⁹ Here, it is enough to note that S.M. Melamed prefers to perpetuate cultural stereotypes than to do the philosophical “heavy-lifting” that is necessary to address the metaphysical problems that Spinoza and Eastern philosophy address.

But S.M. Melamed’s cultural chauvinism could be tolerated if his scholarship were otherwise sound. Hence, what is most dissatisfying about S.M. Melamed’s book is its superficiality. He doesn’t bother to demonstrate his pronouncements about Spinoza or the East with careful textual analysis. Instead, he relies on generalizations, clichés, and distortions.³⁰ For example, S.M. Melamed treats all Eastern philosophy (both Hindu and Buddhist) as if it were a single system. Indeed, he even uses the name “Buddha” and the word “Buddhism” as metonyms for Eastern thought in general and, more broadly, for pantheism, asceticism, and mysticism

24 Melamed, *Spinoza and Buddha*, pp. 236–237. See also *id.*, p. 10.

25 Melamed, *Spinoza and Buddha*, p. 238.

26 Melamed, *Spinoza and Buddha*, p. 238.

27 Melamed, *Spinoza and Buddha*, p. 248.

28 Melamed, *Spinoza and Buddha*, p. 286.

29 See Cumming, James H., “Freedom in a Deterministic Universe,” in *DOGMA, Revue de Philosophie et de Sciences Humaines*, Édition No. 21, Automne 2022, pp. 145–149.

30 See, e.g., Melamed, *Spinoza and Buddha*, pp. 251–275.

wherever those forms of religiosity are found. Most significantly, S.M. Melamed has no awareness of *Pratyabhijñā* philosophy, which more than any other school of Hindu thought resembles Spinoza's system.

The core thesis of S.M. Melamed's book is that Eastern pantheism implies a God that is bound by physical laws, which leads, for human beings, to a crisis of despair, pessimism, and hopelessness, and that crisis, in turn, leads to disengagement from public affairs (i.e., passivity and quietism), monastic asceticism, and a foolish desire to lose oneself in God. S.M. Melamed says:

The personal, living God of the Bible is only a correlation to its living, passionate, and powerful man. The universal and dead God of the Upanishads is equal in reality to its dead universalism. Out of the jungle [of South Asia] crawled a dead God, and out of the desert [of the Levant] roared a living God. [¶] The religious history of Western man is, in the final analysis, the history of a struggle between the living Jehovah and the dead Brahma[n].³¹

S.M. Melamed asserts that in ancient times, this flawed Eastern philosophy gained a foothold in the West, influencing Western thinkers such as Paul of Tarsus (1st century c.e.) and Augustine of Hippo (354–430 c.e.), and in S.M. Melamed's view, Spinoza's philosophy represents the intellectual culmination of that trend (and a betrayal of the world-affirming Jewish tradition that was Spinoza's birthright). S.M. Melamed therefore describes Spinoza as "the last tremor of Buddhism in the Western world,"³² meaning not actual Buddhism so much as its "basic driving

forces in the realm of the spirit."³³ But in making this argument, S.M. Melamed presents a highly distorted understanding of Spinoza, mistakenly treating him as an acosmist who viewed "the world [as] a phantom *sans* reality."³⁴ Moreover, because S.M. Melamed is ignorant of the world-affirming, life-affirming teachings of *Pratyabhijñā* philosophy, his presentation of Eastern philosophy is equally distorted and mistaken.

Ultimately, S.M. Melamed is more a cultural commentator than he is a scholar. Moreover, he is a cultural commentator who takes great satisfaction in his own Jewish heritage, urging an assertive and confident world-engagement that suited his role, from 1921 to 1924, as the head of the Chicago branch of the Zionist Organization of America. S.M. Melamed's message, which told his Jewish readers to be activists, not fatalists; courageous, not despairing; and individualistic, not universalistic, was an important one for his day, and understood in those terms, his book is a work of prescient genius, but understood as a work of scholarship, it is too superficial and biased to significantly advance our understanding of the parallels between Spinoza's philosophy and the philosophies of the East.

At about the same time as the publication of S.M. Melamed's book, Kurt F. Leidecker wrote a 1934 article for *The Open Court*, comparing Spinoza's philosophy to Śāṅkara's Vedānta.³⁵ Leidecker does not undertake a detailed, text-based analysis of either Vedānta or Spinozism, instead merely pointing out the most obvious points of similarity between the two systems, but his insights are none-

31 Melamed, *Spinoza and Buddha*, p. 11–12.

32 Melamed, *Spinoza and Buddha*, p. viii.

33 Melamed, *Spinoza and Buddha*, pp. 1–2.

34 Melamed, *Spinoza and Buddha*, p. 214.

35 Leidecker, Kurt F., "Spinoza and Hinduism," in *The Open Court*, vol. 48, no. 931 (1934).

theless informative. Leidecker argues that in each system: (1) God is the eternal, self-caused, infinite existence underlying all things (“infinite” in the sense of being independent and unconstrained); (2) God is beyond human categories of good and evil; (3) world-creation does not give rise to something separate from God; (4) the consciousness of the individual soul is God’s own consciousness; (5) the human mind has access to three types of knowledge, one based on inference, another based on reason, and a third based on direct knowledge of God’s essence; and (6) true knowledge leads to human perfection and enduring joy (*laetitia*) or bliss (*ānanda*). Leidecker’s brief article is valuable, but it merely whets the appetite for a more probing analysis.

A third book-length comparison of Hindu philosophy to that of Spinoza is *Spinoza in the Light of the Vedānta* by Rama Kanta Tripathi, published in 1957. The book is primarily an explication of Spinoza’s philosophical system, but Tripathi points out, throughout his analysis, the places where similar ideas appear in Śaṅkara’s Vedānta. The result is a fascinating comparison that serves to make Spinoza accessible to readers who are accustomed to thinking in Vedāntic categories.

Tripathi identifies all the most obvious parallels between Śaṅkara’s Vedānta and Spinozism, such as (1) the similarity of Śaṅkara’s “Brahman” to Spinoza’s divine “substance” (*substantia*), (2) the unity of all things in God’s own infinite being, (3) the pursuit of human self-perfection through the cultivation of reason over passion, and (4) the attainment of liberation or blessedness by means of true knowledge — that is, knowledge of things *sub specie aeternitatis* (“under a species of eternity”). But Tripathi also takes liberties with Spinoza’s ideas, using his explication of Spinoza’s

philosophy as a vehicle for championing the genius of Śaṅkara’s Vedānta. As Tripathi’s editor concedes, Tripathi’s book is “an emendation of Spinoza in the light of Śaṅkara.”³⁶ In other words, Tripathi’s purpose is, in part, to improve upon Spinoza’s philosophy by interpreting it through a Vedāntic lens. It is Tripathi’s assertion that Vedānta reconciles the most problematic parts of Spinoza’s system and that Westerners misunderstand Spinoza because they are not accustomed to certain counterintuitive ideas that are well developed in Vedānta.

There may be some validity to the latter assertion. If Spinoza’s philosophy is similar in many ways to the leading philosophies of Hindu India — and I think it is — then it follows that Hindus might have easier access to some of Spinoza’s ideas than do Westerners. It is perhaps difficult for Westerners, who are generally accustomed to thinking empirically, to imagine that the subject-object divide is merely an illusion or that mind and matter are the same thing comprehended in two different ways. By contrast, those notions are much less alien to the well-educated Hindu, for they are central to the Hindu religious discussion. Indeed, Tripathi argues that much of the criticism of Spinoza’s philosophy can be traced to the inability of Spinoza’s critics to think in non-empirical terms.³⁷

But Tripathi, in his effort to explain Spinoza’s system in light of Śaṅkara’s Vedānta, reconfigures the former to fit the latter. He asserts that Vedānta — and in particular Śaṅkara’s doctrine of world-illusion (*māyāvāda*, or *vivartavāda*) — is the key that makes sense of Spinoza’s metaphysics,

36 Tripathi, Rama Kanta, *Spinoza in the Light of the Vedānta* (Banaras Hindu Univ. Press 1957), p. i.

37 Tripathi, *Spinoza in the Light*, pp. iv–v, 172, 312.

and he further asserts that this acosmist emendation of Spinoza's philosophy is implied in everything Spinoza states explicitly.

