

# The Nondual Mind



## Vedānta, Kashmiri Shaivism, and Spinoza

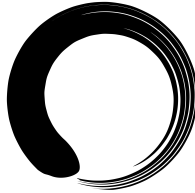
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by James H. Cumming

*The Nondual Mind:  
Vedānta, Kashmiri Shaivism, and Spinoza*

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בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא יִהְיֶה יְהוָה אֶחָד וַיִּשְׁמוּ אֶחָד.

—Hebrew Bible, Zech 14:9

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. (*Brahmanism and Hinduism*, page xii.)

—Sir Monier Monier-William (1819–1899 C.E.)

For my father.

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## **Preface**

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? [¶] . . . [¶] Lo, whereby would one understand the understander?

—*Brhadāranyaka Upaniṣad* 4.5.15.

I began writing this book as Part Six of my book *Torah and Nondualism*, and early drafts addressed the rich history of nondualist thought in post-scriptural Jewish literature. But as my research proceeded and broadened, I became intrigued by the parallels I saw between the nondual ideas of Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677 c.e.) and those of Kashmiri Shaivism, a philosophy that emerged in 9th century Kashmir and later spread all over India, influencing mainstream Hindu thought. Therefore, I put aside for another day, if not another scholar, the task of documenting Judaism's enduring romance with nondual truth, and I set out to explicate Spinoza in light of South Asian philosophy of

mind. As the saying goes, “this, too, is for the best,”<sup>1</sup> for my exploration of Vedānta, Kashmiri Shaivism, and Spinoza has proved fruitful beyond expectation.

The primary subject of this book is the question of *consciousness*, what Professor David Chalmers called the “hard problem,”<sup>2</sup> but one cannot explain consciousness without also saying something about ontology, epistemology, determinism, ethics, and death. The discussion may seem dry to those who are not accustomed to philosophical discourse. I have not written a devotional book; rather, I have written an analytical one that demands a certain amount of effort from its reader, although the reader can also take some solace in knowing that I am not a professional philosopher and that the book would likely have been even more impenetrable if I were.

I am not a professional philosopher, but I am a person for whom subject-object duality has ceased to feel real, replaced by a nondual state that is much more satisfying and true. And although this book is somewhat demanding of its reader, it also offers the possibility of great reward. The reader who follows the book’s reasoning to the end has the opportunity to gain an entirely new conception of self, one that “removes the veil” that separates knower from known.

And when the illusion of the subject-object divide dissolves, the mind-body problem dissolves with it, and philosophical

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<sup>1</sup> Hebrew: *Gam zu l'tovah*. The phrase is most often associated with Nachum ish Gam Zu, a saintly practitioner of nondualism who is described in the Babylonian Talmud. “Whatever would happen to him, he would say, ‘This, too, is for the best.’” He did so even in extraordinarily trying circumstances. See *BT Taanit* 21a.

<sup>2</sup> Chalmers, *The Conscious Mind*, pp. xii–xiii.



puzzles like Mary and her black-and-white room<sup>3</sup> are easily resolved. 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. The reason there appears to be an outside world, when in truth one is only consciousness of one's own self, is the same reason that the reflection of a city on the flat surface of a 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. But even more important, one's consciousness-of-self is not different from one's *being* self. Consciousness and being are the same thing. Put another way, there is no such thing as matter that *has* consciousness; rather, matter *is* consciousness.

That assertion may sound like idealism. The philosophy presented here is type of idealism, but it is a *diffuse* idealism. One errs if one imagines that there is a material substance that *contains* consciousness or that *supports* consciousness, but one also errs if one imagines that the objects of the physical world have no intrinsic being independent of one's consciousness of them. Even when one's consciousness of a particular object ceases, the object remains conscious of itself, and therefore it continues to exist. Its own consciousness, not that of the outside observer, is the foundation of its being.

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<sup>3</sup> Mary and her black-and-white room is a thought experiment that gets to the heart of the mind-body problem. See Jackson, "Epiphenomenal Qualia," pp. 128–130. It is discussed in the present work at pages \_\_\_ to \_\_\_, *post*.

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This book will appeal to philosophy of mind scholars, and it will thrill students of South Asian nondualism. But it is worth reading just for the anecdote about Einstein at Princeton and what that anecdote tells us about human agency.

J.H.C.

May 30, 2020

Berkeley, California

## **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 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 (letter to Descartes)

We tend to divide the world into opposites, and often this dualism takes on a moral valence. We speak of truth and falsity, good and evil, God and devil, but we fail to appreciate that this moral dualism has its source in a deeper rift that lies at the core of our being. I am referring to the subject-object divide, also known as the mind-body problem. The latter problem is brought to the fore by Princess Elisabeth's challenge to René Descartes, quoted above. How, she asked, could "an immaterial thing" have "the capacity to move a [material] body and be moved by one"? In other words, what constitutes the point of intersection between one's mind (consciousness) and one's brain (matter)? 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 super-cosmic force that competes with God. Thus, moral dualism evolves into theological dualism. Ontological dualism, by contrast, is concerned with Princess Elisabeth's challenge to Descartes. It focuses on the mind-body problem, the fundamental rift between self and other, between consciousness and matter. We shall see, however, that moral and theological dualism have their source in ontological dualism. So, let us delve deeply into the

mind-body problem, and from what we learn about the mystery of consciousness, let us see if we discover something about God and the devil.

René Descartes (1596–1650 C.E.) asserted that each of us is an immaterial soul operating the body from a command center located in the pineal gland of the brain. 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. Now proceed. . . ." And as the soul issues its diverse directives, the body responds appropriately. A message is dispatched, again through the neural network, to the relevant muscle group, which reacts as necessary to actualize the soul's intention. Or, so Descartes imagined, and people who have not thought deeply about the mind-body problem often embrace some variant of his mind-body dualism, because it seems to align so closely with everyday human experience.

And seeming to confirm this Cartesian model of the human soul, there is the near-death experience. The immaterial soul slips temporarily from its sheath of flesh, and experiences its independence and immortality. There, below lies the body, sprawled across the sidewalk, paramedics crouching at its side, administering aid, and above that frenetic scene, the soul is gazing down with calm detachment. And then the soul makes a conscious decision to reenter the body. The heart muscle resumes its autonomic contractions. The paramedics 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 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—which imagines immaterial souls piloting material bodies—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. Even Descartes struggled to explain how an immaterial soul could initiate a biological process in the pineal gland that would, in due course, activate nerves and muscles, causing the movement of, say, an arm or a hand. How 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 a *thinking substance*,<sup>[4]</sup> can determine [(i.e., move or activate)] the bodily spirits in producing bodily actions.”<sup>5</sup> 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

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<sup>4</sup> Here, the term “thinking substance” does not imply a physical substance that thinks. Princess Elisabeth used the term “substance” in the Cartesian sense, which contrasts “thinking substance” (i.e., mind, consciousness) with “extended substance” (i.e., physical things, matter).

<sup>5</sup> Garber, *Descartes Embodied*, p. 172, italics added.

would be for me to concede the capacity to move a body and be moved by one to an immaterial thing.”<sup>6</sup>

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 with physical things. Princess Elisabeth had identified the most fundamental problem with Cartesian dualism: What provides the causal link by which an immaterial soul can direct movements of the physical body? And, how can we say that the soul’s directives—and not the laws of physics—are what actually determine the physical body’s actions?

But the Cartesian dualist has to answer another question, too. In a living person, each component of the “soul” has some physical system on which it depends. The soul’s power to see depends on the existence of physical eyes and a visual cortex; its power to hear depends on functioning eardrums and an auditory cortex; and its power to recall past events depends on memory cells. 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 summer evening is recalled to thought, there are memory cells from which it 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

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<sup>6</sup> Garber, *Descartes Embodied*, p. 172, italics added.

the mental capacity of the soul and the proper 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 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, 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 people—especially neuroscientists and computer programmers—veer toward the material, denying that there is any such thing as an immaterial soul. They argue that the material world alone exists and that consciousness is a physical thing that we will eventually discover, just as we have discovered leptons and quarks. Other people—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 consciousness and 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 a form of consciousness, but it is not a dualistic consciousness that stretches across a subject-object divide; rather, it is a nondual consciousness

that is conscious only of itself.

Below is a painting of an outdoor scene:



The image is flat, but it appears to have depth because of the rules of perspective that the artist applies in 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 doing the knowing. Consider that the object and its knower are only tricks of perception, like the depth that seems to characterize the artist’s painting. They are appearances that arise when consciousness—which is always conscious only of itself—assumes a particular form, suggesting a 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 that 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 the knower and the known are secondary interpretations imposed on primary facts. What actually exists as to both knower and known is nondual consciousness-of-self. This point may be difficult to grasp, but the “hard problem” of consciousness is half solved if we consider that all consciousness is consciousness-of-self—it is never 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* this consciousness-of-self; rather, consciousness-of-self is the underlying stuff 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 lonely 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 that can be inventively applied to predict real events and to devise real responses to those events. That is so, because in using the word “consciousness” to describe the true being of the chair and 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 the hallucinations of some independent observer; they are the hallucinations of *themselves*, having their own intrinsic being, and therefore, although they are consciousness, they are no less material. Thus, we can just as validly describe the philosophical system proposed here as a type of materialism.

But what we have said so far 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. So let us proceed.

## **Part One: Nondual Consciousness**

### **1. Those Pesky Laws of Physics**

[L]et us conceive something very simple—say, a stone which receives a certain quantity of motion from an external cause which sets it in motion. Afterward the stone will necessarily continue to move . . . , because it has this quantity of motion. Therefore, this permanence of the stone in motion is compelled, . . . because it must be defined by the thrust of the external cause. What is to be understood here concerning the stone should be understood concerning any singular thing whatever . . . : that each thing is necessarily determined by some external cause to exist and produce effects in a certain and determinate way. (Letter 58.)<sup>7</sup>

—Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677 C.E.)

#### **a. The Mind-Body Problem**

We will begin by looking more closely at the way modern physics complicates the mind-body problem. The experience we have of being a conscious soul that dwells in a material body and directs its movements gives rise to a seemingly intractable dilemma. What provides the causal link by which an immaterial thing (a soul) can activate 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 body's actions?

We can explain every event in the universe in purely physical terms, right down to the subtlest physiological processes that occur

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<sup>7</sup> The translations of Spinoza's writings that appear in this book are from Curley, *A Spinoza Reader*, sometimes with minor, non-substantive edits.

in complex living creatures. 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 dynamic system, and all this activity is fully explainable by a vast web of causes and their inevitable effects, all proceeding according to an established 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, 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 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 marvelous 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 belief that the soul (an immaterial, thinking thing) pilots the body from some location within the brain (a material thing). If the soul 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 does this soul activate the neurons and glands that, like the levers and knobs 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?

### **b. Materialism**

As noted in the Introduction, 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 problem. Doing so solves the problem of how the soul directs the body's activities. 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 important, 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. 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 there 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 at issue in “The Measure of a Man” is a subset 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 based solely on the fact that they act *as if* they do. 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 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 gobbledegook 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.”<sup>8</sup> For the materialist, it would seem, consciousness is nothing but a smoke-and-mirrors trick.<sup>9</sup>

But what happens when one jabs one’s finger with a sewing needle? There are specific 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 just 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 falls 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

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<sup>8</sup> Dennett, *Consciousness Explained*, p. 431.

<sup>9</sup> Dennett, *Consciousness Explained*, pp. 438–440.

functionalist terms, as something that somehow 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 important, 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. Instead of the question "What is consciousness?" we have the question "What is the universe?" We have come no closer to ultimate truth.

### **c. Idealism**

The idealist, by contrast, seeks a nondual 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.

According to the idealist solution to the mind-body problem, what, if anything, can we call "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 unknowable and 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—is perfectly real. So claims the idealist.

Idealism has some advantage over materialism because, 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. 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 C.E.)

Or, consider 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 his tooth. Regardless of how sure he is, subjectively, that the ceramic apple is a piece of fruit, the objective world has a sometimes unpleasant way of taking charge of subjective experience. There is, after all, a universe “out there,” shared in common with others, not just one “in here,” in the imagination. The world can be a difficult place, and that difficulty is something idealism brushes aside a little too lightly. 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 idealism merely shrugs, asserting that it is all just dream images.

Moreover, why apply oneself to discovery, invention, and industry in a world that is only a dream? If the world is only a dream, we should be finding ways to dream better dreams, not ways to engineer the objects that are appearing in our present dream. Why eke out some small benefit through ingenuity and toil if, instead, one can simply awake from the dream and dream anew? But has any society 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 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 we are 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 matter, it acts the way matter acts, and the difference between idealism and materialism is just semantic.

#### **d. 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 it? Why not consider the possibility that thought and matter are simply the same thing comprehended in two different ways? 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 could *that* be? Thought and matter are so obviously *not* the same thing. One does not solve the mind-body problem simply by denying its existence. 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.

## **2. All Consciousness Is Consciousness of Self**

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

substance, which is now comprehended under this attribute, now under that. So also a mode of extension and the idea of that mode are one and the same thing, but expressed in two ways. (*Ethics*, IIP7, Schol.)

—Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677 C.E.)

Each of us can focus the attention within and identify what appears to be an internal knower of the body’s thoughts, feelings, and 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 c.e.), the 20th century Indian sage who attracted many people to nondual philosophy, urged his disciples to practice *ātma vichāra* (“contemplation of the self”). He suggested that during silent meditation, the meditator should use the question “Who am I?” to continuously refocus the attention on the knower of whatever thoughts or feelings happen to 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 object like a chair or sweet tea, for as soon as one attempts to objectify the knower, it ceases to be the knower. The very process of trying to cast one’s mental gaze on the knower is analogous to trying to use the outwardly focused light beam of a spotlight to illuminate the spotlight itself. It can’t be done. In other words, we know the knower only by *being* the knower. It 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 inner knower, *being* that knower and *consciousness of* that knower are the same thing—subject-object consciousness simply does not apply.

It is the assertion of this book, however, that the foregoing discussion describes all conscious experience. Notwithstanding our

strong feeling of being a person who knows a world, subject-object consciousness is merely an illusion. The experience we have with reference to the inner knower—the experience of being conscious of a thing by *being* it, not by *perceiving* it—is what consciousness really is. All consciousness is consciousness of self; there is no such thing as consciousness of another.<sup>10</sup>

Consider, for example, the knowing of a tree that one sees standing on a distant 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 dedicated to registering light or dark, others to various parts of the color spectrum, others to circles or lines or contrasting edges, and still others to 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 reflecting, 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 (in vain) 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 external

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. Aristotle, *Metaphysics* XII, 7 and 9 [making the same point in reference to God's thoughts].

world that appear somewhere within one's own brain.<sup>11</sup>

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, for one can never be conscious of anything else. And this point 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 true content of one's consciousness, and because that is so, consciousness is never actually spread across a subject-object divide. The subject-object divide is a secondary interpretation of the facts. One can never be conscious of a thing without *being* that thing, and therefore consciousness is not different from being. And in that insight lies the key to the “hard problem” of consciousness.

Thus, careful analysis belies the very existence of the subject-object divide and with it the consciousness-matter conundrum. There is never consciousness of an external object. Instead, there is consciousness of one's own self, and there is *inference* about an external object—an object that one then imagines to be composed of unconscious matter. But why so imagine it? Since one experiences one's own existence as consciousness of self, why not assume that all things experience their existence in that same way? Consciousness, then, is not some wondrous mystery associated with the brains of higher-order animals, distributed, a drop here and there, in a mostly unconscious material universe. Rather, consciousness is the underlying stuff of existence.

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 our nondual

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<sup>11</sup> See Russell, *The Analysis of Matter*, p. 383.

consciousness, in order to learn things about the external world that our self reflects and that we desire to know in order to survive as embodied organisms. Because of this “seeing past,” the nondual character of consciousness becomes invisible to us, and then we feel as if we are a subject knowing an object.

An analogy can be made to observing the world through its reflection in the surface of a mirror. 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 is the thing that 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 only thing we ever actually see. Likewise, although all consciousness is 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 the thing that most interests us. Our own self thus becomes invisible to us in favor of the external world, but 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 one’s eyes. So, why does one’s mind tune it out? The answer is that 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 seeks 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, this distortion disappears. One learns to see past the distortion in favor of the information one seeks to gather about the external world.

Language provides yet another example of the transparency of

the medium of perception. 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 to the listening boy, and what he experiences when he hears the relevant phonemes is their comforting message (i.e., the intention of the speaker). 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 famous essay, Professor Thomas Nagel considers what it is like to be a bat “seeing” by means of its sonar. As Professor Nagel points out, we cannot really know; after all, we are not bats. But we can make a pretty good guess that “seeing” by means of a sonar is not so very different from seeing by means of eyes. In both cases, a creature is employing a tool to gather information about the *shape* of the external world and to construct a representation of that world in its brain. But in some respects, the two experiences must be very different, and that difference is due to the functional differences between the tools each species uses to gather the

relevant information. The bat's sonar, for example, does not deliver information about color. Conversely, the bat probably has a heightened sense of depth perception relative to a person, because people infer depth by merging binary retinal images, whereas depth is precisely the information that the bat's sonar is capable of delivering.

Professor Nagel argues that bat 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."<sup>12</sup> Agreed. It remains true, however, that the medium by which relevant information is delivered is not as important as the fact that the information gets delivered *somehow*. In other words, the same experience of perception or intellectual understanding can be realized in multiple ways. We know this to be true when we learn a new language or a new alphabet, and we can reasonably infer it to be true generally. In example after example, the medium that conveys the desired information becomes transparent to us in favor of the information we hope to gather. 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 that is reflected and represented therein, a world that we strongly desire to know.

In this way, we come to feel that we are the knowers of an external physical world, knowing it across an unbridgeable subject-object divide, and we even imagine that subject-object consciousness describes all conscious experience. But what we are interpreting as "subject" and "object" is merely our inherent capacity to be conscious of our own self by being it.

### **3. Thought-Matter Equivalence**

I should say that what the physiologist sees when he looks

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<sup>12</sup> Nagel, "What Is It Like to Be a Bat?," p. 438.



at a [hospital patient's] brain is part of his own brain, not part of the brain he is examining. (*The Analysis of Matter*, p. 383.)