As to the latter point, Tripathi makes two interrelated arguments.³⁸ First, he adopts the subjective interpretation of the "attributes" of Spinoza's divine substance, meaning that the categories of "thought" and "extension" (i.e., mind and matter) are, according to Tripathi's interpretation of Spinoza, merely things we *ascribe* to the infinite being of God; they are not actually real or existent in themselves. As Tripathi puts it, their basis is epistemological, not ontological. Thus, Tripathi reads Spinoza as holding that the world, in both its mental and material aspects, is a false appearance (*māyā*). Second, Tripathi relies heavily on Spinoza's assertion that "all determination is negation" (*omnis determinatio est negatio*).³⁹ Following Georg Wilhelm Friedrich

38 For Tripathi's presentation of these arguments, see, e.g., Tripathi, *Spinoza in the Light*, pp. v–vi, 65–66, 68–73, 89, 92, 113, 121, 122–129, 134, 154–160, 184–188, 197–200, 203–208, 211–216, 314–322.

39 To better understand Spinoza's assertion, one should consider it in its context. Spinoza says: "As for shape being a negation, and not something positive, it's manifest that matter as a whole, considered without limitation, can have no shape, and that shape pertains only to finite and determinate bodies. For whoever says that he conceives a shape indicates nothing by this except that he conceives a determinate thing, and how it is determinate. So this determination does not pertain to the thing according to its being, but on the contrary, it is its non-being. Therefore, because the shape is nothing but a determination, and a *determination is a negation*, as they say, it can't be anything but a negation." Letter 50 [Gebhardt, Carl (ed.), *Spinoza Opera*, 4 vols. (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1925), IV/240b/25–35], italics added. The translations of Spinoza's writings that appear in this article are from Curley, Edwin (ed. and transl.), *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, vols. I & II (Princeton Univ. Press 1988 and

Hegel (1770–1831 c.e.), Tripathi derives from this principle that anything that is finite exists only as a selective negation of God's infinite presence, and therefore only God's infinite presence is real, not the finite object that one might be observing. In my view, which follows that of Yitzhak Melamed (no relation to S.M. Melamed), the acosmist interpretation of Spinoza is flawed,⁴⁰ but Tripathi relies on it to conclude that Spinoza's God, like Śaṅkara's Brahman, is a God relative to which all things are unreal. In this regard, Tripathi follows the lead of Theodore Goldstücker and Maganlal Buch.

In making these arguments, Tripathi embraces a qualified version of subjective idealism,⁴¹ and he overlooks the non-reductive aspect of Spinoza's philosophical system. For Spinoza, "a mode of extension" (i.e., a distinct material object) is just as real as "the idea of that mode" (i.e., the thought that corresponds to that object),

2016), sometimes with minor edits.

40 See Melamed, Yitzhak Y., " 'Omnis determinatio est negatio': Determination, negation, and self-negation in Spinoza, Kant, and Hegel," in Förster, Eckart, and Yitzhak Y. Melamed (eds.), *Spinoza and German Idealism* (Cambridge Univ. Press 2012), pp. 184–196. See also Melamed, "Salomon Maimon and the Rise of Spinozism in German Idealism," pp. 76–79, 86. When Tripathi describes God as infinite, he means the absence of defining characteristics. But when Spinoza describes God as infinite, he means that God is not constrained or determined by anything *external to God*, and therefore that nothing impedes God's expression of God's own essence. Importantly, in Spinoza's use of the term "infinite," God has discernible characteristics.

41 Tripathi argues that there is an aspect of God called "Īśvara" that mediates between the "supreme reality" (*paramārthika*) and the practical world of diverse phenomena (*vyavahārika*), and Tripathi asserts that the finite things that make up the practical world are the dream images of Īśvara. See Tripathi, *Spinoza in the Light*, pp. 158–159, 188–192.

and neither can be eliminated in favor of the other. Thus, Spinoza rejects subjective idealism. But Tripathi — whose admiration for Spinoza is beyond question — prefers to repair Spinoza’s philosophy by conforming it to Śaṅkara’s Vedānta rather than to repair Śaṅkara’s Vedānta by conforming it to Spinoza. In contrast to S.M. Melamed, Tripathi has a profound grasp of and appreciation for Spinoza’s ideas, but in the end, Tripathi loves his Vedānta as much as S.M. Melamed loves his Judaism. As a result, Tripathi’s contribution to our understanding of Spinoza’s metaphysics, although valuable, is incomplete.

More recently, there has been renewed interest in the similarities between Hindu philosophy and that of Spinoza. In 1984, Bina Gupta wrote a thoughtful article for the *Indian Philosophical Quarterly*, comparing Śaṅkara’s “Brahman” to Spinoza’s divine “substance” (*substantia*). Gupta notes that both entities are defined as eternal, self-caused, infinite existence, constrained by nothing and dependent on nothing.⁴² But Gupta also identifies the key distinction between the two. She notes that in Spinoza’s system, the differentiated world of finite things is objectively real. It is a necessary expression of the divine substance, and in that sense, it tells us something about the innermost nature of the divine substance. For Śaṅkara, by contrast, the world is a mere appearance — a false interpretation that we superimpose on Brahman. In Śaṅkara’s system, the world is real only insofar as it is understood to be Brahman; it is a mere phantasm insofar as it is understood to be the world. Moreover, people who, through their ignorance, take the world to be real turn Brahman into a

42 Gupta, Bina, “Brahman, God, Substance and Nature: Samkara and Spinoza,” in *Indian Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. XI, no. 3 (1984), pp. 272, 281–282.

finite god of religious devotion. In truth, no qualities characterize or can be ascribed to Brahman.⁴³

Gupta readily concedes several general correspondences between the philosophies of Śaṅkara and Spinoza. For example, both philosophers recognize three means of acquiring knowledge, and for both, freedom is achieved through the highest of these means, an intuitive knowledge of God’s essence.⁴⁴ Also, both philosophers claim that human beings lack free will. Instead, human beings imagine themselves to be free because they do not know the causes of their desires.⁴⁵ But Gupta sees a distinction in how the two philosophies characterize the outcome of the philosopher’s quest. The highest goal for Spinoza is the ability to view all things “under a species of eternity,” understanding all things as God understands them. For Śaṅkara, by contrast, true knowledge leads to the awareness that the world is an illusion.⁴⁶

As Gupta points out, Śaṅkara’s doctrine of world illusion (*māyāvāda*) allows Brahman, the underlying cause of the world, to remain indeterminate, having no form and undergoing no modifications. By contrast, Spinoza’s divine substance expresses its own eternal essence through temporal modifications that are real, thus giving rise to a real world, but by the same token, giving content to God’s own being.⁴⁷ Gupta comments on the significance of this distinction, saying:

43 Gupta, “Brahman, God, Substance and Nature,” pp. 272–276.

44 Gupta, “Brahman, God, Substance and Nature,” pp. 276–278.

45 Gupta, “Brahman, God, Substance and Nature,” p. 279.

46 Gupta, “Brahman, God, Substance and Nature,” pp. 278–281.

47 Gupta, “Brahman, God, Substance and Nature,” p. 281.

The intuitive knowledge of God which Spinoza seeks is a way to understand the world as it really is. It is not a flight from the material world, but a celebration of its essential nature and oneness. The pursuit of Brahman, on the other hand, implies repudiation of the world: it is a realization that Brahman is the only reality; the world is merely an appearance and the [individual soul] and Brahman are non-different.⁴⁸

Here, of course, Gupta rejects the acosmist interpretation of Spinoza put forward by Hegel, Goldstücker, Buch, Tripathi, and many others. Moreover, Gupta has focused our attention on the precise point that makes *Pratyabhijñā* Shaivism, not Śaṅkara's Vedānta, the closer analog to Spinoza's metaphysics.

A year later, in 1985, Abhedha Nanda Bhattacharya published a short book entitled *The Idealistic Philosophy of Śaṅkara and Spinozā*. His book relies mostly on secondary sources, and it includes almost no comparative analysis of the two philosophies. Instead, the book summarizes Śaṅkara's Vedānta (in about 70 pages), and then it separately summarizes Spinoza's philosophy (in about 36 pages), leaving it mostly to the reader to identify similarities and differences. Bhattacharya does, however, end each of his summaries with a section entitled "Critical Estimate" in which he expresses his own views about each philosophy. Notably, in these sections, he doesn't attempt to hide his admiration for Śaṅkara's philosophy, nor does he shy from highlighting what he deems to be the flaws in Spinoza's system.

Bhattacharya is particularly sensitive to the charge that, according to Śaṅkara, the objective world is a mere illusion, and

Bhattacharya devotes considerable energy to refuting that charge. His main point is that the world is not an illusion in the sense of being nonexistent; rather, the world is a misapprehension of the facts. The cause of the world is Brahman, but the cause (i.e., Brahman) never actually undergoes any change or transformation, and thus the effect (i.e., the world) never actually occurs. What appears as the world is actually just Brahman, as when a coiled rope appears to be a snake.⁴⁹ Nonetheless, consistent with Śaṅkara's teaching, Bhattacharya readily concedes that the world has a practical significance that makes it more real than a mere dream image. According to Bhattacharya, Śaṅkara's Vedānta is not subjective idealism, and it does not abandon consciousness-matter dualism: Something "external" exists as the object of consciousness, but that something is not what we imagine it to be.⁵⁰

With regard to Spinoza's philosophy, Bhattacharya rejects the subjective interpretation of the "attributes" of divine "substance" (*substantia*), thus disagreeing with Buch and Tripathi's acosmist interpretation of Spinoza. Instead, Bhattacharya concludes that the attributes of Spinoza's divine substance are ontologically real, multiplying God's being. Moreover, because God's attributes are infinite in number, whereas human beings are only capable of conceiving two of those attributes (thought and extension), Bhattacharya argues that God, for Spinoza, is transcendent and unknowable.⁵¹ Taking

49 Bhattacharya, Abhedha Nanda, *The Idealistic Philosophy of Śaṅkara and Spinozā: Some Typical Problems of Idealism of the Two Philosophers* (Durga Publications 1985), pp. 4, 23–25.

50 Bhattacharya, *The Idealistic Philosophy*, pp. 30, 82.

51 Bhattacharya, *The Idealistic Philosophy*, pp. 103–104.

48 Gupta, "Brahman, God, Substance and Nature," p. 281.

the point a step further, Bhattacharya finds here an inconsistency in Spinoza's philosophy. As Bhattacharya puts it, Spinoza begins his philosophy as a pantheist (i.e., nature and God are the same thing), but he ends his philosophy as a theist (i.e., God is infinitely greater than nature, the latter being incomplete and hence imperfect).⁵²

As regards the reality of the physical world, Bhattacharya notes that, for Spinoza, thought and extension (i.e., mind and matter) have coequal status. Neither is reducible to the other, and neither can influence the other causally. But Bhattacharya finds an inconsistency in the fact that Spinoza also describes thought and extension as conceptions of the human intellect, which is itself a *thinking* thing. Bhattacharya argues that thought thus "has a double function"; it is, on the one hand, a parallel attribute to the attribute of extension, and it is, on the other hand, the thinking subject that perceives the two attributes of thought and extension. Bhattacharya therefore concludes that Spinoza's theory of thought-matter equivalence, which claims to be a response to Cartesian dualism, is merely Cartesian dualism in a different form.⁵³ Of course, Bhattacharya is not the first to notice this particular peculiarity of Spinoza's philosophy, and although Bhattacharya doesn't make the point explicitly, he implies by the title of his book (*The Idealistic Philosophy of Śaṅkara and Spinozā*) that for Spinoza, thought is everything, and matter (i.e., extension) — even if it is non-eliminable — is ultimately just a concept held by the intellect. Here, I think Bhattacharya misreads Spinoza, a point this article explains in section 2, below.

52 Bhattacharya, *The Idealistic Philosophy*, pp. 98–102, 106–110, 113, 116–117.

53 Bhattacharya, *The Idealistic Philosophy*, pp. 105–106.

Bhattacharya's book includes some important insights, but it fails to undertake a deep analysis of the primary sources. As a result, Bhattacharya's defense of Śaṅkara's Vedānta lacks analytical rigor, and his critique of Spinoza, although valid in part, makes interpretive errors. For example, Bhattacharya takes a misstep, I think, when he argues that all nondualist philosophies need to bridge the gap between the "absolute" (i.e., Śaṅkara's "Brahman" or Spinoza's "substance"), which is infinite and perfect, and the external world, which is finite and imperfect.⁵⁴ Spinoza would not agree that the world is finite; rather, human beings divide it into finite parts. Nor would Spinoza agree that the world is in any sense imperfect, evil, or sinful; rather, moralistic judgments and ethical categories are, for Spinoza, valid only in relation to human needs. (See, e.g., *Ethics*, III, Preface.) Therefore, for Spinoza, there is no gap to bridge between God and the world, and Spinoza, unlike Śaṅkara, has no need to declare the world false or to deny the reality of causal transformation. In the end, the greatest contribution of Bhattacharya's monograph may be that it forces us to think deeply about the irregularities and inconsistencies that lurk within both Śaṅkara's Vedānta and Spinoza's monism, asking ourselves, as to each system, whether those irregularities and inconsistencies can be reconciled.

In 2014, William Néria published a book entitled *Plotin, Shankara, Spinoza: Le dépassement de la raison et l'expérience de l'Absolu*. As the title suggests, Néria compares the philosophies of Plotinus (204/5–270 c.e.), Śaṅkara, and Spinoza. With respect to each philosophy, Néria first examines the individuation process

54 See, e.g., Bhattacharya, *The Idealistic Philosophy*, pp. 15, 26–27, 98–102, 108, 113, 116–117, 125–126.

that gives rise to the ego-sense. Next, he considers the role played by the intellect in overcoming that individuation. And finally, he describes the state of a person who has merged his or her individuality into the “Absolute.”

Because Néria is attempting a three-way comparison among philosophies that emerged in different cultural settings and that use words in different ways, his task is a formidable one. Nonetheless, Néria’s approach is careful and scholarly, and his insights are brilliant. His primary point is that all three philosophies begin with a “prime intuition,” a common “anchor point” that is more experiential than it is philosophical.⁵⁵ From there, all three philosophies validate the use of the intellect, but they also ask the seeker to go beyond mere reason to a higher form of knowing that eliminates the subject-object divide. That higher form of knowing leads to eternal serenity, unaffected by the extremes of desire and aversion.⁵⁶

Although Néria’s book is the most recent in-depth treatment of our subject, scholars have continued to be fascinated by the similarities between the philosophical systems of Śaṅkara and Spinoza. In 2016, Shakuntala Gawde wrote a brief article emphasizing the need for global intercultural harmony.⁵⁷ Like other scholars before her, she identifies the following points of similarity between Śaṅkara’s Vedānta and Spinoza’s philosophical system: (1) God is one, infinite, indivisible, unchanging, and the underlying being of all things; (2) God

55 Néria, William, *Plotin, Shankara, Spinoza: Le dépassement de la raison et L’expérience de l’Absolu* (Les Deux Océans 2014), p. 19.