—Bertrand Russell (1872–1970 C.E.)

In light of what we have said in the previous section, consider the possibility that consciousness is what it feels like *to be* a thing, whereas matter is how a thing *appears* when it is known by inference from the impressions it makes on one's sense organs and, through them, on one's own self. In other words, when item X is known sensorially, it seems to be matter. But when item X is known directly, by being item X, it is nothing but consciousness. Thus, it is only the mediation of the senses as a method of knowing that differentiates matter from consciousness. Matter and consciousness are really the same thing experienced in different ways.

But here we have to be careful, because we tend to think of consciousness as subject-object consciousness, and we cannot allow that tendency to confuse us. Consciousness is always consciousness-of-self, not consciousness of another.

Colloquially speaking, if I am thinking of an apple, my thought involves a mental image of a round object, about the size of a fist, usually red or green, smooth to touch, having a distinctive aroma, etc. But those thoughts are not what it feels like to be an apple; rather, those thoughts are what it feels like to be a brain thinking of an apple. Thought-matter equivalence does not mean that a person's apple-thought is the same as an apple; rather, it means that a person's apple-thought is the same as a brain representing an apple in the form of neural spiking frequencies.

One might ask, however, whether thought-matter equivalence implies idealism. If the physical world, when experienced directly rather than sensorially, turns out to be nothing but consciousness, then aren't we essentially denying the reality of matter, dismissing

it as the illusory effect of a flawed epistemology? And if so, doesn't thought-matter equivalence share all the problems that accompany the idealist solution to the mind-body problem?

We can correctly conclude from thought-matter equivalence that everything is consciousness, but to say that everything is consciousness does not mean that everything is merely a dream being dreamed by you, its observer. Rather, everything is a dream being dreamed by the thing *itself*, and that point is what differentiates thought-matter equivalence from other types of subjective idealism. The world is real. Each particle of the universe has its own intrinsic being, but its being is nothing over and above its consciousness of itself. To *be* a boson is to *be conscious of* a boson, and that is all it is.

With our senses mediating our perception of the world, we tend to assume that matter is the fundamental nature of things. We perceive external things as material, and we perceive our own brains as material, and then we conclude that there has to be a material substratum for thoughts. But those assumptions are merely offshoots of the illusory subject-object divide. They arise because we are in the habit of *seeing past* consciousness-of-self and inferring an external world that we take to be material.

If one perceives, say, a lump of clay on a potter's wheel, the clay appears to be a dead thing, devoid of consciousness. But if one realizes that, in perceiving the clay, one is conscious only of the clay's reflection in one's own self, a self that is veritably sparkling with consciousness, then it becomes very hard not to conclude that all things everywhere are sparkling with that same consciousness. In other words, the one thing in this universe that one knows directly, without any mediation, is one's own self, and it is undeniably conscious, so why not conclude that everything else, when known directly, is the same? And if that is so, then the underlying being of a thing—even a lump of clay—is not matter, but the consciousness the thing has of itself.

According to Descartes, a material thing is a thing that has

spatial extension. In other words, material things have shape, size, and location. But what does that really mean? Shape, size, and location is merely information, which is just thought. Thus, the apparent materiality of a boson might only be the fact that one of its definitional characteristics is its location within an imagined map. Spatial extension, then, is just a way of organizing the data, and all things actually exist as thoughts in a dimensionless point of nonspace. A boson is only a set of self-referential ideas, and from an infinity of such ideas, all of them interacting and changing in accordance with fixed laws, a vast material world appears, rather like John Horton Conway's "game of life."<sup>13</sup>

This section opened with a quote by Bertrand Russell about the human brain. A very good way to know a human brain is to study one the way a physiologist does in a hospital, using the most modern scientific equipment available. But a much more accurate way to know a human brain is to *be* one. Despite our great faith in scientific objectivity, the physiologist's way of knowing a human brain is mediated and therefore unreliable, leading to confused theories such as the theory that the human brain is a material thing extended in space.

Some readers might be doubtful about the assertion that scientific objectivity is an unreliable form of knowing. People make errors of subjective judgment all the time, and for that reason, we value the objectivity of the scientific method precisely because of its accuracy. My point is not to dismiss the value of scientific research, nor am I suggesting that subjective judgments are invariably valid or that one can accurately discover all the structures and mechanisms of one's brain merely by closing one's eyes and being them. Rather, my point is that when one is conscious of a thing by being it, one's consciousness of it is not distorted by any mediating physics. Even a drunk man has perfect and undistorted consciousness of his own brain—he has perfect

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<sup>13</sup> Gardner, "Mathematical Games," pp. 120–123.

and undistorted consciousness of the misinformation that his alcohol sodden brain is then representing.

By contrast, when one knows something by sensory perception, one's knowledge of it is very limited. 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 small fragments of a dull and misshapen mirror. It is true that we can vastly improve our understanding of external things by using scientific instruments to correct the distortions and inadequacies of our senses, but we remain disadvantaged in our effort to learn, using empirical methods, the true form of things that lie outside, even imagining them to be unconscious matter.

Speaking metaphorically, we might say that when the physiologist studies a patient's brain in a hospital, the physiologist's way of knowing the brain (as matter) is knowing it *from the outside*, whereas the patient's way of knowing the same brain (as thoughts) 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 experiential and direct. And either way, consciousness-of-self is the only consciousness that actually exists. 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."<sup>14</sup>

So, which philosophers are right, the idealists or the materialists? Asking the question is like asking whether the true Juliet is Juliet's experience of Juliet or Romeo's experience of Juliet. Both are the true Juliet, but only Juliet is actually *conscious* of Juliet, and she awakes to the reality of that consciousness-of-self only when, after years of philosophical inquiry, she stops imagining herself to be a "soul" that knows Romeo. Romeo, by contrast, only infers Juliet, he is not *conscious* of her—unless, of

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<sup>14</sup> Russell, *The Analysis of Matter*, p. 383.

course, his great love for her causes his mind to merge into hers.

## Part Two: South Asian Nondualism

The absolute *chiti* [(“nondual consciousness”)] of its own free will is the cause of the [effectuation] of the universe. (*Pratyabhijñāhṛdayam*, *sūtra* 1.)

—Kṣemarāja (10th–11th century C.E.)

In Part One, I attempted to convey the theory of “nondual consciousness” in general terms. Here, in Part Two, I will focus on South Asian literary sources, tracing how nondualism is presented in both Vedānta and Kashmiri Shaivism. What follows is not an attempt to explicate those philosophical systems in their entirety. Instead, I have selected excerpts from the principal texts of both traditions, choosing material that bears directly on the mind-body problem.

### 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 perfectly consistent in every detail. A careful reader can discern different philosophical emphases that probably represent textual emendations and an evolution of thought. One of the basic principles that emerges, however, from the Upanishads is that Brahman (God, or the power that upholds all things) 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 consciousness in each of us).

The assertion that God’s own consciousness is the consciousness underlying the soul of each person may sound like a blasphemous arrogation of divine status by ordinary human beings. But the soul or self that the Upanishads equate with divine consciousness is the person’s *true* self, not the ego-self that most people—steeped in Cartesian dualism—imagine themselves to be.

Most people believe a soul or self to be a thinking thing that pilots the body, but the Upanishads call our attention to a self that is more *self*—more interior—than that ego-self. This true self is the underlying consciousness by which the ego-self becomes a conscious entity.

Sunlight that streams through a window lattice may take on the shadow-and-light pattern of the lattice, but it is not different from the sunlight shining outside the house. If the window lattice is removed, the sunlight remains, no longer conditioned by the lattice. Likewise, the consciousness that illuminates an individual soul is not different from the consciousness that illuminates all things. The ego-self corresponds to the distinctive pattern of light that emerges through the lattice, whereas the true self corresponds to the sunlight that illuminates that pattern. Put another way, one's own soul is conscious because God is conscious, and one is in God.

Already, we see that the upanishadic theory of nondual consciousness is very similar to the theory discussed in general terms in Part One. The *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, dating to the early part of the first millennium B.C.E., explains that at first Brahman (universal consciousness) knew only itself, but then Brahman divided into countless parts, becoming the consciousness of individual beings. In other words, consciousness is nondual in its original form—conscious only of itself—but in countless beings, it takes on the form of subject-object consciousness. 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 [(universal nondual consciousness)]. [¶] It knew only itself: “I am Brahman!” Therefore, it became the All. . . . Whoever thus knows “I am Brahman [(universal nondual consciousness)]!” becomes this All; even the gods have not power to prevent his becoming thus, for he becomes

their self (*ātman*) [(i.e., he becomes the consciousness in them)]. [¶] So whoever worships another divinity [than consciousness], thinking “[This divinity] is one and I another,” he knows not.<sup>15</sup>

The Upanishad is clearly saying that the consciousness that each of us experiences internally is not as individual as it seems to be. Instead, the same seamless consciousness shines in all things, and when one is aware of that fact, one recognizes one’s own inner self to be the inner self of all things. By realizing the unity of consciousness, one becomes the self (soul) of even the gods. The same idea—that one’s own consciousness is the consciousness of all things—is expressed more succinctly as follows: “[T]hese worlds, these gods, these beings, everything here is what this Soul is.”<sup>16</sup>

For this reason, the Upanishad rejects dualistic devotional practices, urging instead the worship of consciousness itself. The Upanishad explains that the one God (called “Brahman”) is not an *object* of consciousness, and therefore our relationship with God cannot be an I-and-thou relationship. Rather, God is the *subject* in all that is conscious, a being that is knowable only by experiencing one’s own consciousness. The point is expressed in a dialog between Ushasta Cākrāyaṇa and the sage Yājñavalkya:

Then Ushasta Cākrāyaṇa questioned him.  
“Yājñavalkya,” said he, “explain to me him who is the Brahman, present and not beyond our ken, him who is the Soul in all things.”

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<sup>15</sup> *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 1.4.10. The translations of the Upanishads that appear in this book are from Hume, *The Thirteen Principle Upanishads*, sometimes with minor, non-substantive edits. References to “Brahma” have been rendered herein as “Brahman.”

<sup>16</sup> *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 2.4.6.



“He is your soul (*ātman*), which is in all things.”

“Which one, O Yājñavalkya, is in all things?”

“He who breathes in with your breathing in (*prāṇa*) is the soul of yours, which is in all things. . . .

Ushasta Cākrāyaṇa said: “This has been explained to me just as one might say, ‘This is a cow. This is a horse.’ [(That is, it has been explained as a fact to be learned, not as a lived experience.)] Explain to me him who is just the Brahman, present and not beyond our ken, him who is the Soul in all things.”

“He is your soul, which is in all things.”

“Which one, O Yājñavalkya, is in all things?”

“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. [(That is, God is not an object of consciousness; God is the consciousness itself.)] Aught else than this is wretched.”

Thereupon Ushasta Cākrāyaṇa held his peace.<sup>17</sup>

The identity between God (Brahman) and the consciousness that shines in each of us is expressed again later in the same Upanishad:

He is the unseen Seer, the unheard Hearer, the unthought Thinker, the un-understood Understander. Other than He there is no seer. Other than He there is no hearer. Other than He there is no thinker. Other than He there is no understander. He is your Soul, the Inner Controller, the

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<sup>17</sup> *Bṛhadāranyaka Upaniṣad* 3.4.

Immortal.<sup>18</sup>

Thus, the Upanishad describes God as the consciousness that makes one's own soul conscious—the self of one's self—not an object of perception. One knows God by *being a part of* God, although not in the ego-sense.<sup>19</sup> Yājñavalkya makes the point in humorous terms:

“You idiot,” said Yājñavalkya, “that you will think that [God] could be anywhere else than in ourselves [(i.e., the consciousness the makes one's own soul conscious)]! for if it were anywhere else than in ourselves, the dogs might eat it or the birds might tear it to pieces.”<sup>20</sup>

Yājñavalkya also makes the point made at length above in Part One that one cannot be conscious of a thing without being that thing, and therefore that all perception is really consciousness-of-self:

[In the state of nondual consciousness, a person] is verily seeing . . . , for there is no cessation of the seeing [in the awakened state] . . . . It is not, however, a second thing, other than himself and separate, that he may see. [(The

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<sup>18</sup> *Bṛhadāranyaka Upaniṣad* 3.7.23.

<sup>19</sup> See *Kaushītaki Upaniṣad* 3.8 [“ ‘He [God] is my self [(i.e., the consciousness within)]’—this one should know.”]; *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* 3.2.9 [“He, verily, who knows that supreme Brahman [(God)], becomes ver[il]y Brahman.”]; *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad* 1.7 [“Brahman-knowers become merged in Brahman.”]. On the related idea that the universal consciousness is the source of consciousness in the individual, see, e.g., *Bṛhadāranyaka Upaniṣad* 1.4.7; *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* 3.10–11, 5.12; *Īśā Upaniṣad* 16; *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad* 3.7–21; *Maitrī Upaniṣad* 2.5.

<sup>20</sup> *Bṛhadāranyaka Upaniṣad* 3.9.25.

next seven verses repeat the same principle with reference to smell, taste, speech, hearing, thinking, touching, and knowing.)] 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!<sup>21</sup>

The Upanishad further explains that a self-realized person “sees everything as the [universal] Soul.”<sup>22</sup> In that way, the subject-object duality of a conscious soul knowing a material universe is eliminated:

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? [॥] . . . [॥] Lo,

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<sup>21</sup> *Bṛhadāranyaka Upaniṣad* 4.3.23–32.

<sup>22</sup> *Bṛhadāranyaka Upaniṣad* 4.4.23. The *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* includes a lengthy discussion of the *ātman* (“soul” or “self”).

whereby would one understand the understander?<sup>23</sup>

Similar ideas are found in the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*, which also dates to the early part of the first millennium B.C.E. It describes the self-realized state by the literary device of a dialog between a father, Uddalaka Aruni, and his son, Svetaketu. The father says:

That which is the finest essence—this whole world has that as its soul. That is Reality. That is *Ātman* ('Soul'). That art thou (*tat tvam asi*), Svetaketu.<sup>24</sup>

*Tat tvam asi*—"That art thou." In other words, you the reader are, insofar as you are conscious, not different from the consciousness that underlies everything, everywhere. Moreover, the subject-object divide is a false interpretation of the facts. What one interprets dualistically as "knower" and "known" is, in truth, merely the self being conscious of the self. The Upanishad explains:

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<sup>23</sup> *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 4.5.15, italics added. See also *id.* 2.4.14 [same], 4.4.13 ["He who has found and has awakened to the Soul . . . , [t]he world is his: indeed, he is the world itself."]; *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 2.21.4 ["One should reverence the thought 'I am the world-all!'"], 7.25.1 ["'I, indeed, am below. I am above. I am to the west. I am to the east. I am to the south. I am to the north. I, indeed, am this whole world.'"]; *Īśā Upaniṣad* 6–7 ["In whom all beings/Have become just the Self of the discerner"]; *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* 2.2.5 ["He on whom the sky, the earth, and the atmosphere are woven, and the mind, together with all the life-breaths, Him alone know as the one Soul (*Ātman*)."]; *Maitri Upaniṣad* 6.7 ["Now, where knowledge is of a dual nature, there, indeed, one hears, sees, smells, tastes, and also touches; the soul knows everything. Where knowledge is not of a dual nature, being devoid of action, cause, or effect, unspeakable, incomparable, indescribable—what is that? It is impossible to say!"].

<sup>24</sup> *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 6.8.7.

Where one sees nothing else [other than oneself], hears nothing else, understands nothing else—that is a Plenum. But where one sees something else [other than oneself]—that is the small. Verily, the Plenum is the same as the immortal; but the small is the same as the mortal.<sup>25</sup>

When the Upanishad refers to seeing, hearing, and understanding nothing else other than oneself, it is saying, in effect, that one cannot be conscious of a thing without *being* that thing, a point that has been described in detail in Part One. It is always one's own self that is the content of one's consciousness, regardless of what objects one might think one is seeing or hearing. The Upanishad puts it this way:

As far, verily, as this world-space extends, so far extends the space within the heart [(i.e., the theater 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.<sup>26</sup>

These quotations make clear that, notwithstanding India's venerable tradition of ritual worship, it has an equally old

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<sup>25</sup> *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 7.24.

<sup>26</sup> *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 8.1.3. The same ideas appear in the *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad*, although there God is described in distinctively Shaivite language. See *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad* 4.20 ["No one soever sees Him with the eye./ They who thus know Him with heart and mind/ As abiding in the heart [(i.e., as consciousness)], become immortal."], 6.11 ["The one God, hidden in all things/All-pervading, the Inner Soul of all things."].

philosophical tradition that equates God (Brahman) with universal consciousness (*Ātman*) and that boldly asserts that the consciousness illuminating the individual soul is none other than the universal consciousness. Moreover, the Upanishads state repeatedly that material things are, in fact, just Brahman (consciousness).

But the Upanishads don't fully explain matter, at least not with the detail set forth above in Part One. In other words, they don't quite close the subject-object divide. Instead, the Upanishads seem to imply a form of subjective idealism that gives matter no intrinsic being of its own. They 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 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 a form."<sup>27</sup>

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 just our thoughts and imaginings with no independent existence? The Upanishads do not settle the question.