56 Néria, *Plotin, Shankara, Spinoza*, pp. 167–170, 209–212.

57 Gawde, Shakuntala, “Monism of Śaṅkara and Spinoza – a Comparative Study,” in *International Journal of Social Science and Humanities Research*, vol. 4, no. 3 (July–Sept. 2016), pp. 483–489.

does not interfere in human affairs, which are instead dictated by the law of cause-and-effect; (3) the consciousness of the human soul is God’s own consciousness; (4) the appearance of diversity (i.e., *māyā* according to Vedānta, the “attributes and modes” according to Spinoza) is merely a subjective ascription, not real; and (5) true knowledge leads to human perfection and joy.⁵⁸

As point (4) in this brief summary shows, Gawde embraces the acosmist interpretation of Spinoza, agreeing with Buch, Tripathi, and others holding a similar view.⁵⁹ Of course, the acosmist interpretation tends to align Spinoza’s system more closely with Śaṅkara’s Vedānta, but as already said, it overlooks the fact that for Spinoza, the material world is quite real, thus making *Pratyabhijñā* Shaivism the closer comparison.

Michael Hemmingsen wrote an article in 2018 that focuses directly on the question of acosmism in Spinoza’s philosophy, a question that, as we have seen, is critical to any effort to align Spinoza’s philosophy with that of Śaṅkara.⁶⁰ Hemmingsen’s

58 In 2018, two years after Gawde’s article, Urmi Ray published a brief article that makes similar points. See Ray, Urmi, “Advaitavada versus Spinoza’s Monism,” in *Journal of Emerging Technologies and Innovative Research*, vol. 5, no. 7 (July 2018), pp. 610–614. In addition to those points, Ray’s article also considers (1) the temporality of the differentiated world (*id.*, pp. 611–612), (2) the transcendent unknowability of God (*id.*, p. 612), and (3) God’s lack of purpose other than sport or joy (*id.*, pp. 613–614). Like Gawde, Ray uses her comparative analysis as a basis for urging harmony in human relations.

59 Gawde, “Monism of Śaṅkara and Spinoza,” p. 486.

60 Hemmingsen, Michael, “Māyā and Becoming: Deleuze and Vedānta on Attributes, Acosmism, and Parallelism in Spinoza,” in *Comparative and Continental Philosophy*, vol. 10, no. 3 (June 2018), pp. 238–250.

article contrasts Tripathi's interpretation of Spinoza with Gilles Deleuze's alternative interpretation. Tripathi — who seeks to emend Spinoza's philosophy in light of Śāṅkara's Vedānta — embraces the subjective interpretation of the "attributes" of divine "substance," arguing that the attributes are mere ascriptions that we superimpose on divine substance and that divine substance is ultimately unknowable and transcendent (i.e., not subject to any differentiation or determination). By contrast, Deleuze is one of the philosophers who reject the acosmist interpretation of Spinoza's philosophical system, arguing that Spinoza's divine substance is expressed in its attributes and modes, and that it is ontologically real in that expressed form, giving rise to a real world of objects and ideas. Hemmingsen's article compares the competing interpretations of Tripathi and Deleuze, focusing on three issues: (1) the ontological status of the attributes, (2) acosmism and the unity of all existence, and (3) the parallelism of the attributes. The result is a fascinating analysis of Spinoza's philosophy, although the reader wishes Hemmingsen had ventured more deeply into Spinoza's own statements, explaining where either Deleuze or Tripathi failed to come to grips with what Spinoza actually said.

Also in 2018, MD-Zizaur Rahaman and Ashaduzzaman Khan wrote an article comparing the philosophies of Rāmānuja (ca. 1017–1137 c.e.), Spinoza, and Ibn 'Arabī (1165–1240 c.e.). Their article makes the point that in all three systems, God is identified in some way with the physical world and with individual souls. Rāmānuja describes physical matter and individual souls as attributes or modes of a single divine substance, and — in contrast to Śāṅkara — Rāmānuja insists that the world is real, rejecting Śāṅkara's assertion

that God is devoid of qualities (*nirguṇa brahman*).⁶¹ In these ways, Rāmānuja's philosophy seems to be similar to that of Spinoza, but Rāmānuja uses the terms "attribute" (*viśeṣaṇa*), "mode" (*prakāra*), and "substance" (*dravya, viśeṣya, prakāri*) in very different ways than Spinoza uses them, making the two philosophies verbally similar but semantically distinct. Significantly, Rāmānuja does not describe an isomorphism of thought and matter, nor does he assert that all material objects have minds and that all consciousness is consciousness of self. In addition, Rāmānuja embraces (1) absolute free will, (2) the immortality of the individual soul, and (3) the existence of a personal God that intervenes in history. In short, Rāmānuja's philosophy — unlike Spinoza's — expresses the widely held intuitions of devotional religion. Nonetheless, it does relate all things, including both mind and matter, to God.⁶² Ibn 'Arabī, by contrast, describes the physical world and living beings as *reflections* of God.⁶³ Rahaman and Khan conclude their article by noting that despite the irreconcilable distinctions among religions, the concepts of God and world (and their relation to one another) are similar in each of these three philosophies.⁶⁴

61 Rahaman, MD-Zizaur, and Ashaduzzaman Khan, "The Concept of God: A Comparative Study of Ramanuja, Spinoza, and Ibn-Arabi," in *Research Guru*, vol. 12, no. 2 (Sept. 2018), pp. 91–94.

62 Rāmānuja also embraces the theory of divine incarnation (*avatāra*). For a general introduction to Rāmānuja's thought, see Radhakrishnan, Sarvepalli, *Indian Philosophy*, vol. II (George Allen & Unwin LTD, 2nd edition, 1931), ch. IX; Ādidevānanda (transl.), *Yatīndramatadīpikā by Śrīnivāsadāsa: A Hand Book on the Philosophy of Rāmānuja* (Sri Ramakrishna Math 1949).

63 Rahaman and Khan, "The Concept of God," pp. 96–98.

64 Rahaman and Khan, "The Concept of God,"

As this brief survey of the relevant literature shows, many scholars have taken an interest in the obvious parallels between Hindu thought and Spinoza's more recent philosophical system. The most important distinction that several scholars have recognized relates to the ontological status of the objective world. According to Śaṅkara's Vedānta, the world is a false appearance superimposed on God. Some scholars have argued that Spinoza holds a similar view, and others have strongly disagreed. The remainder of this article will focus on this dispute, concluding that for Spinoza the objective world is real and that the acosmist interpretation of Spinoza's philosophy is wrong.

2. The Attributes of Divine Substance

We have seen that for Spinoza, "substance" (*substantia*) is the ground of being; it is that in which other things inhere, but which itself inheres in no other thing. (*Ethics*, ID3.) And Spinoza further asserts that only one infinite, eternal, and self-sufficient substance exists and that it is God. (*Id.*, IP11 and IP14.) These descriptions make Spinoza's divine substance comparable to Vedānta's Brahman, as numerous scholars have noted.

But one issue in particular has troubled scholars who have compared Spinoza's philosophy to that of the Hindu sages, and that issue is the proper way to understand Spinoza's assertion that "substance" (i.e., God) has infinite "attributes" (i.e., ways of being comprehended), of which the "attribute of thought" and the "attribute of extension" are but two. As described above, some scholars have adopted a subjective interpretation of the attributes, asserting that the attributes are mere ascriptions of the philosopher's intellect with no real existence, and based on that conclusion, these

scholars assert that, for Spinoza, thought and extension (i.e., mind and matter) are just appearances. This interpretation, of course, closely aligns Spinoza's philosophy with Śaṅkara's doctrine of world-illusion (*māyāvāda*).⁶⁵ Other scholars have argued that the attributes of substance are ontologically real, and because they are infinite in number, they infinitely multiply God's being, making God infinitely greater than what human beings can know, and hence transcendent.⁶⁶ And a third view is that the attributes are distinct aspects of the divine substance, and they are therefore real, but as aspects of a single thing, they do not multiply God's being.⁶⁷ Which of these descriptions is most accurate?

According to Spinoza, the attributes are "what the intellect perceives of a substance, as constituting its essence." (*Ethics*, ID4.) The modes, by contrast, are "the affections of a substance" (*id.*, ID5), meaning the modifications that inhere in a substance. Therefore, if the intellect is ascribing the attribute of thought to a substance, and hence to the modifications of that sub-

65 On the subjective interpretation of the attributes, see, e.g., Wolfson, Harry Austryn, *The Philosophy of Spinoza: Unfolding the Latent Processes of His Reasoning* (Harvard Univ. Press 1934), vol. I, pp. 146–157. On the comparison to Vedānta, see, e.g., Buch, *The Philosophy of Śaṅkara*, pp. 201–203; Tripathi, *Spinoza in the Light*, pp. v–vi, 65–66, 68–73, 89, 92, 113, 121, 122–129, 134, 154–160, 184–188, 197–200, 203–208, 211–216, 314–322.

66 See, e.g., Bhattacharya, *The Idealistic Philosophy*, pp. 93–117.

67 See, e.g., Melamed, Yitzhak Y., "The Building Blocks of Spinoza's Metaphysics: Substance, Attributes and Modes," in Della Rocca, Michael (ed.), *Oxford Handbook of Spinoza* (Oxford Univ. Press 2017), pp. 90–103; Melamed, Yitzhak Y., "Spinoza's Deification of Existence," in *Oxford Studies in Early Modern Philosophy*, vol. 6 (2013), pp. 98–102.

stance, then Finite Mode A seems to be an idea of the mind, but if the intellect is ascribing the attribute of extension to those same modifications, then Finite Mode A seems to be a particular configuration of a material brain.

In each case, however, the intellect is *ascribing* something to the substance, and it is perceiving the substance and its modifications relative to that ascription. Hence, the careful reader will be asking, What is Finite Mode A *as it is in itself*, without any ascription of the intellect? Put another way, if the intellect inevitably perceives the essence of substance under this or that attribute, is the perceivable world merely an appearance, analogous to the illusory world of Śāṅkara's Vedānta, and is the world *as it is in itself* unknowable?

As noted, some Vedānta scholars have made that argument, but Spinoza flatly rejects it. He asserts that “[t]he human Mind has an adequate knowledge of God's eternal and infinite essence.” (*Ethics*, IIP47.) In Spinoza's usage “adequate knowledge” means knowledge that is true. Moreover, the intellect, according to Spinoza, is the rational subpart of the mind, and its ideas — being either axiomatic or derived by flawless reasoning — are never false. (See *id.*, IIP41.) Therefore, if the attributes are “what the *intellect* perceives of a substance, as constituting its essence” (*id.*, ID4, italics added), then they must be true perceptions, not mere perceptual overlays. Hence, the attributes must correspond to something that actually exists in the essence of the divine substance itself, which means that they are ontologically real, not mere illusions.⁶⁸

The widespread confusion, however, regarding the ontological status of the

attributes is due, in part, to Spinoza's seeming equivocation on the question. For example, Spinoza claims that “outside the intellect there is nothing except substances and their affections” (*Ethics*, IP4, Dem.), thus implying that the attributes are mere ascriptions of the intellect and therefore unreal, and he likewise asserts that “the intellect . . . *attributes* such and such a definite nature to substance” (Letter 9 [IV/46/20–25], italics added). To better understand what Spinoza means by these statements, an analogy might help. A circle can be accurately conceived geometrically. It is then a two-dimensional figure representing the locus of points equidistant from a single point. But a circle can also be conceived algebraically. It is then the equation $x^2 + y^2 = k$, where x and y are variables and k is a constant. Underlying both these alternative conceptions of a circle is the same mathematical idea, and both conceptions are ways the intellect perceives that underlying mathematical idea. Both are equally true since both accurately express the underlying mathematical idea. Moreover, neither can be eliminated in favor of the other; neither is more valid than the other. One can think of them as mere ascriptions of the intellect, since they are the intellect's ways of perceiving the underlying mathematical idea, but because both are equally true and because neither can be eliminated in favor of the other, both are real. Thus, these alternative ways of conceiving of a circle can be understood as *aspects* of the underlying mathematical idea. In a similar way, the attributes of thought and extension (i.e., mind and matter) are, according to Spinoza, aspects of a single divine substance. One can think of them as mere ascriptions of the intellect since they are the intellect's ways of perceiving the divine substance, but they are real, not illusions.

68 See Melamed, “The Building Blocks of Spinoza's Metaphysics,” pp. 90–103, esp. pp. 95 and 102; Melamed, “Spinoza's Deification of Existence,” pp. 98–102.

But our story doesn't end there, for everything we have said so far still seems to be erected upon an idealistic foundation. Notice that Spinoza uses the language of mentation whenever he discusses the attributes. In other words, thought does a double duty in Spinoza's system; it acts as one of the attributes that the intellect perceives (alongside an infinite number of non-mental attributes), but at a higher level, it also acts as the intellect's own act of perception. Spinoza says that everything can be "comprehended" as either thought or extension (i.e., mind or matter),⁶⁹ but since *thought* is the thing doing the comprehending, *thought* must be the ultimate ground of being, and the non-mental attributes must be unreal.

But that seems to be true only because by trying to solve the philosophical riddle, we are *thinking* about it. According to thought-matter equivalence, the intellect that perceives the attributes — and, ultimately, we are referring to the infinite intellect⁷⁰ — is just as much an extended thing as it is a thinking thing. (See *Ethics*, IIP13; Letter 32 [IV/173a/15–174a/10]; see also *Ethics*, VP29.) In other words, for Spinoza, our perception of the attributes derives from their actual existence, not the other way around. Therefore, no attribute is eliminable, and none can be reduced to another.

As noted, some Vedānta scholars, accepting that the attributes are ontologically real, have argued that because Spinoza defines God as a being that is

69 "[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., italics added.

70 Spinoza also defines the attributes as "whatever can be perceived by an *infinite intellect* as constituting an essence of substance." *Ethics*, IIP7, Schol., italics added.

"absolutely infinite," "consisting of an infinity of attributes" (*Ethics*, ID6), and because human beings can conceive of only two such attributes (see Letter 64 [IV/277/10–278/5]), God's being — like that of Śaṅkara's Brahman — is infinitely greater than what is humanly knowable. There are two problems with this reasoning. First, it fails to recognize that the attributes constitute aspects of the same substance, not different substances. Therefore, although they are ontologically real, they do not multiply God's being. The fact that there are different, equally valid ways to conceive of a thing does not imply that there are different things being conceived. Second, Spinoza does not commit himself to the actual existence of any attributes other than thought and extension; rather, he commits himself to the assertion that God is unconstrained, free, and independent, which is what Spinoza means when he uses the term "infinite." God must have "infinite" attributes because any limitation on the number of God's attributes would imply the existence of something outside God that imposed that limitation, and no such thing exists. As Spinoza explains,

[w]e form the axiom [that God has infinite attributes (*Ethics*, IP10, Schol.)] from the idea we have of an absolutely infinite Being . . . , and not from the fact that there are, *or could be*, beings which have three, four, etc., attributes. (Letter 64 [IV/278/20–25], italics added.)

In summary, in Spinoza's philosophy, the attributes of divine substance are ontologically real, which means that the world is real. Moreover, the attributes of divine substance are infinite in number, but such infinitude does not place God's essence beyond the reach of the human mind. And it is precisely these points — the reality of the world and the knowability of God —

that most sharply distinguish Spinoza's philosophy from Śaṅkara's Vedānta, but importantly, it is these same points that also distinguish *Pratyabhijñā* philosophy from Śaṅkara's Vedānta, making *Pratyabhijñā* philosophy the closer analog to Spinozism. Nor is this distinction from Śaṅkara's Vedānta without important consequences. The world can be a difficult place. Countless people lack adequate nutrition and shelter. Epidemic diseases sweep across the planet. Wars ravage entire nations. If these calamities are unreal, why apply oneself to discovery, invention, and industry? Why eke out some small benefit through ingenuity and toil? Quietism and renunciation seem like the better response. But has any society overcome hunger, cold, disease, and war by the methods of quietism and renunciation? *Pratyabhijñā* philosophy and Spinoza teach us that the world is real and that it operates according to immutable physical laws, laws that can be inventively applied to predict real events and to devise real answers to real problems. This teaching is nothing less than a call to action.