## 2. *Adi Śaṅkara*

*Adi Śaṅkara* (8th century C.E.) is perhaps the leading expounder of the philosophical system presented in the Upanishads. Little is definite about Śaṅkara's life, although

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<sup>27</sup> *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 1.4.7. The assertion that all differentiation is just name and form is repeated frequently in the Upanishads. Sample texts are set forth in Appendix One, section 1, page \_\_\_\_.

legends about him provide us with some hints. 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.<sup>28</sup> The 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 example appearing in his *Brahmasūtrabhāṣya* 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., Brahman, or 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 divers 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

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<sup>28</sup> Some scholars question whether all the texts traditionally attributed to Śaṅkara were actually authored by him.

on.<sup>29</sup>

Below, I set forth three additional quotations from the *Brahmasūtrabhāṣya*, each making essentially the same point as the point made above. The first quotation uses the analogy of the sun or moon illuminating an object in space. The next two quotations use the analogy of the sun or moon being reflected in a body of water. Again, Śaṅkara argues that universal consciousness only appears to be individual and manifold because it shines through a variety of material vessels:

[1] 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 [(i.e., the light becomes visible as the straight or bent form of the illuminated finger)]; so Brahman [(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)

[2] [Brahman is compared] to the images of the sun [or moon] reflected in the water and the like, meaning thereby that all difference in Brahman is unreal, only due to its limiting conditions. Compare, e.g. out of many, the two following passages: “As the one luminous sun when entering into relation to many different waters is himself rendered multiform by his limiting adjuncts; so also the one divine unborn Self [(i.e., Brahman)]”; and “The one Self of all beings separately abides in all the individual beings; hence it appears one and many at the same time,

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<sup>29</sup> *Brahmasūtrabhāṣya* I, 1, 5, translated in Thibaut, *The Vedānta-Sūtras*, reprinted in Deutsch and Dalvi, *The Essential Vedānta*, p. 205.



just as the one moon is multiplied by its reflections in the water.” (III, 2, 18)

[3] The reflected image of the sun 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)<sup>30</sup>

The main point Śāṅkara is making in all the foregoing quotations 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. Below, Śāṅkara again makes essentially the same point, this time using ambient light as a metaphor. He describes the intellect as an inert thinking machine. When that machine is pervaded by the ambient light of consciousness, then consciousness seems to be thinking:

By illumining the intellect—which does the thinking—through its own self-effulgent light that pervades the intellect, the self [(i.e., consciousness)] assumes the

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<sup>30</sup> *Brahmasūtrabhāṣya* III, 2, 15–20, translated in Thibaut, *The Vedānta-Sūtras*, reprinted in Deutsch and Dalvi, *The Essential Vedānta*, pp. 251–252.

likeness of the latter [(i.e., the intellect)] and seems to think, just as light [passing through colored glass seems to be colored]. Hence people mistake that the self thinks; but really it does not. Likewise it *shakes, as it were*: When the intellect and other organs as well as the *prāṇas* [(i.e., vital forces in the body)] move, the self, which illumines them, becomes like them, and therefore seems to move rapidly; but really the light of the self has no motion.<sup>31</sup>

As noted, Śaṅkara expresses this same idea repeatedly throughout his writings. Here is a rather succinct statement taken from *Crest-Jewel of Discrimination*:

The fool sees the reflection of the sun in the water of a jar, and thinks it is the sun. Man in the ignorance of his delusion sees the reflection of Pure Consciousness upon the coverings [that constitute the gross and subtle body], and mistakes it for the real I.

In order to look at the sun, you must turn away from the jar, the water, and the sun's reflection in the water. The wise know that these three are only revealed by the reflection of the self-luminous sun. They are not the sun itself.<sup>32</sup>

Later in the same text, Śaṅkara again takes up the same point, and once again he refers to ordinary people as fools:

The sun is reflected upon water. Water moves, and

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<sup>31</sup> *Brhadāranyakopaniṣad-bhāṣya* IV, 3, 7, translated in Mādhavānanda, *The Brhadāranyaka Upaniṣad*, reprinted in Deutsch and Dalvi, *The Essential Vedānta*, p. 262.

<sup>32</sup> *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi* 218–219, translated in Prabhavananda and Isherwood, *Shankara's Crest-Jewel of Discrimination*, p. 68.

the fool thinks that the sun is moving. The *Ātman* is reflected upon the physical and mental bodies. The bodies move and act, and the fool thinks: “I act, I experience, I am killed”.

This body may drop dead in water or on land. I am not affected by that. The [space the fills] a jar is not affected when the jar is broken.<sup>33</sup>

We can summarize Śaṅkara’s understanding of Vedānta in this way: The body is part of the material world, and it moves and acts according to immutable laws that govern the material world, and consciousness pervades the body, as it does all things, and ordinary people think, “I act, I experience.” But in truth, the body has no soul of its own, and the one that knows the body’s movements and actions is the universal consciousness. As Śaṅkara puts it, “[t]he air in a jar is one with the air everywhere. In like manner, your *Ātman* [(soul)] is one with Brahman [(universal consciousness)].”<sup>34</sup>

And as for the body, Śaṅkara states that an awakened person does not care about it or identify with it:

During a solar eclipse, the sun is hidden by the moon. The ignorant, who do not understand what has happened, say that the sun has been swallowed up by a demon—but the sun can never be swallowed up.

In the same manner, the ignorant see the body of a knower of Brahman and identify him with it. Actually, he is free from the body and every other kind of bondage. To him, the body is merely a shadow.

He dwells in the body, but regards it as a thing apart

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<sup>33</sup> *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi* 508–509, translated in Prabhavananda and Isherwood, *Shankara’s Crest-Jewel of Discrimination*, p. 117.

<sup>34</sup> *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi* 288, translated in Prabhavananda and Isherwood, *Shankara’s Crest-Jewel of Discrimination*, p. 80.

from himself—like the cast-off skin of a snake. The body moves hither and thither, impelled by the vital force.

A log of wood is carried by the river to lower or to higher ground. [Likewise, the] body, carried by the river of time, enjoys or suffers the effects of past actions.<sup>35</sup>

Below is yet another of Śaṅkara's analogies illustrating the true nature of the soul, this one based on a fire-iron glowing in a hot fire. I find this analogy to be particularly meaningful, because it emphasizes the way in which we tend to co-opt the universal consciousness, making it seem as if it is our own individual consciousness:

Just as iron gives forth [glow] when it is in contact with fire, so the mind appears to act and to perceive because of its contact with Brahman, which is consciousness itself. These powers of action and perception, which seem to belong to the mind, are unreal. They are as false as things seen in delusion, imagination and dream.<sup>36</sup>

The glowing iron appears to have its own heat, but its heat is that of the fire in which it rests. Likewise, the human mind appears to have its own consciousness, but its consciousness is of that of Brahman.

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 an individual soul piloting a body. But these texts are

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<sup>35</sup> *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi* 547–550, translated in Prabhavananda and Isherwood, *Shankara's Crest-Jewel of Discrimination*, pp. 123–124.

<sup>36</sup> *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi* 349, translated in Prabhavananda and Isherwood, *Shankara's Crest-Jewel of Discrimination*, p. 91. See also *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi* 133, 191.

weak when it comes to explaining in detail how it is that universal consciousness comes to be filtered through so many material vessels, taking the illusory form of a multitude of souls.

In this regard, Śaṅkara sometimes invokes a stark consciousness-matter dualism, asserting that matter, although somehow derivative of Brahman, is completely separate from consciousness. This dualistic assertion directly contradicts the theory presented in Part One that consciousness and matter are the same thing comprehended in two different ways. In other words, despite Śaṅkara's great renown as a nondualist, he does not really close 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.<sup>37</sup>

In other words, the material elements—things such as earth, water, air, and fire—could no more be conscious than an acrobat could mount his own shoulders. It seems that Śaṅkara is more interested in asserting that all consciousness is one, than he is in actually closing the subject-object divide. It may be that Śaṅkara

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<sup>37</sup> *Brahmasūtrabhāṣya* III, 3, 54, translated in Thibaut, *The Vedānta-Sūtras*, reprinted in Deutsch and Dalvi, *The Essential Vedānta*, p. 255. Many similar statements, in which Śaṅkara insists on a stark consciousness-matter dualism, are collected in Appendix One, section 2, page \_\_\_\_.

draws this sharp distinction between consciousness and matter because he wants to break our identification with the body and even with the body's intellect, and thus help us to identify with the undifferentiated consciousness that illuminates the body. But be that as it may, Śāṅkara insists that any connection between consciousness and the body is false. He says:

It is a well-ascertained truth that that notion of identity of the individual Self with the not-Self,—with the physical body and the like—which is common to all mortal creatures is caused by *avidyā* [(“ignorance”)], just as a pillar (in darkness) is mistaken (through *avidyā*) for a human being. . . . Similarly *consciousness never actually pertains to the body*; neither can it be that any attributes of the body—such as pleasure, pain and dullness—actually pertain to Consciousness, to the Self; for, like decay and death, such attributes are ascribed to the Self through *avidyā*.<sup>38</sup>

And Śāṅkara draws the same consciousness-matter distinction in *Crest-Jewel of Discrimination*:

This body is the ‘physical covering’. . . . It cannot be the *Ātman* [(i.e., universal consciousness)], the ever-pure, the self-existent. [¶] . . . It is a sense-object, which can be perceived, like a jar. How can it be the *Ātman*—the experiencer of all experiences? [¶] . . . [¶] . . . That this *Ātman*, which is the abiding reality, is of another nature than the body, must be self evident. [¶] The body is a bundle of bones held together by flesh. . . . The body can

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<sup>38</sup> *Bhagavadgītābhāṣya* XIII, 2, translated in Mahādeva Śāstri, *The Bhagavad-Gītā*, reprinted in Deutsch and Dalvi, *The Essential Vedānta*, p. 278, italics added.

never be the same as the self-existent *Ātman*, the knower. The nature of the *Ātman* is quite different from that of the body. [¶] . . . [¶] . . . Those who live in ignorance identify the body with the *Ātman*. This ignorance is the root cause of birth, death and rebirth. Therefore you must strive earnestly to destroy it.<sup>39</sup>

Śaṅkara's stark consciousness-matter dualism could not be more clear.

To be sure, there are many passages in which Śaṅkara states that Brahman is one without a second and that the material world is nothing but Brahman. For example, he says:

Our perception of the universe is a continuous perception of Brahman, though the ignorant man is not aware of this. Indeed, this universe is nothing but Brahman.<sup>40</sup>

But Śaṅkara nonetheless insists on distinguishing consciousness from matter, asserting that Brahman first created the material world and then entered into it.<sup>41</sup> For Śaṅkara, in other words,

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<sup>39</sup> *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi* 154–164, translated in Prabhavananda and Isherwood, *Shankara's Crest-Jewel of Discrimination*, pp. 57–59.

<sup>40</sup> See, e.g., *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi* 521, translated in Prabhavananda and Isherwood, *Shankara's Crest-Jewel of Discrimination*, p. 119. See also *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi* 512, translated in Prabhavananda and Isherwood, p. 118 [“This whole universe—from Maya down to the outward physical forms—is seen as a mere shadow of Brahman.”].

<sup>41</sup> For this idea, he relies on the Upanishads. See *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 1.4.7 [“He entered in here [(i.e., the physical world)], even to the fingernail-tips, as a razor would be hidden in a razor-case, or fire in a fire-holder.”]; *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* 2.6.1 [“Having performed austerity, he created this whole world, whatever there is here. Having created it, into it, indeed, he entered. Having entered it, he became . . . both the conscious (*vijñāna*) and the unconscious . . .”].

consciousness and matter are distinct, although Brahman happens to be the source of each. Śaṅkara also rejects the theory set forth in Part One that all things are conscious:

For we see that from man, who is acknowledged to be intelligent [(i.e., conscious)], non-intelligent things such as hair and nails originate, and that, on the other hand, from avowedly non-intelligent matter, such as cow-dung, scorpions and similar [conscious] animals are produced.<sup>42</sup>

The closest Śaṅkara comes to explaining the existence of matter is to repeat the upanishadic theory that the material world is merely name and form superimposed on Brahman. He states:

Because of the ignorance of our human minds, the universe seems to be composed of diverse forms. It is Brahman alone. [¶] A jar made of clay is not other than clay. It is clay essentially. The form of the jar has no independent existence. What, then, is the jar? Merely an invented name! [¶] The form of the jar can never be perceived apart from the clay. What then is the jar? An appearance! The reality is the clay itself. [¶] This universe is an effect of Brahman. It can never be anything else but Brahman. Apart from Brahman, it does not exist. There is nothing beside Him.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> *Brahmasūtrabhāṣya* II, 1, 6, translated in Thibaut, *The Vedānta-Sūtras*, reprinted in Deutsch and Dalvi, *The Essential Vedānta*, p. 223. See also *id.*, II, 1, 13, reprinted in Deutsch and Dalvi, at p. 227 [“The distinction of enjoyers and objects of enjoyment is well known from ordinary experience, the enjoyers being intelligent, embodied souls, while sound and the like are the objects of enjoyment.”].

<sup>43</sup> *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi* 227–230, translated in Prabhavananda and Isherwood, *Shankara’s Crest-Jewel of Discrimination*, p. 70.



Moreover, Śāṅkara emphasizes that because the material world is merely name and form, it is also a mere illusion.<sup>44</sup> He writes:

By that element of plurality which is the fiction of Nescience, which is characterized by name and form, which is evolved as well as non-evolved, which is not to be defined either as the Existing or the Non-existing, Brahman becomes the basis of this entire apparent world with its changes, and so on, while in its true and real nature [Brahman] at the same time remains unchanged, lifted above the phenomenal universe. And as the distinction of names and forms, the fiction of Nescience, originates entirely from speech only, it does not militate against the fact of Brahman being without parts.<sup>45</sup>

In a similar vein, Śāṅkara says:

You may dream of place, time, objects, individuals, and so forth. But they are unreal. In your waking state, you experience this world, but that experience arises from your ignorance. *It is a prolonged dream, and therefore unreal.* Unreal also are this body, these organs, this life-

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<sup>44</sup> See *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi* 406, translated in Prabhavananda and Isherwood, *Shankara's Crest-Jewel of Discrimination*, p. 100. See also *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi* 110, 138, 246, 387, 569.

<sup>45</sup> *Brahmasūtrabhāṣya* II, 1, 27, translated in Thibaut, *The Vedānta-Sūtras*, reprinted in Deutsch and Dalvi, *The Essential Vedānta*, pp. 241–242. Similar statements, in which Śāṅkara asserts that the material world is merely name and form, and hence unreal, are collected in Appendix One, section 1, page \_\_\_\_.

breath, this sense of ego.<sup>46</sup>

The problem with Śāṅkara's idealism is familiar to us from Part One. 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 rock, you had better not kick it with a bare foot. Therefore, name and form is—at least at the practical level—not as dreamlike and illusory as Śāṅkara suggests, and even Śāṅkara acknowledges that the material world is not completely false, like the “son of a barren woman”; rather, it is ephemeral, and our focus should be on the underlying thing (Brahman) that is permanent. He says:

The modifications of Maya [(‘illusion’)]—ranging from the sense of ego down to the body and the sense objects—are all unreal. *They are unreal because they change from*

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<sup>46</sup> *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi* 252, translated in Prabhavananda and Isherwood, *Shankara's Crest-Jewel of Discrimination*, p. 74, italics added. See also *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi* 170, 234, 447, translated in Prabhavananda and Isherwood, pp. 60 [“The waking state is only a prolonged dream. The phenomenal universe exists in the mind.”], 71 [“If this universe were real, we should continue to perceive it in deep sleep. But we perceive nothing then. Therefore it is unreal, like our dreams.”], 107 [“When a man wakes from his dream, his dream-actions vanish into nothingness. When a man wakes to the knowledge that he is Brahman, all accumulated causes, all past actions performed in the course of millions and millions of lives, are dissolved away. [¶] While a man is asleep, he may dream that he is doing good deeds or committing dreadful sins. But, when the dream breaks, how can these dream-actions lead him either to heaven or to hell?"]. But see *Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad-bhāṣya* IV, 3, 7, translated in Mādhavānanda, *The Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, reprinted in Deutsch and Dalvi, *The Essential Vedānta*, pp. 265–266 [rejecting idealism].

moment to moment. The *Ātman* never changes.<sup>47</sup>

Śaṅkara is a master at analogies, and he typically develops his analogies for his readers, using them to powerfully illustrate his ideas. But in *Crest-Jewel of Discrimination*, Śaṅkara makes only passing mention of an intriguing analogy that gains significance two centuries later in the texts of nondual Kashmiri Shaivism.<sup>48</sup> Śaṅkara says: “The mirage of the universe is reflected in Brahman, *like a city in a mirror*.”<sup>49</sup> The idea being expressed here, without elaboration, is that the experience 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 city on the surface of a mirror only appears to be a remote city; in truth, it is only the surface of the mirror that one is seeing. Likewise, the observed world only appears to be separate from oneself, in truth it is only oneself that one is seeing.

This city-in-a-mirror simile is not the first time that the idea of reflection appears in Hindu philosophy. As we have already seen,

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<sup>47</sup> *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi* 350, translated in Prabhavananda and Isherwood, *Shankara's Crest-Jewel of Discrimination*, p. 91, italics added. See also *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi* 501, 503, translated in Prabhavananda and Isherwood, p. 116 [“My outward form comes and goes”; “I am untouched by change.”]; *Brahmasūtrabhāṣya* II, 2, 28, translated in Thibaut, *The Vedānta-Sūtras*, reprinted in Deutsch and Dalvi, *The Essential Vedānta*, pp. 135–136 [asserting that the “external” world has actual existence].

<sup>48</sup> See, e.g., *Spanda-Nirṇaya*, propitiatory verses, coms. to *Spandakārikā*, section 1, verses 1, 2, and 14–16; *Pratyabhijñāhrdayam*, com. to *sūtra* 2; *Paramārthasāra*, verses 12–13 and *Yogarāja's* com. to verses 12–13.

<sup>49</sup> *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi* 291, translated in Prabhavananda and Isherwood, *Shankara's Crest-Jewel of Discrimination*, p. 80, italics added. The city-in-a-mirror simile also appears, without elaboration, in Śaṅkara's *Dakṣiṇāmūrti Stotra*, stanza 1 (translation by Sw. Chinmayananda): “He who experiences, at the time of realization, his own immutable Self, in which the Self alone plays as the universe of names and forms, *like a city seen in a mirror . . .*” (Italics added.)