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James H. Cumming (Bachelor of Arts, Columbia University; Juris Doctor, *magna cum laude*, University of Pennsylvania) is a senior research attorney at the California Supreme Court, where he is an expert in philosophy of law. He has also been a scholar of religion for over 40 years. He began by studying Sanskrit and Indian scripture, specializing in the nondual philosophy of Kashmir. Later, he learned Hebrew and completed a comprehensive study of Jewish mysticism. In 2019, he published *Torah and Nondualism: Diversity, Conflict, and Synthesis* (Ibis Press). This article is excerpted from his second book,

The Nondual Mind: Vedānta, Kashmiri Pratyabhijñā Shaivism, and Spinoza, which is still in manuscript, and which can be accessed on Academia.edu.

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ÉTÉ

- 2023 -

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THE VALUE OF PI IN THE BIBLE (AND WHAT IT TELLS US ABOUT BIBLICAL HERMENEUTICS)

by James H. Cumming

JamesHCumming@gmail.com



1. The Value of π in the Bible

In ancient times, builders and land surveyors were aware that the ratio of a circle's circumference to its diameter was a constant, and they were also aware that the number three was a rough approximation of that constant. Today, we know that π is approximately 3.14159265359, but the decimal system for notating non-integer numbers did not spread westward from India until the 12th century of the Common Era. In ancient times, therefore, the value of π was not usually reduced to a single multi-digit number. Instead, it was expressed as a ratio. The ratios most often used were 3:1, 22:7, 256:81, 333:106, and 355:113. The last of these is the most accurate, corresponding to 3.14159292035 in decimal notation. But 333:106 is also very accurate, corresponding to 3.14150943396 in decimal notation. And less accurate approximations were also widely used. The Rhind Mathematical Papyrus, which dates to 1650 b.c.e., discusses how to determine the volume of a cylindrical granary if one knows its diameter, and the formula given in that text indicates that the ancient Egyp-

tians used 256:81 as an approximation for π , corresponding to 3.16049382716 in decimal notation.

One excerpt, however, from the Bible suggests that, in ancient times, Israelite builders and land surveyors were working with much cruder approximations. Referring to the construction of the basin used for priestly ablutions in the temple of Solomon, the first book of Kings states: "And he made the molten sea of ten cubits from brim to brim, round in compass, . . . and a line of thirty cubits did compass it round about." (1 Kings 7:23.) If one calculates the ratio between the thirty-cubit circumference of the "molten sea" and its ten-cubit diameter, it appears that the Bible's redactors used the ratio 3:1 as a rough approximation for π .

But what if the scribes who redacted 1 Kings knew that the value for π indicated in the text was merely an approximation? If so, how might they have signaled that awareness? Perhaps by using *gematria*, a hermeneutical technique whereby the numerical value of a letter is calculated based on its position in the Hebrew alphabet.

Significantly, in the text translated above from 1 Kings, the word “line” is used for “circumference” (“a *line* of thirty cubits did compass it round about”). In Hebrew, the word for “line” is *qava*, and it is usually spelled using the Hebrew letters *quf* and *vov* (many Hebrew words are spelled without vowels). But in 1 Kings, the word “line” is spelled incorrectly as *qavah*, using the Hebrew letters *quf*, *vov*, and *hei*. If each letter is given a numerical value based on its position in the Hebrew alphabet, then the value of *qava* (the correct spelling) is $100 + 6$, or 106, but the value of *qavah* (the incorrect spelling) is $100 + 6 + 5$, or 111. Thus, the text misspells *qava*, and the misspelling results in an error in the numerical value of that word, changing its value from 106 to 111.

Taking this bit of *gematria* into consideration, it appears that the scribes who redacted 1 Kings chose a very efficient way to express the value of π in the biblical text. Decimal notation was not in use at the time, and therefore if they had wanted to write that the “molten sea” was ten cubits across and 31.415 cubits around (which, of course, would have much more accurately approximated π), they would have needed to express 31.415 as the ratio 333:106 multiplied by 10, which would have required a great deal of additional text. Instead, the scribes very cleverly wrote the erroneous value of “thirty cubits” for the circumference of the “molten sea” and then signaled that they were well aware of the error by *inflating* the numerical value of the word *qava* (“line”), which is the word that the text uses for “circumference.” By giving that word an inflated value of 111, instead of 106, these clever scribes hinted that the erroneous circumference of “thirty cubits” also needed to be inflated, in the same proportion. And when that is done ($30 \times 111/106$), the circumference of the

“molten sea” becomes 31.4150943396 cubits, indicating a very accurate knowledge of the value of π . Indeed, it is as if the scribes had said: “Just as we have increased the numerical value of this word that we are using here to describe the circumference of the molten sea, so also, and to the same degree, the circumference of thirty cubits should be increased.”

The biblical text thus demonstrates that the ancient scribes were aware of a very accurate approximation of π , and they encoded it into the Bible in a very efficient way. The text makes use of *gematria* (calculating the numerical value of letters) to convey its full meaning, and the application of that hermeneutical technique is, in this instance, too illuminating to be casually dismissed. Rather, it suggests that the numerical value of letters and words was something the Bible’s redactors had in mind as they labored over the sacred text. And that fact, in turn, suggests that modern Bible scholars, if they want to be objective in their search for truth about the Bible’s meaning, should not lightly dismiss the hermeneutical methods recorded in Jewish esoteric literature.

Woe to the person who says that Torah intended to present a mere story and ordinary words! For if so, we could compose a Torah right now with ordinary words, and more laudable than all of them [in the existing Torah]! . . . Concerning Torah, one should look only at what is beneath the garment. So all these words and all these stories are garments.

(*Zohar*, 3:152a.)

The foregoing quote is drawn from the *Zohar*, the primary text of the Jewish mystical tradition. Taking seriously the *Zohar*’s directive to treat the “words” and “stories”

of Hebrew scripture as “garments” and to look “at what is beneath the garment,” the remainder of this short article explicates the text of the Hebrew Bible. The next section, entitled “Two Kingdoms; Two Names of God; One People,” focuses on the *words* of scripture, showing that those words reveal a polytheistic subtext that many Bible readers overlook. The final section, entitled “The Nondual Garden of Eden,” focuses on the *stories* of scripture, showing that the leading message of one of those stories, the Garden of Eden story from the book of Genesis, is not what most readers imagine.

2. Two Kingdoms; Two Names of God; One People

Hebrew scripture sometimes uses the Canaanite name *El Shaddai* for God, particularly to indicate God’s righteous or punitive aspect. (See Isa 13:6, Joel 1:15, Job (*passim*), Ruth 1:20-21.) We know now, from study of the Ugaritic tablets discovered in Syria in 1928, that the name *El* refers to the chief god of the Canaanite pantheon, and from the Deir ‘Alla Inscription discovered in Jordan in 1967, we learn that the name *Shaddai* probably refers to the Canaanite storm god *Ba’al*. Thus, the combined name *El Shaddai* implies “*El* (God) appearing in the form of *Shaddai*,” but in English translations of the Bible, the name *El Shaddai* is usually rendered simply as “God Almighty.”

Hebrew scripture also uses the name *yhvh* for God, sometimes suggesting that it invokes God’s mercy. (See Exod 34:5-7; Num 14:18-20; Deut 5:9-10.) The name *yhvh* is not vocalized in Hebrew, and in English translations of the Bible it is usually rendered as “Lord” or “Yahweh.” Significantly, however, scripture informs us that the patriarchs of the Israelite people worshiped God as *El Shaddai*, and that

Moses, who was reared in the Egyptian religion, was the one who first introduced the name *yhvh* to the Israelites. Recall, for example, these revealing words that God spoke to Moses: “I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob as *El Shaddai*, and with my name *yhvh*, *I was not known to them.*” (Exod 6:2-3, italics added.)

Hebrew scripture also relates the history of two rival kingdoms: the Northern Kingdom, called “Israel” (*Yisrael*), and the Southern Kingdom, called “Judah” (*Yehudah*). These kingdoms were united under David (ca. 10th-11th centuries b.c.e.), but after the death of David’s son Solomon, Israel rebelled against Judah, and a bitter civil war raged between these two kingdoms for centuries. (See 1 Kings 11:26-39, 12:1-24; see also Ezek 37:15-28.) Moreover, this division of the Davidic kingdom into two warring parts was not at its root a *political* division; rather, it was a *religious* and *ideological* division. If we look “beneath the garment” of the name *El Shaddai* — the name the patriarchs used for God — we find that, in Hebrew, it is an anagram of “Israel,” the name of the Northern Kingdom. By contrast, the name *yhvh* — the name of God that Moses introduced — is embedded in the Hebrew spelling of “Judah,” the name of the Southern Kingdom.

To see that *El Shaddai* is an anagram of the name “Israel,” we must appreciate that the Hebrew letter *dalet* (corresponding to a “D” in English) is almost identical in form to the Hebrew letter *reish* (corresponding to an “R” in English). (See Figure 1.)

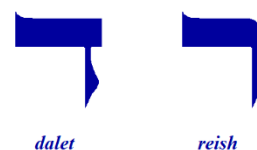


Figure 1

Because of this similarity of form, the *Zohar* asserts that a *dalet* is the same as a *reish*, and in fact the letters *dalet* and *reish* — whose names both mean “poor” — are somewhat interchangeable in Hebrew scripture. (See Num 1:14 [Deuel] and 2:14 [Reuel]; Gen 10:4 [Dodanim] and 1 Chron 1:7 [Rodanim].) When we recognize that the Hebrew spelling of the name *El Shaddai* is *alef-lamed-shin-dalet-yud* (A-L-S-D-Y) and that the Hebrew spelling of the name “Israel” is *yud-shin-reish-alef-lamed* (Y-S-R-A-L), and when we further recognize the interchangeability of the letters *dalet* and *reish*, it becomes clear that, in Hebrew, the name “Israel” (*Yisrael*) expressly invokes the patriarchal God *El Shaddai*. (See Figure 2.)¹



Figure 2

Likewise, when we recognize that the Hebrew spelling of the name “Judah” is *yud-hei-vov-dalet-hei* (YHVDH), contain-

¹ The identity between *El Shaddai* and the name “Israel” is stated explicitly in the Bible, although the relevant verses are dispersed in two different sections of the book of Genesis. See Cumming, James H., *Torah and Nondualism: Diversity, Conflict, and Synthesis* (Ibis Press 2019), pp. 152–153.

ing all the letters of the name *yhvh*, it becomes clear that, in Hebrew, the name “Judah” (*Yehudah*) expressly invokes the Mosaic God *yhvh*. (See Figure 3.)



Figure 3

In the Northern Kingdom, the temple was located in Beth-El (lit.: “House of *El*”), and it was dedicated *El Shaddai* (see Gen 35:1–15). In that kingdom, personal names often included the theophoric element “-*el*” or “-*ba’al*,” and the very name of the kingdom — *Yisrael* (“Israel”) — invokes the deity of the patriarchal religion: *El Shaddai*. In the Southern Kingdom, the temple was located in Jerusalem (the “City of David”), and it was dedicated to *yhvh* (see 2 Sam 6:1–19). In that kingdom, personal names often included the theophoric element “-*yahu*” (Y-H-V), and the very name of the kingdom — *Yehudah* (“Judah”) — invokes the deity of Moses’ Egyptian upbringing: *yhvh*. Thus, “beneath the garment” of scripture’s words, we discover *two religions*, not one; there, we discover the Canaanite religion of the patriarchs and also the Egyptian religion that Moses introduced to their descendants.

Two kingdoms. Two names of God. Two temples. Two religions. But to heal that often-bitter division, a wise group of scribes wove together the narratives of the two nations into a single Torah. “Behold, how good and how pleasant the abidance of brothers — even together!” (Ps 133:1.)

3. The Nondual Garden of Eden

The preceding section demonstrates that the *words* of scripture are not always what they seem to be. They are “garments” concealing hidden meanings, and the Bible thus includes a polytheistic subtext that many of its readers overlook. The present section shows that the *stories* of scripture, when read closely, are also “garments” concealing hidden meanings.

Western ideas about free will and determinism flow, in part, from the Christian dogma of original sin, which asserts that, by the exercise of free will, mankind introduced evil into the perfect world that God had created. In this way, the Garden of Eden story from the book of Genesis is interpreted as a wisdom tale urging us to exercise our God-given freedom to choose good and to reject evil. The reader may be surprised, however, to learn that human free will is not the leading message of the Genesis story; rather, nondualism is that message.

Here, for ease of reference, I have included my own translation of the Garden of Eden story (Gen 2:8–3:23). For the original Hebrew, I relied on the Masoretic text of the Bible, and to help the reader think critically about the story, I favored a literal translation over one that conforms closely to English idiom. Readers who are familiar with the details of the story can skip to my commentary, which follows immediately after this translation:

And yhvh –God planted a garden in Eden, from the East, and he placed there the Adam that he [had] formed. And yhvh –God caused to sprout from the soil every tree pleasant for appearance and good for food, and the Tree of Life in the midst of the garden, and the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. . . . And yhvh –God commanded concerning the Adam, saying, “From every tree of the garden you will surely eat [(lit.: eating you eat)], but from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil you will not eat from it, for in the day of your eating from it, you will surely become mortal [(lit.: dying you die)].” . . . And yhvh –God built up the rib that he took out of the Adam into a woman and brought her to the Adam. . . . And the two of them were naked — the Adam and his woman — and they were not ashamed. And the Serpent was more cunning than all the living beings of the field that yhvh –God had made. And he said to the woman: “Really!? — that God said, ‘You will not eat from every tree of the garden?’” And the woman said to the Serpent, “From the tree-fruit of the garden we will eat, but from the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, God said, ‘You will not eat from it, and you will not touch it, lest you die.’” And the Serpent said to the woman, “You will surely not die [(lit.: not ‘dying you die’)]! For God knows that in the day of your eating from it, . . . your eyes will open, and you will be like gods, knowers of good and evil.” And the woman saw that the tree was good for food and that it was beneficial for the eyes, and the tree was desirable to make [one] wise, and she took from its fruit, and she ate, and she gave also to her man with her, and he ate, and the eyes of the two of them were ope-

ned, and they knew that they were naked, and they stitched leaves of fig, and they fashioned for themselves wraps. And they heard the sound of yhvh— God walking in the garden, at the breeze of the day, and the Adam and his woman hid themselves from the face of yhvh —God in the midst of the tree[s] of the garden. And yhvh — God summoned the Adam, and he said to him, “Where are you?” And [Adam] said, “Your sound I heard in the garden, and I feared, for I am naked, and I hid myself.” And [yhvh —God] said, “Who told to you that you were naked? Perhaps from the tree that I commanded you not to eat from it you ate?” . . . And yhvh — God said, “Behold, the Adam [is] like one from us for knowing good and evil. And now, lest he send forth his hand and take also from the Tree of Life and eat and live forever.” And yhvh —God sent him from the garden of Eden

As said, this story of Adam and Eve’s rebellion against the commandment of “yhvh —God” is usually understood as scriptural proof that human beings have free will. It is pointed out that God (yhvh) could have created Adam and Eve as programmed automatons, incapable of disobeying God’s instructions. But, instead, God created them with free will, and we know that is true because Adam and Eve used their freedom to disobey God’s command. A comparison is then sometimes drawn to the healthy psychological development of a youth entering adulthood: To establish an individual identity, the youth must disobey his or her parents, after which a reconciliation is hopefully made, and the child, now an adult, engages his or her parents as a peer. According to this theory, the message of the Garden of Eden

story is that human freedom is a “greater good” that outweighs the evil of Adam and Eve’s rebellion against God, an evil that can be healed through religious faith and practice.