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. Śaṅkara's sun-in-water example has its roots in the *Brahma Sūtras*, which date, at the latest, to the first centuries of the common era and probably earlier, and which assert that the individual soul is a "reflection"<sup>50</sup> of the universal consciousness. And in post-Śaṅkara literature, several Vedānta scholars employ the analogy of reflection in that way, describing the individual soul as a reflection (*pratibimba*) and the universal consciousness (Brahman) as the prototype (*bimba*) that is the source of the reflection.<sup>51</sup>

But the city-in-a-mirror simile is fundamentally different, for it describes the *external world*, not the individual soul, as a reflection, and it describes the *universal consciousness* (Brahman) as the medium in which the reflection of the external world is appearing. In light of those distinctions, Śaṅkara's city-in-a-mirror simile might have its roots not in the *Brahma Sūtras*, but in the *Yoga Sūtras*, which also date to the first centuries of the common era. The *Yoga Sūtras* embrace the theory that one cannot be conscious of a thing without *being* that thing, and therefore the *Yoga Sūtras* assert that the mind (also called the "intelligence") assumes the form of an external object in order to know that object. In other words, the mind or the intelligence knows an external object by reflecting it and then knowing itself. The *Yoga Sūtras* state:

Although it is unchanging, consciousness becomes aware

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<sup>50</sup> *Brahma Sūtras*, *sūtra* II.3.50, translated in Radhakrishnan, *The Brahma Sutras*, p. 420. The *sūtra* uses the word *ābhāsa* for "reflection." The same word can mean "false appearance."

<sup>51</sup> See, e.g., *Pañcapādikā of Padmapāda* XXIX.107–111, XXX.112–113; *Pañcadaśī of Vidyāraṇya* I.15–23, III.37–42, VI.1–10, 128–142; *Vedāntasāra of Sadānanda* IV.173.

of its own intelligence (*buddhi*) by means of pervading the forms assumed by the intelligence (*buddhi*). The mind, colored by the seer as well as by that which is seen, knows all objects.<sup>52</sup>

This idea, that the consciousness-pervaded mind assumes the form of the object that it knows, is perhaps the literary precursor to Śaṅkara's assertion that "the universe is reflected in Brahman, like a city in a mirror."

We have said that Śaṅkara does not really close the subject-object divide, but the city-in-a-mirror simile helps narrow the gap. It informs us the seeming remoteness of the material world—its objectivity—is an illusion, like the illusion of depth and distance that characterizes the image of a city on the flat surface of a mirror. According to this paradigm, consciousness is always conscious only of itself, and the world doesn't exist as an objective thing separate from nondual consciousness.

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, solves the consciousness-matter puzzle that Śaṅkara has otherwise only seemed to complicate. Moreover, it does so without denying the reality of the external world. As argued in Part One, the objects of the observed world are not just *consciousness* (dream images), they are also *conscious* (dreamers). The things of the external world have their own intrinsic being because they are

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<sup>52</sup> *Yoga Sūtras*, *sūtras* IV.22–IV.23, translated in Bryant, *The Yoga Sūtras*, pp. 443–446. See also *id.*, *sūtra* IV.17. Perhaps drawing from the *Brahma Sūtras*, Vyāsa commentary to these *sūtras* (IV.17, IV.22, and IV.23) asserts that the mind (or intellect) reflects universal consciousness at the same time that it reflects the objects of the world. Thus, the mind or intellect acts as a mirror that mediates consciousness and matter. See also *Aṣṭāvakra Gītā* I, 19 ["Just as a mirror exists within and without the image reflected in it, even so the Supreme Lord exists inside and outside this body."].

*subjects* as well as *objects* of consciousness. What the city-in-a-mirror simile suggests is that subject and object are one, and therefore any object of consciousness is also a conscious subject, having the same ontological status as subjects. In short, the objects of the observed world have intrinsic being because they are thinkers as well as thoughts; they are conscious of themselves, and consciousness-of-self is the underlying stuff of existence.

But to understand how that philosophical conclusion is derived from the city-in-a-mirror simile, we will turn to the texts of nondual Kashmiri Shaivism.

### 3. Nondual Kashmiri 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 seventy-seven *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. The *sūtras* allegedly discovered there constitute one of the primary texts of nondual Kashmiri Shaivism. Vasugupta is also credited with writing the *Spandakārikā* (“Verses on Vibration”), although the actual author of the latter work might have been his disciple Bhatta Kallata (9th century C.E.). Both these texts are written in a highly elliptical style, necessitating, as to each, an elucidating commentary. Kṣemarāja (10th to 11th century C.E.) provides us with such commentaries, and Kṣemarāja also wrote the *Pratyabhijñāhṛdayam* (“Heart of Self-Recognition”), a

summary of nondual philosophy.<sup>53</sup> Finally, Kṣemarāja's teacher, Abhinavagupta (10th–11th century C.E.), wrote a text called the *Paramārthasāra* ("The Essence of the Supreme Truth"),<sup>54</sup> and Yogarāja (11th century C.E.) wrote a commentary on that work. Together, these four texts—Kṣemarāja's commentaries on the *Śiva Sūtras* and the *Spandakārikā*, his own *Pratyabhijñāhṛdayam*, and Yogarāja's commentary on the *Paramārthasāra*—provide a useful introduction to nondual Kashmiri Shaivism.

Like the Upanishads and the writings of Śaṅkara, these Kashmiri 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, the universal consciousness<sup>55</sup>—the texts of Kashmiri Shaivism refer to God using masculine names and honorifics that are usually associated with mythological figures—Śiva, Sadāśiva, Śambhu, Bhairava, Śaṅkara, and Īśvara. In the context of nondual Kashmiri Shaivism, these references should not be thought of as invoking the deities of myth. Instead, like the term Brahman, they are used to signify the universal consciousness. The texts also use feminine names and terms, such as Śakti, Parā, Parāparā, and Aparā, to describe God's creative power. Masculine and feminine

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<sup>53</sup> The scholar Jaideva Singh (1893–1986 c.e.) translated and annotated Kṣemarāja's major works. The present book relies on Jaideva Singh's translations, sometimes with minor, non-substantive edits. The translations have also been adjusted to make them more gender neutral. It is unquestionable that Jaideva Singh believed that the awakened state was equally available to women and men.

<sup>54</sup> Abhinavagupta's *Paramārthasāra* is an adaptation of an earlier Vaiṣṇavite text by Ādiśeṣa (6th century C.E.).

<sup>55</sup> The Upanishads also sometimes use anthropomorphic names for God. They refer, for example, to Puruṣa (the Cosmic Person), using that name semi-synonymously with *Ātman* (the "universal self" or "soul"), and they refer to the various deities of Vedic myth such as Indra, Agni, Soma, Varuna, Rudra, Yama, etc.

iconography plays a significant part in Kashmiri Shaivism, but it would be a misinterpretation of the texts to imagine God in primarily mythological or gender-specific terms. In these texts, God is best described as dynamic consciousness—consciousness that has content, not consciousness *in potentia*.

Moreover, the most important thing to consider in studying these texts is not their names for God but their repeated assertion that everything, even an inert lump of clay, has a *conscious self*. That emphasis, not the name used for God, is what distinguishes these Kashmiri texts philosophically from earlier texts.<sup>56</sup>

### a. The *Śiva Sūtras*

Kṣemarāja's commentary on the *Śiva Sūtras* begins with an introductory verse of praise, using Śaṅkara as a name for God. He says:

That consciousness of Śaṅkara . . . is nondual in reality though having an appearance of duality . . . [Its] form is this universe, from [its] unimpeded free will ever leaps forth [its] divine power which is a mass of bliss . . .<sup>57</sup>

Kṣemarāja thus makes clear, even before his commentary on the *Śiva Sūtras* begins, that dualism is a mere apparition. The divine consciousness only *seems* to be dualistic—that is, it only seems to stretch across a subject-object divide, giving rise to the mere appearance of a knower and a known. In reality, it is nondual—conscious only of itself.<sup>58</sup> Moreover, the divine consciousness is

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<sup>56</sup> The assertion that all things are forms of consciousness is commonplace in the texts of Kashmiri Shaivism. Sample texts are set forth in Appendix One, section 3, page \_\_\_\_.

<sup>57</sup> Kṣemarāja's com. to *Śiva Sūtras*, opening prayer.

<sup>58</sup> On the nondual nature of true consciousness, see Singh, *Pratyabhijñāhrdayam*, pp. 4–6, 18–20.



universal, free, and blissful.

After this introductory verse of praise, Kṣemarāja introduces the first *sūtra*, making the following assertion:

[I]t (the *sūtra*) at first teaches—in opposition to those who hold that there is a difference between . . . the human self and Īśvara (the “Supreme Lord”)—that consciousness of Śiva alone is . . . *the self of the entire manifestation*.<sup>59</sup>

Here, Kṣemarāja makes a point that is central to the Upanishads and to Śaṅkara’s writings, that God’s universal consciousness is what each person experiences as the consciousness of his or her own soul. But Kṣemarāja also asserts that God’s universal consciousness is the “self [(i.e., the soul)] of the entire manifestation,” including also inanimate things.

Many people believe that consciousness is a characteristic of living creatures and that if all living creatures tragically died in a horrible cataclysm, there would remain a material universe, hanging in space, but it would be known by no one and nothing. This error derives from the flawed Cartesian idea that consciousness is confined to bubble-like souls that inhabit and pilot bodies. But for Kṣemarāja, nondual consciousness-of-self (what he calls *chaitanya*) is the underlying stuff of existence, and therefore a universe known by no one and nothing is an impossibility. According to this view, the opposite of the word “conscious” is not “inert” or “inanimate”; rather, the opposite of the word “conscious” is “nonexistent,” for consciousness and being are the same thing. This idea is already familiar to us from the discussion in Part One. If it exists, it is conscious of itself, and that consciousness-of-self is the full extent of what existence is.

Kṣemarāja next discusses the first *sūtra*: “*Chaitanyamātmā*.” Kṣemarāja explains that *chaitanya*, which means “the state of

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<sup>59</sup> Kṣemarāja’s intro. to *Śiva Sūtras*, *sūtra* 1, italics added.

being conscious,” is used here as a reference to the universal nondual consciousness, and *ātmā* refers to the human “self” or “soul.” Therefore, the first *sūtra* can be rendered as “the human soul is the same as the universal consciousness.” Kṣemarāja goes on to explain that there cannot be many consciousnesses. Rather, all souls must share the same unified consciousness. As proof, he points out that nothing exists outside consciousness (i.e., consciousness and being are one), and therefore space, time, and form are only appearances in consciousness. Because space, time, and form have no existence independent of consciousness, they cannot serve to divide consciousness into parts.<sup>60</sup>

Still expounding the first *sūtra*, Kṣemarāja says:

Moreover, the aforesaid consciousness is the *ātmā* [(“soul”)] or nature of the entire universe consisting of both existent objects (like “jar” or “cloth”) [and] nonexistent but imagined objects (like “sky-flower”). . . . [¶] Every appearance owes its existence to the light of consciousness. Nothing can ever have its own being without the light of consciousness.<sup>61</sup>

Once again, Kṣemarāja emphasizes that everything, animate or inanimate, has a conscious soul—a jar or a piece of cloth is just as conscious as a person reading a book.

Kṣemarāja next quotes a nondual text called the *Ucchuṣmabhairava Tantra*, which asserts: “The knower and the

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<sup>60</sup> The assertion that space and time cannot divide consciousness into parts or differentiate souls from one another is commonplace in the texts of nondual Kashmiri Shaivism. Sample texts are collected in Appendix One, section 4, page \_\_\_\_.

<sup>61</sup> Kṣemarāja’s com. to *Śiva Sūtras*, *sūtra* 1.

known are really the same principle.”<sup>62</sup> Similarly, he quotes the following from the *Spandakārikā* (section 2, verse 3): “It is only the experien[cer] who always and everywhere exists in the form of the experienced.”<sup>63</sup> What both these verses are asserting is that the subject-object divide is not real; consciousness is always conscious only of itself; the sweet knows the sweet. Thus, consistent with the nondual philosophy set forth in Part One, Kṣemarāja rejects consciousness-matter dualism. What appears as the known (a material object) is in reality only the knower’s own consciousness-of-self.

In summary, the first *sūtra*, as explicated by Kṣemarāja, asserts that God’s universal nondual consciousness is the consciousness that illuminates all things everywhere. As the Upanishads explain, one cannot know God as one would know an object, just as one cannot know one’s own soul as one would know an object. Rather, to know God is to *participate in* God. But nondual Kashmiri Shaivism adds an emphasis that does not come to the fore in earlier texts. These Kashmiri texts assert that even inanimate material things participate in God’s nondual consciousness in that same way. They, too, are conscious, and their consciousness-of-self is the foundation of their existence.

Kṣemarāja returns to these same ideas in his commentary to the fourteenth *sūtra*: “*Dṛśyam śarīram*.” Kṣemarāja explains that the word *dṛśyam*, from the Sanskrit root *dṛś* (“seeing,” “viewing,” “looking at”), refers to all knowable phenomena, 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.”<sup>64</sup> Kṣemarāja’s

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<sup>62</sup> Quoted in Kṣemarāja’s com. to *Śiva Sūtras*, *sūtra* 1.

<sup>63</sup> Quoted in Kṣemarāja’s com. to *Śiva Sūtras*, *sūtra* 1.

<sup>64</sup> Jaideva Singh translates the *sūtra* as follows: “All objective phenomena, outer or inner, are like [the practitioner’s] own body.”

explains:

Whatever is perceptible whether inwardly or outwardly, all that appears to [the expert practitioner] like his or her own body, i.e., identical with his or her own self and not as something different. . . . His or her feeling is ‘I am this,’ just as the feeling of Sadāśiva with regard to the entire universe is ‘I am this.’<sup>65</sup>

Thus, Kṣemarāja presents a philosophical system that matches the philosophical system set forth above in Part One. Most people identify with a physical human body, or perhaps with the brain of such a body, but they do not identify with the surrounding objects that their senses perceive, such as a chair or the sweetness of a cup of tea. But the truth is that all consciousness is consciousness-of-self, and one is aware of an external object only because it is reflected and represented in one’s own self. Moreover, external objects only appear to be material because of being perceived through the mediation of the senses. Their true form is their own consciousness-of-self. And because any divisions that appear in consciousness are themselves just consciousness, a wise person recognizes that all perceptions are nothing but self.<sup>66</sup>

### **b. The *Spandakārikā* and the *Spanda-Nirṇaya***

The *Spandakārikā* is a collection of verses attributed to Vasugupta but perhaps written by his disciple Bhatta Kallata (9th century C.E.). The title means “Verses on Vibration,” referring to the theory that “vibration” or “pulse” (Sanskrit: *spanda*) plays a critical role in the underlying structure of the universe.

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<sup>65</sup> Kṣemarāja’s com. to *Śiva Sūtras*, *sūtra* 14.

<sup>66</sup> See also Kṣemarāja’s com. to *Śiva Sūtras*, *sūtra* 15 [“the appearance of everything as it is in its essential reality, devoid of the distinction between subject and object, [as] a component of oneself”].

Metaphorically speaking, one can think of the universe as the interference patterns that result from countless interactions among countless waves, leading to ever increasing degrees of diversification and complexity.<sup>67</sup> For our purposes, however, the vibrational foundation of the universe 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 that Śaṅkara mentioned in passing in *Crest-Jewel of Discrimination*, but Kṣemarāja develops that simile, using it to explain that consciousness is nondual, despite appearing to be dual. His commentary is in the traditional form of a series of objections and replies. He writes:

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

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<sup>67</sup> See *Spanda-Nirṇaya*, com. to *Spandakārikā*, section 1, verse 1 ["*Vibhava* means the infinite variety of junction and disjunction of the group of *Śaktis* [(“powers”)] whose highest *raison d’être* consists in manifestation. . . . Thus the Lord by mutually joining and disjoining in various ways all the objective phenomena which are of the nature of consciousness and exist in Him as identical with Him is the cause of the manifestation and absorption of the universe.”].

—*abides in Himself.*”<sup>68</sup>

In other words, the universal consciousness—called “Lord” in this text—is both one and alone. The world does not come into existence as something separate from consciousness (“as does a walnut from a bag”). Rather, the world comes into existence as consciousness (“on His own background, like a city in a mirror”), and the separation is only apparent.

Later in his commentary, Kṣemarāja returns to the city-in-a-mirror simile. He writes:

[The creator] manifests innumerable [objective] things like body, blue [sky], etc., which, though non-different from the essential nature of consciousness, appear as different, like reflections in a mirror (which though non-different from the mirror appear as different).<sup>69</sup>

Kṣemarāja is again asserting that objects of consciousness are not different from the consciousness that observes them, just as a reflection of a city in a mirror is not different from the mirror’s shiny reflective surface. Consciousness is always conscious only of itself, and the subject-object divide is an illusion.

In section 2, verses 3 and 4, the *Spandakārikā* again asserts the identity of subject and object in a text that we already encountered in Kṣemarāja’s commentary on the *Śiva Sūtras*:

Since the limited individual self [or soul] is identical with the whole universe, . . . hence, whether in the word,

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<sup>68</sup> *Spanda-Nirṇaya*, com. to *Spandakārikā*, section 1, verse 2, italics added. See also *Spanda-Nirṇaya*, com. to *Spandakārikā*, section 1, verse 1 [“This power . . . goes on presenting [everything] on its own background like the reflection of a city in a mirror.”].

<sup>69</sup> *Spanda-Nirṇaya*, com. to *Spandakārikā*, section 1, verses 14–16.

object, or thought, there is no state which is not Śiva [(i.e., universal consciousness)]. *It is the experien[cer] who, always and everywhere, abides in the form of the experienced*, i.e., it is the Divine Himself who is the essential experien[cer], and it is He [(God, or universal consciousness)] who abides in the form of the universe as His field of experience.<sup>70</sup>

By saying that the experiencer (the subject) takes the form of the experienced (the object), the *Spandakārikā* is making clear that all *objects* of consciousness, even inanimate objects, are also *experiencers* of consciousness. The collapse of subject and object into one—which is the essence of the city-in-a-mirror simile—necessarily implies the consciousness of all things, even things that appear to be material and inert.

The *Spandakārikā* brings these ideas to a powerful conclusion in section 2, verses 6 and 7. These two verses assert:

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 or her 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.<sup>71</sup>

In South Asian religious tradition, one uses the mantra of one's personal deity as a support in meditation, culminating (one hopes) in the manifestation of that deity before oneself in physical form. But this text asserts that the manifestation of one's mantra deity

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<sup>70</sup> *Spandakārikā*, section 2, verses 3–4, italics added.

<sup>71</sup> *Spandakārikā*, section 2, verses 6–7, italics added.

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 affirms, quoting another text: "One should worship Śiva by becoming Śiva."<sup>72</sup> Any other form of worship is at best merely a preparation for worship.

### c. The *Pratyabhijñāhṛdayam*

The *Pratyabhijñāhṛdayam* was written by Kṣemarāja with the purpose of making the ideas of nondualism available to the non-expert. He says:

In this world, there are some devoted people who are undeveloped in reflection and have not taken pains in studying difficult works like Logic and Dialectics, but who nevertheless aspire after *Samāveśa* ["merging" or "identification"] with the highest Lord . . . . For their sake, the truth of the teaching of *Īśvara-pratyabhijñā* [(a 9th century C.E. work by Utpaladeva)] is being explained briefly.<sup>73</sup>

Below is the first *sūtra* of the *Pratyabhijñāhṛdayam*, followed immediately by an excerpt taken from Kṣemarāja's commentary:

#### Sūtra 1:

The absolute *chiti* ["nondual consciousness"]) of its own free will is the cause of the [effectuation] of the universe.

#### Kṣemarāja's commentary:

. . . It is only when *chiti*, the ultimate consciousness-

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<sup>72</sup> *Spanda-Nirṇaya*, com. to *Spandakārikā*, section 2, verses 6–7.

<sup>73</sup> *Pratyabhijñāhṛdayam*, Intro.



power, comes into play that the universe comes forth into being (lit.: “opens its eyelids”) and continues as existent, and when [*chiti*] withdraws its movement, the universe also disappears from view (lit.: “shuts its eyelids”).<sup>74</sup>

What this text is saying is that consciousness and being are the same thing. An object that is outside consciousness is not inert or inanimate; it is non-existent.

The second *sūtra* explains that consciousness does not give rise to the universe in a dualistic sense—that is, with the objective universe existing as a thing separate from, and observed by, a conscious soul. Rather, consciousness creates the universe within consciousness:

By the power of her own will (alone), she [(i.e., *chiti*, or nondual consciousness)] unfolds the universe *upon her own screen* (i.e., in herself as the basis of the universe).<sup>75</sup>

According to this verse, that which appears in the form of knower and known (subject and object) is actually consciousness conscious only of itself, an idea that has become familiar to us. Kṣemarāja then uses the city-in-a-mirror simile to explain the point further:

She [(i.e., *chiti*, or nondual consciousness)] 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.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> *Pratyabhijñāhṛdayam*, *sūtra* 1 and com. to *sūtra* 1.

<sup>75</sup> *Pratyabhijñāhṛdayam*, *sūtra* 2.

<sup>76</sup> *Pratyabhijñāhṛdayam*, com. to *sūtra* 2.

As we have discussed at some length in Part One, we cannot be conscious of a thing without *being* that thing, and therefore in our knowing of any external object, we are only conscious of the effects that object is having on our own self, and from those effects, we are merely inferring the external object. Like the reflection of a distant city in the flat surface of a mirror, objects appear to be remote, but it is only the shiny surface of the mirror that we are seeing when we look at the reflected city, and it is only our own self that is the content of our conscious experience when we look at an external object.

In his commentary to the ninth *sūtra*, Kṣemarāja goes on to explain that by relying on sense organs as a means of acquiring knowledge about the surrounding world, universal consciousness takes the form of an individual soul. This point, too, is familiar to us from the discussion of nondual consciousness in Part One. Kṣemarāja states:

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 psyche)] *and organs of perception* [(i.e., the senses)], [the universal consciousness] acquires *māyīya-mala*, which consists in the apprehension of all objects as different [from itself].<sup>77</sup>

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 will inevitably view internal bodily organs as if they were external. Likewise, when consciousness—which is infinite and universal—shines through

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<sup>77</sup> *Pratyabhijñāhṛdayam*, com. to *sūtra* 9.

the brain and “organs of perception” of a 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 the *Īśvara Pratyabhijñā Kārikā* of Utpaladeva (book 1, ch. 5, v. 7) describes:

The Divine Being whose essence is *Chit* (Universal Consciousness) makes the collection of objects that are internally contained appear outside by His Will, . . . .<sup>78</sup>

In other words, the individual soul is what the universal consciousness *appears to be* when it illuminates the functioning of a brain and sense organs. But in doing so, it undergoes no actual change.

Consider the example of water moving in a fast-flowing cascade, forming itself into numerous whirlpools and eddies that dissipate over time and then reappear. In the same way, universal consciousness, which is dynamic and ever-changing, configures itself into corporeal systems that gather information through sense organs, just as the whirlpools gather water from the surrounding area, and while the universal consciousness is so configured, it imagines itself to be an individual soul knowing an external material world, but in truth it never ceases to be the universal consciousness. Kṣemarāja describes the process in terms of concealment and grace:

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<sup>78</sup> Quoted in Singh, *Pratyabhijñāhṛdayam*, p. 19. Consider also the following verse from the *Īśvara Pratyabhijñā Kārikā* of Utpaladeva (book 1, ch. 6, v. 7), quoted by Kṣemarāja in *Pratyabhijñāhṛdayam*, com. to *sūtra* 10: “[T]he Lord [(i.e., the universal consciousness)], entering into the body, etc., causes the objects to appear outwardly . . . , though [these objects are actually] appearing within Himself.”

[W]hen the great Lord, who is consciousness, entering into the sphere of the body . . . , makes objects . . . appear in definite space, time, etc., then with . . . reference to [their] appearance as different [from the observer], it is His act of concealment. With reference to the appearance of every thing as identical with the light (of consciousness), it is His act of grace.<sup>79</sup>

#### d. The *Paramārthasāra*

The foregoing texts present the views of Kṣemarāja, either in his commentaries on the *Śiva Sūtras* and the *Spandakārikā*, or in his own work, the *Pratyabhijñāhṛdayam*. But Kṣemarāja's disciple, Yogarāja, further develops the theory of universal nondual consciousness in his commentary on Abhinavagupta's *Paramārthasāra*. Significantly, Yogarāja's commentary on the *Paramārthasāra* asserts, even more explicitly than previous texts, that all things are conscious, and Yogarāja further develops the city-in-a-mirror simile to explain the nondual nature of that consciousness.

The first verse of Abhinavagupta's *Paramārthasāra* refers to the universal nondual consciousness as Śambhu, an alternative name for Śiva. It says that Śambhu is "without beginning" and "one" but also "existent in all beings."<sup>80</sup> Yogarāja's commentary then explains that all things are conscious as a result of partaking of the universal consciousness. He says:

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<sup>79</sup> *Pratyabhijñāhṛdayam*, com. to *sūtra* 10.

<sup>80</sup> *Paramārthasāra*, verse 1. The translations quoted herein from Yogarāja commentary on the *Paramārthasāra* are by Prof. Deba Brata SenSharma, sometimes with minor, non-substantive edits. See SenSharma, *Paramārthasāra of Abhinavagupta with the Commentary of Yogarāja*.

Whatever is different from him [(i.e., universal consciousness)] is unmanifest and is therefore nonexistent: [¶] . . . [¶] . . . *Śambhu is . . . the innermost divine Self of all*, and has assumed infinite forms, despite his being of the nature of the supreme Self.<sup>81</sup>

By asserting that “Śambhu is . . . the innermost divine Self of all,” Yogarāja makes clear that the objects of consciousness are not mere dream images. Rather, all things—even inanimate things—have a conscious self, making them subjects as well as objects.

The idea that a rock or a clod of earth is conscious leaves one to wonder what the rock or clod is thinking about, but verse 8 of the *Paramārthasāra* explains that, although all things have a conscious self, all things do not have anything like a human soul, or even an animal soul. Rather, the consciousness that characterizes all things is just consciousness-of-self. That consciousness-of-self can take the form of an individual soul knowing an outside world only when a particular physical system is constructed in such a way as to produce, in one place, a representation of the outside world—as is true, for example, of a body with a brain and sense organs. To make this point, the *Paramārthasāra* draws an analogy to Rāhu.

Rāhu is the ascending lunar node (the place where the moon’s orbit intersects the ecliptic when ascending from the southern ecliptic hemisphere to the northern ecliptic hemisphere). In astronomy, this node is merely a location in space, but if the moon happens to be “full” (directly opposite the sun, on the far side of

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<sup>81</sup> Yogarāja’s com. to *Paramārthasāra*, verse 1, quoting *Spandakārikā*, section 2, verse 3, italics added. Jaideva Singh translates the same verse of the *Spandakārikā* as follows: “It is the experien[cer] himself who, always and everywhere, abides in the form of the experienced, i.e., it is the Divine Himself who is the essential Experien[cer], and it is He who abides in the form of the universe as His field of experience.”

the earth) when this intersection occurs, we experience it as a lunar eclipse. 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, verse 8 states:

Just as the invisible Rāhu (the shadow of the earth), when appearing on the disc of the moon [at the time of a lunar eclipse,] becomes visible, in the same way, the Self *though present everywhere* becomes perceptible in the mirror of the intellect (*buddhi*) by [the perception of] sense objects.<sup>82</sup>

In other words, consciousness is everywhere, but what makes the consciousness of a lump of clay different from that of a person is the absence, in the former case, of a brain and sense organs that can make the consciousness “perceptible in the mirror of the intellect.”

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 the sound.” This relative “I” exists as a subject in relation to a known object, and it depends on the knowing of the object for its existence. When an object is known, even if the object is only a mental image, then the relative “I” is also known. When there is no object known, as in dreamless sleep, the relative “I” disappears. Thus, the relative “I” is the “I” of subject-object dualism, which, as we have seen, is illusory. 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 everywhere”—that is, in all things. Yogarāja explains:

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<sup>82</sup> *Paramārthasāra*, verse 8, italics added, all textual additions by SenSharma.

Although Rāhu remains constantly moving about in the sky and is not ordinarily visible, when it happens to settle down on the disc of the moon at the time of a lunar eclipse, it is seen and recognised as “this is Rāhu.” . . . In the same way, *although the Self exists in all [things]*, constituting the innermost being [of all things], . . . it is not perceived by all as “this is the Self.” But when an object of cognition is revealed by being *reflected in the intellect-mirror . . . of embodied beings [(i.e., beings that have a brain and sense organs)]*, the Self becomes an object of cognition [along with the external object], as in the cognition of sound in the form of “I hear the sound.” . . . [By contrast,] *the Self [(i.e., nondual consciousness)]*, *though existent in a lump of clay*, appears as non-existent to the cognisor on account of its being covered by a thick veil of *tamas* (darkness) . . . . [¶] . . . *But from the point of view of the supreme Lord, the distinction between the inanimate and the animate does not exist*, and the world’s conventional understanding of their difference has no significance.<sup>83</sup>

Yogarāja is making a striking assertion here. Everything, everywhere, is conscious, but only organisms that have a brain and sense organs are constructed in such a way that the consciousness—which is universal and nondual—assumes the form of an individual soul knowing various objects of perception. This assertion, that all things are conscious, is certainly implied or said without elaboration in earlier texts, but here it is spelled out in some detail.

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<sup>83</sup> Yogarāja’s com. to *Paramārthasāra*, verse 8, italics added, underlined textual additions by the present author, all other textual additions by SenSharma.

Verses 12 and 13 of the *Paramārthasāra* present what is perhaps the quintessential statement of the city-in-a-mirror simile, using it to illustrate that consciousness is always nondual, despite appearing to us in the form of a subject knowing an object. Verses 12 and 13 state:

Just as variety in the form of a city, village, etc., when seen in a mirror is not separate [from the mirror's flat surface], yet it [(the variety of objects)] appears differentiated [in the mirror] as a city, village, etc., and also as different from the mirror. Similarly the universe, though not existing as different from pure self-experience of the highest Bhairava [(i.e., universal consciousness)], appears as the world, differentiated and different from [Bhairava] . . . .<sup>84</sup>

Yogarāja's commentary explicates these important verses in great detail, but to understand his commentary, one must consider that mirrors in 11th century Kashmir were made of polished metal, usually an alloy of copper. Thus, when Yogarāja describes a "clear mirror," he is referring to something whose reflective surface was unmistakably visible to the observer, and the term "clear" meant only that a discernible reflection, not a vague blur, appeared within the mirror. Here is Yogarāja's commentary:

When reflected with all their distinct traits and individual features in a clear mirror, a city, a village, hamlets, the walls surrounding them, buildings, fields, big rivers, rivulets, fire, trees, mountains, animals, birds, men, women, etc., all appear to relinquish their separate existence and give up their traits[, all manifesting instead

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<sup>84</sup> *Paramārthasāra*, verses 12–13, underlined textual additions by the present author, all other textual additions by SenSharma.



as the same visible mirror-surface in which they are all reflected]. But even while manifesting themselves as non-different from the mirror, they retain their individual existence and are manifested individually with their characteristic traits. A jar is manifest [in the mirror] differentiated from cloth, and vice versa. All the objects reflected in the mirror are perceived there [as the mirror surface but also as objects] differentiated from each other.<sup>85</sup>

Yogarāja thus makes the point that the metallic surface of the mirror is visible in addition to the reflections that appear within it, and thus the reflections are not mistaken for a real jar or a real piece of cloth; they are known to be mere appearances in a mirror.<sup>86</sup> He continues:

Despite persons having the experience of objects in a mirror, the knowledge that ‘this is a mirror’ remains an uncontradicted experience. [¶] Objects like a pot [though appearing in the mirror] do not characterize the mirror [or change its essential nature], causing us to have the experience ‘this is a pot-mirror’ or ‘this is a cloth-mirror,’ thus obliterating the very existence of the mirror as a reflecting medium. . . .

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As in the example of a city reflected in a mirror described above, after the dissolution of all impurity [from one’s vision], the universe is experienced as non-

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<sup>85</sup> Yogarāja’s com. to *Paramārthasāra*, verses 12–13, underlined textual additions by the present author, all other textual additions by SenSharma.

<sup>86</sup> Yogarāja’s com. to *Paramārthasāra*, verses 12–13 [“[No reflection] is perceived in the mirror as existing apart from it, the reflecting medium.”].

different from [that which illumines and reveals it]: the illumination-nature of the highest Bhairava, which is the absolutely pure light of consciousness of the supreme Lord Śiva, accompanied by the highest bliss.<sup>87</sup>

What Yogarāja is saying here is that just as the reflection of a city in a mirror is seen to be non-different from the metallic surface of the mirror in which it appears, and one necessarily is aware of the metallic mirror-surface that is the underlying substratum of the reflection, so the universe is seen, by a self-realized person, to be non-different from the divine consciousness in which the universe appears, and one necessarily is aware of the divine consciousness as the underlying substratum. Moreover, like the objects in the mirror, which retain their characteristic traits and differentiation from each other, so “[t]he universe . . . is composed of experiencers and the experienced [(subjects and objects)], which are distinct from each other and are of infinite variety,”<sup>88</sup> despite being non-different from the universal consciousness in which they appear.

Yogarāja next discusses the limitations of the city-in-a-mirror simile, at least when that simile is used to describe the totality of *all* consciousness rather than just the consciousness of a single person:

The distinction between the manifestation of objects through their reflection in a mirror and the manifestation of the universe by the light of consciousness . . . lies in the fact that the objects like the city and so on are external to the mirror when these are reflected in its clear surface.

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<sup>87</sup> Yogarāja’s com. to *Paramārthasāra*, verses 12–13, all textual additions by SenSharma.

<sup>88</sup> Yogarāja’s com. to *Paramārthasāra*, verses 12–13, all textual additions by SenSharma.

Moreover these objects are not created by the mirror during the process of reflection. Therefore, the perception in the mirror that “this is an elephant” is undoubtedly a delusion[, for it is a metallic mirror reflecting an elephant, not an elephant.] [¶] The divine illumination[, by contrast,] . . . experiencing the universe [projected upon] its own Self as the canvas [or reflecting surface,] out of its own free will, has [only] consciousness[, not the existence of some external object,] as the material cause. . . . This self-knowledge is the distinguishing feature of the divine illumination, differentiating it from the inert reflecting power of the mirror.<sup>89</sup>

Just as a reflection of a city in a metallic mirror takes the form of a distant city, when in reality it is non-different from the metallic surface of the mirror, likewise the universal consciousness creates the illusion of a multitude of subjects each knowing a vast external world, when in reality the universal consciousness has no spatial dimensions, and it is always nondual—conscious only of itself. But as Yogarāja explains, the surface of a metallic mirror reflects light shining from an actual distant city, and in so doing, the mirror’s surface isn’t conscious of the image it is reflecting. By contrast, the universal consciousness manifests images of cities and the like on the “canvas” of consciousness, without there being an object outside consciousness that is the source of those images, and the universal consciousness is conscious of those images by reason of

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<sup>89</sup> Yogarāja’s com. to *Paramārthasāra*, verses 12–13, underlined textual additions by the present author, all other textual additions by SenSharma. See also *Paramārthasāra*, verses 48–49 [“It is in ‘me’ that the universe reveals itself as [inanimate objects like] jars, as in a mirror. . . . It is the supreme ‘I’ (*aham*) alone who takes the form of the universe, like a body composed of hands, feet, etc. In all, it is the ‘I’ (*aham*) alone who is manifest as illumination in all of its modes.” (textual addition by SenSharma)].

being conscious of itself.<sup>90</sup>

Yogarāja's critique of the city-in-a-mirror simile is valid insofar as he is pointing out that, although a real city exists outside the metallic mirror, nothing exists outside the universal consciousness. At the universal level, the images that appear in consciousness appear there without being the reflections of an external thing. But as Yogarāja has previously explained, the city-in-a-mirror simile also describes the *human intellect*, which is the consciousness-of-self that illuminates the human brain, and needless to say, things do exist outside a human brain. Thus, as regards the sensory perceptions that a person has of the surrounding world, the city-in-a-mirror simile remains quite apt. Whatever seemingly external thing one might be perceiving, one is actually only conscious of one's own self in which the external thing is being reflected. One's sense of separation from the content of one's consciousness is only an illusion. The subject-object divide is a misinterpretation of the facts.