But is that really the message? I don’t think so, for where did the story deny the existence of deterministic laws of physics governing all that occurs in God’s world, including in each neuron of Adam and Eve’s two brains? And where did the story say that, although God created the world, Adam and Eve created their own thoughts, desires, and choices, thus making them co-creators (i.e., gods) alongside God? And where did the story deny God’s role as the ultimate author of Adam and Eve’s disobedience? Where, in short, did the story say that Adam and Eve had absolute free will?²

The first thing to notice about the Garden of Eden story is that as soon as Adam and Eve disobeyed God’s commandment, apparently exercising their free will, they also developed knowledge of “good and evil.” Thus, free will and moral dualism are presented as two sides of the same philosophical coin, and what the story really comes to teach us is that our (false) sense of freedom goes hand in hand with our (mistaken) habit of knowing “good and evil.” Adam and Eve imagined that they were independent masters of their own destiny, and as soon as they imagined

2 Absolute free will is the freedom to choose any course of action at any moment. Relative free will is the freedom to express one’s inner essential nature unimpeded by external influences. On the distinction between absolute free will and relative free will, see Cumming, James H., “Freedom in a Deterministic Universe,” in *DOGMA, Revue de Philosophie et de Sciences Humaines*, Édition No. 21 (Autumne 2022), pp. 135–137.

themselves in that way, they began dividing God's creation into that which they deemed to be "good" and that which they deemed to be "evil."

By this reckoning, faultfinding is the underlying sin that Adam and Eve committed. Adam and Eve partook from the "tree" — the mental habit — of knowing good and evil, and that mental habit made them feel alienated from God. In God's world, nothing is evil in the absolute sense of the term. Of course, some things are evil in the *relative* sense, meaning that some things are detrimental to human health and happiness, and one should certainly strive to avoid such things, but whatever the outcome of one's efforts, it is not evil in the *absolute* sense. Nothing that transpires in God's world is ever a mistake; nothing ever merits deletion. When, however, one begins to imagine that human beings have absolute free will, one also begins to reject certain aspects of the world, imagining that they did not need to be.

But if the foregoing explication of the Garden of Eden story is correct — that is, if dualistic thinking was Adam and Eve's only sin — then why does God (yhvh) say in response to Adam and Eve's eating from the Tree of Knowledge: "Behold, the Adam [is] *like one from us* for knowing good and evil"? Doesn't that statement imply that *all* the members of the Divine Council, including even yhvh, are knowers of good and evil (i.e., dualists), just like the post-rebellion Adam and Eve?

The confusion here arises because we tend to impose the idiom of the English language onto the Hebrew text. When the Hebrew text tells us that Adam, by knowing evil, has become "like *one* from us," it quite literally means that there is *one* member of the Divine Council that is a knower of

good and evil (i.e., a dualist). And which "one" might that be? Presumably, it is the Serpent (i.e., Satan), because he is the one who claims that knowing good and evil will make Adam and Eve "like gods." (Gen 3:5.)³ In other words, Adam and Eve partook from the "tree" of dualistic knowledge, and they became dualists, like the Serpent (i.e., Satan).

We see, then, that a close reading of the Garden of Eden story tells us that Adam and Eve never really had free will, at least not in the absolute sense (i.e., the freedom to choose any course of action at any moment). They only *imagined* that they had it, and then they imagined that they had used their free will to rebel against God, and having so imagined, they justified themselves by persuading themselves that God sometimes gets it wrong — in other words, by fault finding. Thus, they took upon themselves the task of judging God's perfect creation.

And for a person who proudly claims that he or she has absolute free will, acts of heroic self-control are the certain proof of that claim, and irresistible bodily urges are feared and despised, because they undermine one's imagined sense of absolute freedom. Therefore, when Adam and Eve took upon themselves the task of choosing things that they deemed to be evil in God's world, the first things they chose were the irresistible bodily urges that God had given them. And since nakedness reveals those urges for all the world to see, Adam and Eve made wraps and covered themselves.

Then, from that small start, Adam and Eve imagined many other things in God's world to be evil, and whenever they found

³ On Satan's membership in the Divine Council, see Job 1:6.

themselves unable to resist such things, they justified their actions with contrived excuses, or they covered their actions with the “fig leaves” of locked doors and deleted computer files, or they bemoaned their sinfulness, as Paul did in his famous letter to the Romans. (See Rom 7:15–24.) And although Adam and Eve could not — even after the most careful examination — pinpoint when or how they had actually *chosen* to have the thoughts and desires that led to their rebellion against God, they never doubted their absolute freedom to choose, for doing so would have stripped them of the false sense of agency they gained when they first accepted the lie of Cartesian dualism. God therefore asked Adam, “Where are you?” By imagining that he had absolute free will, Adam had developed a first-person perspective. In other words, Adam had become a map of the universe with a “You are here” arrow at its center; he had gained a (false) sense of location within the Garden of Eden rather than enjoying his inherent identity with the entire Garden.

For Adam and Eve, it was the pretense of absolute freedom that constituted their true rebellion. And it was that same pretense of absolute freedom that caused them to superimpose an invented good-evil dualism upon the perfect world that God had created. Among the seven days of Creation, the only day that God does not call “good” is the second day, the day when God created a “divider” (*mavdil*) — dualism, that is. (See Gen 1:6–8.) Adam and Eve elevated the relative good of dualism over the absolute good of embracing God’s marvelous show, and so it went for them . . .

. . . until one day Adam and Eve awoke from their dream and realized that they had never rebelled against God even for

a moment. In fact, they had no power to do so, and the absolute freedom that they imagined themselves to possess was only a proud lie that had served to separate them from God.

It was God that created the thought that motivated Adam and Eve to follow the Serpent’s advice. God created that thought just as surely as God breathed the “breath of life” into Adam’s brow (Gen 2:7), just as surely as God created Pharaoh’s thoughts when Pharaoh decided to harass the Israelites (see Exod 4:21, 7:3, 9:12, 10:1, 10:20, 10:27, 11:9–10, 14:4, 14:8), and just as surely as God created Cyrus’s thoughts when Cyrus proclaimed the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem (see 2 Chron 36:22; Ezra 1:1, 7:25). Indeed, the Bible teaches repeatedly that God is the author of human thoughts. (See Lev 26:36; Deut 2:30; Josh 11:20; Judg 9:23; 1 Sam 16:14–23; 1 Kings 22:19–23; Isa 10:5–6, 36:10, 45:7; Jer 25:9, 27:6.) The only “sin” that Adam and Eve ever committed was the false belief that they had the freedom to sin (i.e., to defy God’s will). And when they relinquished that false belief and accepted that everything is just God’s marvelous show (see Isa 45:7), they quit their constant fault finding. They stopped, that is, being knowers of “good and evil.”

But — you might object — if everything is God’s marvelous show, then no moral standards govern human conduct. The mistake in that reasoning is the tendency to confuse determinism with fatalism, falsely concluding that human effort and righteousness have no place in a deterministic universe. Why can’t effort and righteousness play a part in the destiny that God has laid out for human beings? God’s universe is perfect, but God has assigned a role for us to play in that universe, and it is not a passive role. By exerting our-

selves in positive ways, we foster happiness for ourselves and for others, and God — the author of all things — placed it in our hearts to do so, as the Bible repeatedly tells us. (See 1 Kings 10:24; Jer 31:33, 32:40; Ezek 11:19–20, 36:26–27; Ps 4:7; Prov 21:1; Ezra 1:5; Neh 2:12, 7:5.)

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James H. Cumming (Bachelor of Arts, Columbia University; Juris Doctor, *magna cum laude*, University of Pennsylvania) is a senior research attorney at the California Supreme Court, where he is an expert in philosophy of law. He has also been a scholar of religion for over 40 years. He began by studying Sanskrit and Indian scripture, specializing in the nondual philosophy of Kashmir. Later, he learned Hebrew and completed a comprehensive study of Jewish mysticism. In 2019, he published *Torah and Nondualism: Diversity, Conflict, and Synthesis* (Ibis Press). His second book, *The Nondual Mind: Vedānta, Kashmiri Pratyabhijñā Shaivism, and Spinoza*, was published serially in previous editions of *Dogma* and is also available on Academia.edu.



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CONTACTS:

WWW.DOGMA.LU

INFO@DOGMA.LU