But the most important point stated repeatedly in the *Paramārthasāra* is that the nondual consciousness that is so aptly illustrated by the city-in-a-mirror simile describes the consciousness of *everything*, not just the consciousness of living creatures. For example, verse 30 asserts that it is only because of our dualistic vision, mediated through the senses, that we "experience the non-self [(i.e., inertness)] in things which in fact are identical with the Self [(i.e., consciousness)]."<sup>91</sup> Indeed, even an earthenware jar is fully conscious. Therefore, verse 74 states that for an awakened person, "[e]ither his own body or another's . . . or any [external] object like a jar etc. is his

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<sup>90</sup> These points are explained by Swami Lakshmanjoo Raina (1907–1991 C.E.) in his introductory book on Kashmiri Shaivism. See Lakshmanjoo, *Kashmir Shaivism: The Secret Supreme*, pp. 29–32.

<sup>91</sup> *Paramārthasāra*, verse 30, all textual additions by the present author.

temple”<sup>92</sup>—that is, the locus of God or consciousness. Yogarāja elaborates the point as follows:

Not only is the physical body a location of pure consciousness and therefore rightly described as a temple, but everything else is *also the locus of pure consciousness and must be regarded as a temple*. . . . [The reference to “jars” in the verse] impl[ies] the five types of sense-objects, which are the objects enjoyed through the [five] senses—the eyes[, ears, tongue, nose, and skin]—and *which are also pervaded by pure consciousness*.<sup>93</sup>

This teaching, that the objects of the world are not just consciousness but also conscious, is a logical outgrowth of the city-in-a-mirror simile, which eliminates the subject-object divide without privileging one or the other side of that divide. If the teaching is categorized as idealism, it is very different from the notion that all things are merely the dream images of a lonely dreamer. Rather, all things are the dream images of *themselves*, having their own intrinsic being despite being only consciousness. This idealism, then, is a *diffuse* idealism that merges idealism and materialism into one. One could just as accurately describe it as materialism that focuses on what matter is, not how matter acts.

#### 4. The *Yoga Vāsiṣṭha* and the *Tripurā Rahasya*

The last South Asian texts that we will discuss are the *Yoga Vāsiṣṭha* and the *Tripurā Rahasya*. Both texts develop ideas that are only outlined in the 11th century texts of nondual Kashmiri

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<sup>92</sup> *Paramārthasāra*, verse 74, italics added, textual addition by SenSharma.

<sup>93</sup> Yogarāja’s com. to *Paramārthasāra*, verse 74, italics added, underlined textual additions by the present author, all other textual additions by SenSharma.

Shaivism, and they integrate those ideas into mainstream Hinduism. It seems likely, therefore, that the current recensions of both texts date to a period after the 11th century. They both rely heavily on nondual Kashmiri Shaivism, popularizing its ideas, using the accessible format of a dialogue between a teacher and a student.

### **a. The *Yoga Vāsiṣṭha***

The *Yoga Vāsiṣṭha* (“Vāsiṣṭha’s Union”; i.e., his method for attaining divine union) is a long text that covers a lot of ground. It is not always internally consistent, although the inconsistencies are mostly superficial, reflecting the effort of the author to harmonize different schools and traditions. The text consists of a series of entertaining stories, interwoven with philosophical commentary that draws from South Asian folk traditions, Buddhism, Śāṅkara’s Vedānta, and, in particular, nondual Kashmiri Shaivism. As noted, *Yoga Vāsiṣṭha* elucidates the ideas of the latter tradition, and therefore the final redaction of the *Yoga Vāsiṣṭha* probably dates to the 11th century C.E. or later. Because an abbreviated version of the *Yoga Vāsiṣṭha* was translated into Persian in the 14th or 15th century C.E., it seems reasonable to date the text to somewhere between the 11th and 15th centuries. The *Yoga Vāsiṣṭha* is very repetitive. For our purposes, it is most useful to focus on select passages that seem to be rooted in nondual Kashmiri Shaivism, using those passages as evidence of the continuing development of the latter tradition.

Consistent with the principal texts of nondual Kashmiri Shaivism, the *Yoga Vāsiṣṭha* asserts not only that all things are consciousness, but that all things are themselves conscious. Seeming to draw directly from Yogarāja’s commentary to verse 8 of the *Paramārthasāra*, the *Yoga Vāsiṣṭha* asserts that the consciousness of an inanimate thing such as a rock is like the consciousness of a person in dreamless sleep; it is fully present but not hooked up to a functioning brain and to functioning sense

organs, and so, like light shining through empty space, it goes unnoticed. In addition, the *Yoga Vāsiṣṭha* repeatedly makes the point that all consciousness is consciousness-of-self; the illusion of subject-object consciousness arises only because of the way the content of consciousness is configured. These are ideas that are familiar to us both from the general discussion of nondual consciousness in Part One and from our review of the principal texts of nondual Kashmiri Shaivism.

The *Yoga Vāsiṣṭha* also makes frequent use of the city-in-a-mirror simile or some variant thereof. As in earlier texts, the point of the mirror simile is to emphasize that the apparently vast world, with all its complexity and differentiation, exists within a measureless point of undifferentiated consciousness, just as a large city or a mountain is reflected in the surface of a small mirror. And as noted, the mirror simile further serves to teach that the universe, despite the illusion of subject-object dualism, is nothing but nondual consciousness, just as the reflection in a mirror is nothing but the mirror.

Building on nondual Kashmiri Shaivism, the *Yoga Vāsiṣṭha* spells out much more precisely than earlier texts how universal nondual consciousness-of-self becomes what we experience (falsely) as an individual soul that knows an objective world. Employing the mirror simile, the *Yoga Vāsiṣṭha* first explains that the soul, witnessing, within itself, a reflection of various external actions, imagines it is the *doer* of those actions, when in reality the actions merely unfold spontaneously:

Even as a mountain is reflected in a mirror and is seen as if it were in the mirror, the *jīva* [(individual soul)] reflects the external objects and activities, and soon begins to think that they are all [initiated] within itself and that he is the doer of the actions and the experiencer of the

experiences. (III, 13.)<sup>94</sup>

The text goes on to explain that the individual soul seeks information about the surrounding world, and that seeking is what causes the sense organs to continue to evolve. Moreover, sensory perception, far from being a true and accurate form of knowing, is constrained by the limitations of the sense organs, which present the world to the soul in a way that makes it appear to be a material thing rather than the nondual consciousness that it is. The *Yoga Vāsiṣṭha* states:

When the *jīva* [(the individual soul)] wishes to see, eyes are formed in the gross body. Even so the skin (tactile sense), ears, tongue, nose, and the organs of action are formed as a result of the appropriate desire arising in the *jīva* [(the individual soul)]. Thus abides in the body, the *jīva*, which has the extremely subtle body of [nondual] consciousness, imagining various external physical experiences and various internal psychological experiences. Thus, resting in the unreal [(i.e., what is presented by the sense organs)], which however appears to be real, Brahman [(i.e., the nondual consciousness)], now appearing to be *jīva* [(an individual soul)], becomes confused.

This same Brahman, which has come to regard itself as a finite *jīva* and endowed with a physical body, apprehends the external world, which on account of the veil of ignorance appears to be composed of matter. . . .

But all this is mere imagination or thought. Even now, nothing has ever been created; the pure infinite

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<sup>94</sup> The translations quoted herein from the *Yoga Vāsiṣṭha* are by Swami Venkatesananda, sometimes with minor, non-substantive edits. See Venkatesananda, *The Supreme Yoga*.



space alone exists. . . . Cosmic consciousness alone exists now and ever; in it are no worlds, no created beings. That consciousness reflected in itself appears to be creation. . . . (III, 13.)

This wonderful text is making a point that we elaborated in some detail in Part One. The *jīva*—the individual soul—is and always was universal nondual consciousness. Its sense of being an individual located in a particular time and place is merely an illusion created by sensory perception. The text continues:

[T]here is neither one *jīva* [(i.e., individual soul)], nor many, nor a conglomerate of *jīvas*. *Jīva* is only a name! What exists is only Brahman [(i.e., universal nondual consciousness)]. . . . [What is really] [o]ne alone appears as diverse on account of ignorance; we do not experience this ignorance, which disappears on enquiry even as darkness vanishes when light is brought in to look at it. Brahman alone is the cosmic soul and [also] the millions of *jīvas* [(i.e., individual souls)]. There is naught else.

By the apprehension of the perceived or the knowable [(i.e., by the subject-object consciousness of sensory perception)], [nondual] consciousness becomes *jīva* (the living soul) and is apparently involved in repetitive history (*samsara*). When the false notion of a knowable apart from the knower (consciousness) ceases, it regains its equilibrium. (III, 14.)

The *Yoga Vāsiṣṭha* thus beautifully explains that subject-object consciousness is a misinterpretation of the facts. In truth, “the universe does not exist as universe, independent of consciousness.” (III, 14.) Moreover, its apparent materiality is merely an effect of sensory perception, which is a mediated form of knowing and therefore flawed:

One can say that this world-appearance is real only so far as it is the manifestation of consciousness and because of direct experience; and it is unreal when it is grasped with the mind and the sense organs. (III, 61.)

The *Yoga Vāsiṣṭha* returns repeatedly to these same basic ideas, rephrasing them in numerous ways. The passage quoted below again explains (1) that consciousness is always conscious only of itself, (2) that subject-object consciousness is an illusion, and (3) that what appears to be material when known through the senses is actually nothing but consciousness. The text states:

It is not as if the subject illumines the object, which has no luminosity of its own, but since consciousness is all this, everything is self-luminous, without requiring a perceiving intelligence. It is by the action of consciousness becoming aware of itself that intelligence manifests itself, not when consciousness apprehends an inert object.

It is not correct to say that there is a mixture in this universe of the sentient and the inert, for they do not mix. . . . [A]ll things are full of consciousness and when this consciousness comprehends itself there is know[ing]. (III, 121.)

According to the *Yoga Vāsiṣṭha*, it is nondual consciousness that becomes the conscious individual soul, and it is the same nondual consciousness that becomes the material object:

Consciousness reflecting in consciousness shines as consciousness and exists as consciousness; yet, to one who is ignorant (though considering oneself as wise and rational) there arises the notion that there has come into

being and there exists something other than this consciousness. (IV, 36.)

The *Yoga Vāsiṣṭha* often seizes upon ideas introduced in the primary texts of nondual Kashmiri Shaivism, and it then elaborates and develops those ideas. In the following example, the *Yoga Vāsiṣṭha* explains how nondual consciousness comes to imagine that it is a person knowing a world:

Thus, the natural combination of atomic particles and molecules ([taking the form of a brain and sense organs] in-dwelt by consciousness) apparently acts as a dividing wall, thus giving rise to the divisions of “I,” “you,” etc., and these then appear to be outside of consciousness, as its object. In fact, all these are but reflections in the consciousness which, becoming aware of them within itself, bestows upon them their apparent individuality. Consciousness tastes itself, the awareness being non-different from consciousness, and that appears to give rise to the ego-sense, etc., naught else. The crystal of this infinite consciousness reflects its own light of consciousness which is present in all these combinations of atomic particles, and they then gain an apparent self-consciousness and think “I am,” etc.

In reality, because the inner awareness in all these combinations is non-different from the infinite consciousness, there is no subject-object relationship between them: hence, one does not experience the other, gain the other, or change or modify the other. . . . [But] . . . all that I [(the sage Vāsiṣṭha)] have said above is but a play of words to help your comprehension: There is no such thing as “I” or “the world” (the combination of atomic particles, etc.). There is neither mind, nor an object of knowledge, nor the world illusion. Just as water

acquires the appearance of a whirlpool with a personality of its own, consciousness seems to give the appearance of “I” etc., within itself. But consciousness is consciousness only, whether it thinks of itself as lord *Śiva* [(the universal soul)] or as a little *jīva* [(an individual soul)]!

. . . [T]here is no real and essential distinction between the individual (*jīva*) and the cosmic being (*Śiva*). Know all this to be undivided and indivisible infinite consciousness. (V, 57.)

As we read in the Upanishads, even the cosmic forces (the “gods”) are subordinated to consciousness, their individuality being a mere appearance. The *Yoga Vāsiṣṭha* states:

It is consciousness alone which takes the form of *Śiva* [(the universal soul)] and *Pārvati* [(the dynamic creative energy)], of *Brahmā*, the creator, and the numerous other beings. This consciousness is like a mirror which holds a reflection within itself, as it were, without undergoing any modification thereby. Without undergoing any modification in itself, this consciousness appears as all these countless beings in this universe. (VI, 1:30.)

In the *Yoga Vāsiṣṭha* we see the full flowering of the ideas that I outlined in Part One of this book. The individual soul imagines that it is knowing an external object, say, a chair or the sweetness of a cup of tea, but in reality the soul is conscious only of itself, and its knowing of the chair or the sweet tea is nothing other than its consciousness of the reflection of those things within itself. Moreover, the external things that give rise to those reflections are themselves just consciousness. They only appear to be material when knowledge of them is mediated by the sense organs. Their true being is nothing over and above their consciousness-of-self. The *Yoga Vāsiṣṭha* explains the point this way:

Apart from the pure consciousness, there are neither the senses, nor the mind, nor even their objects. It is that consciousness alone which appears as the objects in nature and as the senses in the person. When that consciousness has apparently become the subtle body (*puryaṣṭaka*), it reflects the external objects.

The eternal and infinite consciousness is indeed free of all modifications; but when there arises the notion of “I am” in it, that notion is known as the *jīva* [(the individual soul)]. . . . The same consciousness . . . thinks “I am the body,” “I am the tree,” etc. Thus self-deluded it rises and falls, until it attains a pure birth and is spiritually awakened. Then, by being devoted to the truth, it attains self-knowledge.

I [(the sage Vāsiṣṭha)] shall now tell you how it perceives the objects. I said that on account of the notion of “I am,” consciousness abides as *jīva* [(the individual soul)] in the body. When its senses descend upon similar bodies outside itself, there is contact between the two, and there is desire to know [those outside bodies]. When there is this [sensory] contact, the object is reflected within oneself, and the *jīva* [(i.e., the individual soul)] perceives this reflection, though it believes that the reflection is outside! The *jīva* knows only this reflection, which means it knows itself. This [sensory] contact is the cause of the perception of external objects; hence, it is possible only in the case of the ignorant one whose mind is deluded and not in the case of the liberated sage. . . . The self [(i.e., universal nondual consciousness)] is all-in-all all the time. (VI, 1:50.)

In brief, the individual soul is conscious only of itself, but it sees past itself, gathering information about the things that are reflected

therein, and as a result, the feeling arises of being a subject knowing a material object.

The *Yoga Vāsiṣṭha* goes on to explain that all things, including material things, are the same universal nondual consciousness:

This supreme consciousness alone exists. . . .

It is this consciousness that is known by various names—Brahman, supreme self, etc. In it there is no division into subject-object and their relation (knowledge). Consciousness becomes conscious of its own consciousness; it cannot be realized otherwise (as an object of consciousness). It is this consciousness alone that is manifest as the mind, intellect and the senses. This world-appearance, too, is but consciousness apart from which nothing is. Consciousness does not undergo any change: the only apparent change is the illusory appearance, which is illusory and therefore not real! In an imagin[ed] ocean, imagin[ed] waves arise. The mind-stuff itself is the ocean and the waves are of the mind-stuff, too. Even so the world-appearance arises in consciousness and is therefore non-different from it.

. . .

. . .

The seer (subject) and the seen (object) are in reality the one pure consciousness. . . . [A]ll that is (whether sentient or insentient) is pure consciousness. (VI, 1:78.)

And because time and space, too, are merely ideas that arise in consciousness, there is nothing that can truly separate consciousness into parts. Therefore, despite the experience of individuality and diversity, consciousness remains ever one:

The perception or the experience of “the world” exists within the atomic particle of infinite consciousness.

Just as the reflection in a mirror is only mirror, however, [likewise the world] is non-different from the infinite consciousness. This infinite consciousness is beginningless and endless; that itself is called creation. . . . I am a particle of consciousness but I am one with the infinite consciousness on account of the realization of this truth, even as water is the same as water.

. . . All this happened within it, and within it I saw the three worlds—not outside. (VI, 2:144.)

It is difficult to imagine that we are viewing the world inside out, that the only thing we can ever really know is our own self, and that even that thing which we feel to be “other” is made of the same consciousness as ourselves. It is difficult to imagine that the soul of the entire cosmos and one’s own soul are the same nondual consciousness, ever conscious of itself, ever delighting in itself. It is difficult, but not impossible.

### b. The *Tripurā Rahasya*

The *Tripurā Rahasya* (“Mystery of Three Cities” or “Mystery of the Trinity”) is a South Indian *Śakti* text popularized by Ramana Maharshi (1879–1950 C.E.). As said, it draws many of its most penetrating ideas from nondual Kashmiri Shaivism, but it emphasizes the goddess Tripurā rather than the god Śiva, which philosophically speaking means that it emphasizes the appearance of dynamic images within consciousness rather than emphasizing consciousness per se. The *Tripurā Rahasya* describes this distinction as follows: “Śiva is absolute Awareness, without any form. Sri Tripurā is *Śakti* (energy) and Witness of the whole.”<sup>95</sup> But don’t imagine that this distinction implies dualism.

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<sup>95</sup> *Tripurā Rahasya*, ch. xi, vv. 41–45, translated in Ramanananda Saraswathi, *Tripura Rahasya*, p. 83.

Consciousness is always conscious only of itself. The images that appear in consciousness are just consciousness, a point that the *Tripurā Rahasya* makes explicitly:

My concrete form is the eternal couple—the Supreme Lord [(Śiva)] and Energy [(Śakti)]—always in undivided union and abiding as the eternal consciousness pervading the three phenomenal states of waking, dream and sleep . . . .<sup>96</sup>

Like the primary texts of Kashmiri Shaivism and also like the *Yoga Vāsiṣṭha*, the *Tripurā Rahasya* makes frequent use of the city-in-a-mirror simile to explain nondual consciousness. For present purposes, however, a passage discussing how the universal consciousness becomes an individual soul will provide a taste of how the *Tripurā Rahasya* approaches the mind-body problem. The passage begins by making the point made in Part One that extension in space—the definitional characteristic of matter according to Descartes—is merely an idea appearing within consciousness, which actually has no location or spatial dimension. Thus, what appears to an observer of a material object as the object’s spatial extension is just the object’s own consciousness-of-self:

Diversity is visible only in space, and this space is in the Self [(i.e., universal consciousness)], which in turn projects it at the moment when differentiation starts . . . . What you perceive as space . . . is the expanse wherein all creatures exist, and it forms their Self or consciousness. What they look upon as space is your Self. Thus, the Self [(consciousness)] in one is space [(spatial extension)] in

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<sup>96</sup> *Tripurā Rahasya*, ch. xx, vv. 31–40, translated in Ramanananda Saraswathi, *Tripura Rahasya*, p. 176.



another, and *vice versa*. The same thing cannot differ in its nature. Therefore, there is no difference between space [(spatial extension)] and Self [(consciousness)]—which is full and perfect Bliss-Consciousness.<sup>97</sup>

The same passage then goes on to describe the series of steps, beginning with the idea of spatial extension, by which nondual consciousness takes the illusory form of a soul knowing a material world:

Thus in the transition from the Absolute to the individual, space is the first veil cast off. The clear, concentrated Self becomes pure, tenuous, susceptible space in which hard, dense, crowded, or slender things are conceived. They manifest as the five elements of which the body is composed. The individual then encases himself in the body like a silkworm in its cocoon. Thus the Absolute shines as awareness in the body (namely, “I am the body”), just as a candle lights the covering globe. The individual consciousness is thus found to be only the radiance of the Self [(universal consciousness)] reflected in the body, which it illumines like an enclosed lamp illumining the interior of its cover.

Just as the light of the lamp spreads out through holes made in the cover, so also the light of [universal] Intelligence extends from within, through the senses, to the external world.<sup>98</sup>

According to this beautiful passage, it is only the filtering of

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<sup>97</sup> *Tripurā Rahasya*, ch. xviii, vv. 106–113, translated in Ramanananda Saraswathi, *Tripura Rahasya*, p. 152.

<sup>98</sup> *Tripurā Rahasya*, ch. xviii, vv. 106–113 and 114, translated in Ramanananda Saraswathi, *Tripura Rahasya*, pp. 152–153.

pure nondual consciousness through the limitations of a body (a brain and sense organs) that gives rise to a soul knowing an external material world. Moreover, the material body that acts as the filter is itself just a conglomeration of ideas arising in consciousness. Everything is just a configuration of universal nondual consciousness, not different from that consciousness in any way.

### **Part Three: Spinoza's Nondualism**

By decree of the angels and by the command of the holy men, we excommunicate, expel, curse and damn Baruch de Espinoza, with the consent of God, Blessed be He, and with the consent of the entire holy congregation, and in front of these holy scrolls with the 613 precepts which are written therein; cursing him with the excommunication with which Joshua banned Jericho and with the curse which Elisha cursed the boys and with all the castigations which are written in the Book of the Law. 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. (Amsterdam, July 27, 1656.)

—Decree of Excommunication against Baruch Spinoza

As the foregoing quotation makes clear, Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677 C.E.) was not just rejected by his own Jewish community; that community also cursed and damned him in the strongest terms. And lest we delude ourselves that this curse and condemnation is just an artifact of a bygone age, we should consider that it was reaffirmed as recently as December 6, 2015, by Amsterdam's chief rabbi, after a formal hearing. Spinoza stands

among the greatest philosophers, and like other innovative thinkers before him, he was both hated and disclaimed for his ideas. But notwithstanding the curse that “the Lord shall blot out his name,” Spinoza’s name is today known and respected throughout the world. Albert Einstein wrote poetry in praise of Spinoza. David Ben-Gurion sought to have the ban on Spinoza rescinded. People from all backgrounds continue to read Spinoza’s books and letters; they contemplate and discuss his ideas; and they admire the simplicity of his way of life.

Spinoza—the excommunicated Jew known for his expertise in Cartesian philosophy—recognized the problems that beset consciousness-matter dualism, and he boldly asserted that consciousness and matter are the same thing. In other words, Spinoza’s answer to the mind-body problem is very similar to what we have found in the texts of nondual Kashmiri Shaivism. The South Asian 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 of human souls. Spinoza’s ideas so closely conform to nondual Kashmiri Shaivism that one might wonder whether he had access to South Asian sources, perhaps as a result of contacts European Jews had with Jews in Persia. As mentioned, the *Yoga Vāsiṣṭha* was translated into Persian in the 14th or 15th century C.E., making the ideas of Vedānta and nondual Kashmiri Shaivism potentially available to Persian-speaking Jewish intellectuals. It is intriguing to speculate that Spinoza might have been a student—indirectly, that is—of Kṣemarāja and Yogarāja. That said, I think multiple independent discovery better explains the close parallel between South Asian nondualism and the nondual ideas of this great 17th century Jewish-Dutch philosopher.

What is most relevant to us, however, is that Baruch Spinoza picks up where Kashmiri Shaivism leaves off, filling in missing details and adding a measure of logical rigor and precision that is

sometimes lacking in the Sanskrit texts. Therefore, whether Spinoza arrived at his ideas independently or drew them from South Asian sources, his contribution to nondual thought cannot be discounted.

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.)

In the *Ethics*, this “geometric manner” of proof comes to its full fruition, complete with definitions, axioms, propositions, demonstrations, corollaries, laws, and postulates. Using these tools, Spinoza makes his way, point by point, to the most profound philosophical conclusions, applying only reason and logic at each step. But the language Spinoza employs is often specially and precisely defined, and his conclusions are counterintuitive, directly opposed to the Cartesian dualism of everyday human experience. As a result, a student of Spinoza can spend an hour, or even a day, studying a single paragraph. When such difficult passages are encountered, one is best advised to consult the Latin original and to remind oneself of Spinoza's technical, non-colloquial use of various terms.

As noted, Spinoza was the leading expert of his time on Cartesian philosophy, and he employs many Cartesian terms and ideas in his own philosophical works. Spinoza uses spatial extension to describe matter, and he uses the phrase “mode of extension” to describe various material forms. He uses the term “body” in its broadest sense, including within its scope 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 also accepts that a body might be built up from other bodies (IIP13, “Definition”). Spinoza uses the term “idea” for the content of consciousness. He says:

By idea I understand a concept of the mind which the mind forms because it is a thinking thing. (*Id.*, IID3.)

Spinoza’s most profound point of departure from Cartesian philosophy is his assertion of thought-matter equivalence. More specifically, he argued that thought and matter are two ways of comprehending the same thing, which Spinoza called “substance” (Latin: *substantia*). We find a precursor to this idea in the *Yoga Vāsīṣṭha*, which, as we will recall, explains that everything is actually consciousness and that the apparent materiality of observed objects is only an effect of sensory perception:

One can say that this world-appearance is real only so far as it is the manifestation of consciousness and because of direct experience; and it is unreal when it is grasped with the mind and the sense organs. (III, 61.)

And, as we will again recall, the *Tripurā Rahasya* makes the same point, asserting that what appears to an observer of an object as spatial extension (i.e., materiality) appears from the object’s point of view as self (i.e., consciousness).<sup>99</sup> But Spinoza makes thought-matter equivalence central to his philosophical system, and because thought and matter are really the same thing, the world of thought and the world of matter are fully isomorphic. Therefore, every thought that arises in a human mind is also a material thing, and every bit of matter is also a thought. In the *Ethics*, Spinoza

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<sup>99</sup> *Tripurā Rahasya*, ch. xviii, vv. 106–113, translated in Ramanananda Saraswathi, *Tripura Rahasya*, p. 152.

writes:

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

[T]he thinking substance [(i.e., consciousness)] and the extended substance [(i.e., matter)] are one and the same substance, which is now comprehended under this attribute, now under that. So also a mode of extension [(i.e., a distinct material object)] and the idea of that mode [(i.e., the thought corresponding to that object)] are one and the same thing, but expressed in two ways. (*Id.*, IIP7, Schol.)<sup>100</sup>

In the above quotation, after the phrase “the idea of that mode,” I added, as a clarification, “the thought corresponding to that object.” Some 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 or recalling the object. Thus, if “a mode of extension” is an apple, then “the idea of that mode” is the mental image of the apple in the mind of person observing the apple. I reject that reading, because it is premised on dualistic subject-object consciousness, not nondual consciousness-of-self.

Perhaps it is useful at this point to recall the discussion of thought-matter equivalence in Part One. Thought-matter

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<sup>100</sup> Some scholars have suggested that Spinoza derived his theory of thought-matter equivalence from medieval Jewish philosophers such as Abraham Ibn Ezra and Maimonides, who, relying on Aristotle (*Metaphysics* XII, 7 and 9), asserted that God is the object of his own thoughts, that is, that for God, a thought and an object of thought are the same thing. Spinoza, however, develops this principle in a way that goes far beyond anything said by Aristotle or previous Jewish philosophers.

equivalence does not mean that a person's apple-thought is the same as an apple; rather, it means that a person's apple-thought is the same as a brain representing an apple in the form of neural spiking frequencies. Likewise, a person's thought of an apple must be distinguished from an apple's own thoughts—that is, its own consciousness-of-self.

As noted, some readers of Spinoza wrongly conclude, based on Spinoza's assertion of thought-matter equivalence, that Spinoza is claiming an equivalence between a mental image of an apple and a material apple, and on that basis they doubt Spinoza's philosophy. But we know that a mental image of an apple is mediated by the senses, and highly unreliable, so how could it ever be the same thing as a material apple? Moreover, many people might look at the same material apple at the same time, and each would then have a mental image of the apple. If when Spinoza speaks of "a mode of extension" and "the idea of that mode," he is referring to a material object and the mental image of that object, then a single material object, such as an apple on a table in a crowded room, might have many "ideas" associated with it, which would be incompatible with the one-to-one correspondence Spinoza claims to exist between the world of thought and the world of matter.

But all this confusion disappears if we put aside subject-object consciousness and recall that consciousness is always conscious only of itself. As Spinoza says:

The 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 always conscious only of itself, the only "idea" that corresponds to a material apple is the apple's own consciousness (its consciousness-of-self, that is), and the only "mode of extension" that corresponds to a person's mental image



of an apple is the person's own brain representing an apple in the form of neural spiking frequencies. 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 consciousness a material thing has *of itself*, not the consciousness a person might have of the material thing.<sup>101</sup>

With the benefit of that clarification, we are ready to proceed to Spinoza's revolutionary assertion of mind-body equivalence. Spinoza talks about "the object of the idea constituting the human mind." (*Ethics*, IIP12.) Here, he cannot possibly be referring to a remote object—such as an apple—that a human mind might form a mental image of after perceiving the object sensorially. Indeed, Spinoza is very careful *not* to define the term "idea" in terms of sensory perception. (See *Ethics*, IID3, Exp.) So, what *does* Spinoza mean by "the object of the idea constituting the human mind." (*Ethics*, IIP12.) According to thought-matter equivalence, every "idea" must correspond uniquely with a single material object, because it is not actually different from that object. Therefore, when Spinoza speaks of "the object of the idea constituting the human mind," he is necessarily referring to something that actually *is* the human mind in a material form. In other words, he is referring to some material thing whose consciousness-of-self constitutes the human mind. And what could that be if not the human body, or, more precisely, the brain and sense organs of that body?

It follows, then, that whatever occurs physically in a healthy human brain will necessarily manifest itself as a thought in the human mind that corresponds to that brain. And not surprisingly, Spinoza makes precisely that point. He says:

Whatever happens in the object of the idea constituting the human mind . . . there will necessarily be an idea of

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<sup>101</sup> See, e.g., Della Rocca, *Spinoza*, pp. 104–108, 111–112.

that thing in the mind; that is, 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.)

Continuing the same topic, Spinoza states explicitly that the human body (or some component of it, such as the brain and sense organs) is, in fact, the material form of the human mind. Spinoza says:

The object of the idea constituting the human mind is the body, or a certain mode of extension which actually exists, and nothing else. (*Ethics*, IIP13.)

That powerful statement resolves the mind-body problem by asserting that the mind *is* the body.

Thus, Spinoza completely rejects the consciousness-matter dualism that Śaṅkara insisted upon. As we will recall, Śaṅkara believed that all consciousness is one and that it appears to be differentiated only because it illuminates different material vessels. Spinoza would certainly agree. But Śaṅkara also argued that consciousness and matter are completely distinct and that the mind and body are therefore also distinct:

It is a well-ascertained truth that that notion of identity of the individual Self with the not-Self,—with the physical body and the like—which is common to all mortal creatures is caused by *avidyā* [(“ignorance”)], just as a pillar (in darkness) is mistaken (through *avidyā*) for a human being. . . . Similarly *consciousness never actually pertains to the body*; neither can it be that any attributes of the body—such as pleasure, pain and dullness—actually pertain to Consciousness, to the Self; for, like decay and death, such attributes are ascribed to the Self

through *avidyā*.<sup>102</sup>

Spinoza says exactly the opposite: The mind *is* the body. Moreover, because thought and matter are 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. Here, Spinoza clearly adopts the view from nondual Kashmiri Shaivism that all things are conscious. But, again consistent with nondual Kashmiri Shaivism, Spinoza qualifies the point, noting that the perceptive capacity of any particular mind depends on the suppleness (receptivity) of the material thing that has that mind. Spinoza explains:

[T]he things we have shown so far are completely general and do not pertain more to man than to other individuals, all of which, though in different degrees, are nevertheless animate [(i.e., conscious)]. . . . 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 . . . 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 [(i.e., the mind then has thoughts that express its own essence rather than thoughts it is caused to have by external influences)]. (*Ethics*, IIP13, Schol.)

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<sup>102</sup> *Bhagavadgītābhāṣya* XIII, 2, translated in Mahādeva Śāstri, *The Bhagavad-Gītā*, reprinted in Deutsch and Dalvi, *The Essential Vedānta*, p. 278, italics added.

The parallel here to Kashmiri Shaivism could not be more clear. Yogarāja, as we will recall, asserted that everything is conscious, but only organisms that have sense organs, a brain, and a central nervous system are constructed in such a way that the universal consciousness-of-self takes the form of an individual soul. He said:

Although Rāhu remains constantly moving about in the sky and is not ordinarily visible, when it happens to settle down on the disc of the moon at the time of a lunar eclipse, it is seen and recognised as “this is Rāhu.” . . . In the same way, *although the Self exists in all [things]*, constituting the innermost being [of all things], . . . it is not perceived by all as “this is the Self.” But when an object of cognition is revealed by being *reflected in the intellect-mirror . . . of embodied beings [(i.e., beings that have sense organs, a brain, and a central nervous system)]*, the Self becomes an object of cognition [along with the external object], as in the cognition of sound in the form of “I hear the sound.” . . . [By contrast,] *the Self [(i.e., nondual consciousness)]*, *though existent in a lump of clay*, appears as non-existent to the cognisor on account of its being covered by a thick veil of *tamas* (darkness) . . . . [¶] . . . *But from the point of view of the supreme Lord, the distinction between the inanimate and the animate does not exist*, and the world’s conventional understanding of their difference has no significance.<sup>103</sup>

If Spinoza had been schooled in 11th century Kashmir, his ideas

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<sup>103</sup> Yogarāja’s com. to *Paramārthasāra*, verse 8, italics added, underlined textual additions by the present author, all other textual additions by SenSharma.

could not have tracked Yogarāja's statement more faithfully. Moreover, these same ideas are, as we have seen, expounded in considerable detail in the *Yoga Vāsiṣṭha* and the *Tripurā Rahasya*, each of which make numerous statements that seem to be direct precursors to what Spinoza asserts: Consciousness and matter are the same thing; consciousness is always conscious only of itself; and although all things are conscious, only things with brains and sense organs experience that consciousness as an individual soul knowing a material world.

As noted, Spinoza concedes that the so-called "body" that is the material counterpart of the human mind may refer only to some material component of the human body, such as the brain and sense organs. Moreover, because information received sensorially is mediated and inferential, Spinoza argues that it is necessarily imperfect, and this imperfect knowledge applies even to one's knowing of the parts of one's own body:

The human mind does not involve adequate knowledge of the parts composing the human body. (*Ethics*, IIP24.)

And if the human mind has inadequate knowledge of the parts of the human body, how much less adequate is its knowledge of things *outside* the human body, things that the sense organs represent to the mind in a fragmented and distorted way. Spinoza, who made his living as a lens grinder, providing spectacles and scientific instruments to the Dutch community, was well aware of the inadequacy of the information we receive by way of the eyes and other parts of the human body. He therefore concludes:

The idea of any affection of [(i.e., any external effect upon)] the human body does not involve adequate knowledge of an external body. (*Ethics*, IIP25.)

In other words, all perception of external things is necessarily

flawed, being mediated, inferential, and based on distorted and grossly inadequate data. Spinoza makes a similar point in his next proposition, which was already quoted above:

The human mind does not perceive any external body as actually existing, except through the ideas of the affections of its own body. (*Ethics*, IIP26.)

In these two propositions, Spinoza is making the important point that because we cannot be conscious of a thing without *being* that thing, we can have no consciousness of any external thing's actual existence. Instead, all knowledge of external things is mediated and inferential, known only from the effects those things have on us. Moreover, those effects are muddled up with effects from many sources at once, giving rise to a necessarily confused knowledge of the external world:

[And t]he ideas of the affections of the human body, insofar as they are related only to the human mind, are not clear and distinct, but confused. (IIP28.)

And it bears repeating here that Spinoza universalizes all these principles. He says:

[T]he things we have shown so far are completely general and do not pertain more to man than to other individuals, all of which, though in different degrees, are nevertheless animate [(i.e., conscious)]. . . . [I]n proportion as a body is more capable than others of . . . being acted on in many ways at once, so its mind is more capable than others of perceiving many things at once. (*Ethics*, IIP13, Schol.)

Again, we find that Spinoza's epistemological model is virtually indistinguishable from that of the *Yoga Vāsiṣṭha*, which

states:

When [the body's] senses descend upon similar bodies outside itself, there is contact between the two and there is desire to know (to become one with) them. When there is this contact the object is reflected within oneself and the *jīva* [(i.e., the individual soul)] perceives this reflection, though it believes that the reflection is outside! The *jīva* knows only this reflection, which means it knows itself. This contact is the cause of the perception of external objects . . . . (VI, 1:50.)

Likewise, Spinoza's assertion of thought-matter equivalence (see *Ethics*, IIP7, Schol., IIP12, IIP13) is foreshadowed in the *Yoga Vāsiṣṭha*, which asserts that all things, including both thought and matter, are the same universal nondual consciousness:

This supreme consciousness alone exists. . . .

It is this consciousness that is known by various names—Brahman, supreme self, etc. In it there is no division into subject-object and their relation (knowledge). Consciousness becomes conscious of its own consciousness; it cannot be realized otherwise (as an object of consciousness). It is this consciousness alone that is manifest as the mind, intellect and the senses. This world-appearance, too, is but consciousness apart from which nothing is. . . .

. . .

. . .

The seer (subject) and the seen (object) are in reality the one pure consciousness. . . . [A]ll that is (whether sentient or insentient) is pure consciousness. (VI, 1:78.)

In this quotation, the *Yoga Vāsiṣṭha* is asserting that the underlying

being of all things is their consciousness-of-self, a point that Spinoza also fully embraces. (See *Ethics*, IIP13, Schol.)

Spinoza's philosophical system is set forth and defended in exquisite detail in the *Ethics*, but Spinoza beautifully summarized his philosophy in a letter he wrote to his friend Henry Oldenburg. In that letter, he describes the entire universe as a single unified material body with a single unified mind, what he called the "infinite intellect," and he describes the human body and human mind as a finite participant in that infinite universal being—a being that obviously corresponds to Brahman or Śiva in South Asian philosophy. Here are Spinoza's words:

Now . . . all bodies are surrounded by others, and are determined by one another to existing and producing an effect in a certain and determinate way . . . . From this it follows that every [seemingly individual] body . . . must be considered as a part of the whole universe, must agree with the whole to which it belongs, and must cohere with the remaining bodies. And since the nature of the universe is not limited, . . . but is absolutely infinite, its parts are restrained in infinite ways . . . and compelled to undergo infinitely many variations. . . . You see, therefore, how and why I think that the human body is a part of Nature [(i.e., an interdependent part of the physical universe)]. But . . . 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 Nature [as the content of its consciousness-of-self], and whose thoughts proceed in the same way as Nature itself, its object [of consciousness], 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.)

The universe, for Spinoza, is a single interdependent and indivisible unity that, because of its infinitude, includes every possibility. And just as everything, everywhere, is conscious of itself directly, by being itself, likewise the universe, in its entirety, is conscious of itself directly, by being itself. This universal consciousness is what Spinoza called the “infinite power of thinking,” but he also called it “God,” and it necessarily exists, because all material things are interdependent parts of a single unified whole, and thought and matter are the same thing.

As for the human mind, it, according to Spinoza, is the fraction of that “infinite intellect” that has only the human body (or perhaps just the human brain) as the content of its consciousness, being forced to infer everything that is outside that body by interpreting the modifications that occur inside that body. Spinoza’s assertion that the human mind is what the universal consciousness looks like when it illuminates a human body is, of course, familiar to us from Śaṅkara’s Vedānta. It also aligns with Kṣemarāja’s commentary to the ninth *sūtra* of the *Pratyabhijñāhṛdayam*, which 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. . . . By assuming extreme limitation, *beginning with the acquisition of an inner organ* [(i.e., the psyche)] *and organs of perception* [(i.e., the senses)], [the universal consciousness] acquires *māyīya-mala*, which consists in the apprehension of all objects as different [from itself].<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> *Pratyabhijñāhṛdayam*, com. to *sūtra* 9.

And of course, the same point is repeated in the *Yoga Vāsiṣṭha* and the *Tripurā Rahasya*, as we have seen:

The individual then encases himself in the body like a silkworm in its cocoon. Thus the Absolute shines as awareness in the body (namely, “I am the body”), just as a candle lights the covering globe. The individual consciousness is thus found to be only the radiance of the Self [(universal consciousness)] reflected in the body, which it illumines like an enclosed lamp illumining the interior of its cover.

Just as the light of the lamp spreads out through holes made in the cover, so also the light of [universal] Intelligence extends from within, through the senses, to the external world.<sup>105</sup>

In other words, the universal consciousness—or “infinite intellect,” to use Spinoza’s term—appears as a human soul, just as a lamp appears to have a pattern when filtered through the holes in the lamp cover. But because, under the laws of physics, all things are interdependent, there is no reasoned basis for declaring any part to be truly distinct from any other part, or from the whole. Thus, the human body is not really an independent thing. Rather, argues Spinoza, “the whole of nature is one individual.” (*Ethics*, IIP13, L7, Schol.) And for like reason, the human mind is not really an independent thing. It only appears to be a distinct mind, having solely its own thoughts. In truth, its thoughts are part of a vast interconnected system of thought.

In conclusion, we find in the above-quoted selections from Spinoza’s writings all the principles that this book has heretofore considered both in the abstract (in Part One) and in the leading

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<sup>105</sup> *Tripurā Rahasya*, ch. xviii, vv. 106–113 and 114, translated in Ramanananda Saraswathi, *Tripura Rahasya*, pp. 152–153.

texts of South Asian nondualism (in Part Two). Consciousness is nondual. Therefore, one cannot be conscious of a thing without *being* that thing. Moreover, one's consciousness is not something distinct from one's being. Rather, consciousness and being are the same thing. Matter, by contrast, is only how a thing appears when knowledge of it is mediated by sense organs and thus inferential. When a thing is known as it is in itself, by being that thing (i.e., the noumenon), it turns out to be nothing but consciousness. Therefore, the mind *is* the body. The critical error that lies at the core of the mind-body problem is the subject-object divide, which gives rise to an imagined distinction between consciousness and matter. When the realization arises that all consciousness is nondual consciousness-of-self, the riddle of consciousness is solved.

This philosophy is a synthesis of materialism and idealism, and therefore it is sometimes called "neutral monism." Significantly, it answers many of the questions raised by other solutions to the mind-body problem. First, it denies that the ontological division between the mental and the physical, and thus it solves the problem of how something immaterial (a mind) can have a causative effect on something material (a body). Thoughts lead to other thoughts, and material events lead to other material events, and both progressions describe the same progression—their difference being only apparent.

In addition, neutral monism answers ontological questions about matter, space, and time, questions that the materialist leaves open. Matter is not different from consciousness. And, consciousness has no location, for location is only an idea arising in consciousness. And, consciousness didn't arise at a particular time, nor will it cease at a particular time, for time, too, is just an idea arising in consciousness. Consciousness is, and because it is ontologically anterior to space and time, it can't not be.

Finally, neutral monism parries the accusation of solipsism that is often directed against idealism. It is true that only one thing

exists—nondual consciousness—but nondual consciousness is to be distinguished from a lonely dreamer dreaming of an unreal world full of friends. Rather, that nondual consciousness takes the form of a real universe, conscious of itself by being itself, and configuring itself into countless perspectives of knower and known, as an expression of its absolute freedom. The idealism Spinoza presents to us is a *diffuse idealism* in which perceived things have intrinsic being, because they themselves are the locus of the consciousness that is their own existence. Thus, the universal consciousness is *only*, but it is not *lonely*. It delights in its consciousness of itself, and it is conscious of itself simultaneously from countless perspectives so as to delight all the more.

## **Part Four: Some Problems and Ramifications**

### **1. The Evolution of the Soul**

To suppose that the eye with all its inimitable contrivances for adjusting 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. (*The Origin of Species*, 6th edition, pp. 143–144.)

—Charles Darwin (1809–1882 C.E.)

We have seen that consciousness-of-self is not just a special attribute of neural cells. Rather, 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 as a subject is conscious of an object, but simply by being itself. And 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 the detailed characteristics of the world that surrounds it, that part’s knowing of itself can result in 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” or “subject-object duality.”

There are, within the infinite universe, discrete systems that function more or less as units, at least for a time. Their individuality may be only apparent, but these discrete systems nonetheless have a certain degree of separate existence, and they tend to maintain their distinct form longer if chance has constructed them in a way that predisposes them to self-preservation. Thus, in the fullness of time, discrete systems that are self-preserving in design will necessarily become more prevalent in a universe governed by chance, while those that are less self-preserving will tend to dissipate and disappear. And two traits that vastly increase the self-preserving nature of any discrete system is its ability to recognize destructive forces in its environment and its ability to respond defensively to avoid those forces.

If some component within one of these discrete systems is configured to reflect and represent the changes that are occurring outside the system, then that component’s consciousness-of-self will take the form of an inference about the characteristics of the external world. Moreover, the system might evolve an internal catalog of common external threats, allowing it to recognize such threats as they approach. And if the recognition of a particular threat happens to initiate a successful defensive response, then the self-preserving nature of the entire system will be exponentially enhanced, and as a result, the probability of finding that particular system somewhere in the universe will exponentially increase. And if the system has all the foregoing traits, and it *also* happens to evolve the ability to build new systems with similar traits, then the universe will quickly become populated with numerous versions of

that system.

In short, an infinite universe, in which everything that can possibly occur *does* occur, will certainly evolve over time to contain discrete systems that recognize and respond to external threats, and that pass those strategies on to new generations of themselves. And for that reason, the universe we share is populated by what we call “living organisms.”

One could argue, however, that *conscious* awareness is not actually necessary to the success of such a system. So long as a discrete system can recognize threats and select an appropriate response, it need not be *consciously* aware of those threats; a mechanistic awareness, like that of a self-driving automobile, would certainly suffice. Indeed, we have all experienced having a reflexive response to a sudden movement or noise, and that reflexive response seems to precede conscious cognition of the threat.

It may be true, therefore, that a mechanistic awareness of external threats would suffice to increase a system’s likelihood of survival, in which case the consciousness of the system would not seem to play a significant role in the tendency of such a system to evolve over time. But there is also no reason to *exclude* conscious deliberation from the methods by which a discrete system’s defensive mechanisms and self-optimizing strategies are directed, and that is particularly true if the system’s defensive response involves some computational evaluation of multiple alternatives. In such a case, conscious deliberation might supplement mechanistic awareness as part of an overall strategy of self-preservation.

I concede, for example, that a very basic form of animal life—say, a sea sponge (*phylum porifera*)—could function completely mechanistically. If, however, a discrete system is to have a detailed and nuanced perception of the external world, it needs to have a very supple internal component that can accurately reflect and represent the external changes that are occurring in its environment. And because one internal component might be best

suiting to reflecting and representing one aspect of the external world (light frequencies, for example), while another might be best suited to reflecting and representing another aspect (sound frequencies, or smells, or textures, for example), a discrete system that has a very detailed and nuanced perception of its environment would need to have *many* very supple internal components, each specially suited to its task, and it would also need to have a means of communicating and compiling the information from these diverse components to construct a single integrated representation of the world. And it would need to be able to include in that integrated representation predictive calculations about different courses the world might take under different circumstances, measuring each of those predictions against a record of past experiences and thus selecting self-optimizing behaviors. And the component within the system that performed the information-compiling function—a low-frequency brainwave, perhaps—would, like all things, be conscious of itself by being itself, and thus it would be conscious of the deliberations of the system.

In summary, if a discrete system is to have a very sophisticated *mechanistic* awareness of the surrounding world, then it will also have a *conscious* awareness of that world, and because its sophisticated configuration will enable it to activate self-optimizing behaviors, it will outlast other systems. One could say, then, that an individual soul does not make such a system a better survivor, but an individual soul is an evolutionary byproduct of traits that do make the system a better survivor. Put colloquially, an individual soul comes for free with the deal. Thus, discrete systems—organisms, that is—guided by individual souls are very likely to evolve in an infinite universe in which everything that can possibly occur does occur.

But we have to be clear; the individual soul that characterizes complex systems is just an illusion of subject-object consciousness superimposed on the fact of universal consciousness-of-self. Even a mechanical machine is conscious in some sense, although the



consciousness-of-self of its parts is not integrated in a way that can give rise to an individual soul. One could say that the rudimentary consciousness-of-self that is the underlying being of all things is no more like human consciousness than a subatomic particle is like a human brain. It is a consciousness that has no relative “I,” no conceptual categories, no discursive thoughts, and no constructed narrative about a person living in a world.

The implication of this discussion is, of course, that functionalism turns out to be a viable theory of consciousness. In other words, 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. I would add that functionalism, materialism, idealism, and parallelism are all, in their own ways, valid models for explaining consciousness. The reason so many philosophers disagree about their “-isms” is that they have not transcended the subject-object divide. They are knowing only the “outside” of things, relying on a mediated and inaccurate means of gathering information, and they are imagining that they are knowing the true form of things, as they are in themselves.

Moreover, the more one comprehends things as they are in themselves, rather than as they appear to be to the human senses, the more one conforms one’s mind to the universal mind. Put in theistic terms, God knows all things perfectly—but not by seeing them, not by hearing them, not by tasting them, not by smelling them, not by touching them. Rather, by *being* them.

## 2. Mind Meld

Experience is original consciousness; and in fact we generally say, in the case of experiencing 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. (*Cartesian Meditations*, § 50.)

—Edmund Husserl (1859–1938 C.E.)

At this point, we are confronted with a troublesome question. It is well and good to say that all things are conscious of themselves by being themselves, 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? Is not every so-called “part” subject to the same laws of physics that govern the whole and, therefore, fully determined, in both form and action, by everything that surrounds it? In other words, no part is causally distinct, and therefore the universe is a single interdependent unity that is not divisible into parts, except perhaps by convention of speech. And if the universe is, in truth, a single interdependent unity, how does its universal consciousness-of-self become segmentized into the consciousness of, for example, a human brain or a spider's brain?

Conversely, considering the problem from the micro perspective, how does the consciousness-of-self of, say, a subatomic particle—its consciousness, that is, of its own definitional characteristics—merge with the consciousness-of-self of similar subatomic particles to become the consciousness-of-self of an atom, a molecule, a neural cell, or a brain? In short, we have not really answered the mystery of human consciousness until we have determined what sort of things can share a single mind.

Edmund Husserl, among others, 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. (*Cartesian Meditations*, § 50.)<sup>106</sup> So, if the consciousness-of-self of a single subatomic particle constitutes the "mind" of that particle, how do the minds of two such particles overcome their mutual inaccessibility, merging to form a common mind? And if clusters of subatomic particles, atoms, molecules, and neural cells can all somehow share a single merged mind, does it have to stop there? Could a group of people share a single mind as does the *homo gestalt* in Theodore Sturgeon's *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, to some extent, using only the other brain hemisphere. 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.<sup>107</sup> And if a person can merge the minds of his or her two distinct brain hemispheres, then presumably two people can merge the minds of their two distinct brains.

Likewise, consider the way the brain combines the fields of vision of the two eyes. The brain receives two relatively "flat" images through each of the two eyes, but the mind knows only a single, three-dimensional image. Thus, the mind combines the two received images, ignores redundant information, and suppresses the indexicality that distinguishes the images from one another. In like manner, it would seem that the minds of two people could merge, transcending their indexicality and becoming a single mind

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<sup>106</sup> A similar idea is expressed in Spinoza's *Ethics*. See *Ethics*, IIA4, IIA5, and IIP13, Dem.

<sup>107</sup> See Nagel, "Brain Bisection and the Unity of Consciousness," pp. 405–409.

with a more universal perspective.

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 a single 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. Finally, they would need to share a functional and causal unity such that there was some systemwide advantage to having a single shared mind. Under those conditions, their sense of being two minds might recede, and it might be replaced by a single merged mind.<sup>108</sup>

### 3. The Human Mind

Like everything metaphysical the harmony between thought and reality is to be found in the grammar of language. (*Zettel*, No. 55.)

—Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951 C.E.)

Some philosophers have wondered whether consciousness is possible without language. 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 the incoming data by type and pattern, it is forming a protolanguage, and it can thus begin to interpret the world it is perceiving. An animal may not attach a particular phoneme chain to the

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<sup>108</sup> It might be that we frequently, if only momentarily, experience such psychic links with collaborators on a common project. One thinks, for example, of a small music ensemble playing a complex piece that requires one-pointed concentration. Cf. Della Rocca, *Spinoza*, pp. 115–117, esp. p. 117 [defining consciousness in terms of causal independence (which might include the causal independence of a group of co-collaborators)].

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 archetypes, and by finding a match, it can recognize a thing such as water. Thus, without language there is no meaningful perception.

It might be debated to what extent animals are born with this catalog of stored archetypes—this protolanguage—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.<sup>109</sup> And because animals—including human ones—interpret the world by matching the data of perception against a catalog of archetypes, their knowing of the world is, in actuality, a knowing of their own *conceptions*, not a direct knowing of the world.

But even if both animals and people are born with a catalog of stored archetypes, they also augment that catalog over time, based on their experiences, and some animals assign unique vocalizations or bodily movements to the most important archetypes, allowing them to communicate ideas. As a child masters language, an ever increasing vocabulary of phoneme chains is stored in its memory, and these phoneme chains are then 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 optimal responses, but most important, human beings are able to present to themselves, in the privacy of their own propositional thoughts, 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

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<sup>109</sup> Cf. *Ethics*, II40, Schol. 2; *id.*, IIP49, Schol.

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 changes what it means to be conscious.

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. Then, every experience must be integrated into a story we are authoring about who we are, and if a particular experience doesn't fit the story, we tweak the story, or we experience a psychological crisis. If we are injured, we do not merely feel pain, as an animal does. We also include that pain in a narrative about a person who suffers pain. The pain exists for some time, and then it ends, but the story about an unfortunate person who had pain, and who will have pain, remains. And because of that story, our pain becomes unbearable. Thus, language turns out to be a very dangerous thing. The propositions that arise in our minds tend to be recycled from the propositions we have read and heard. They are not always valid, and they often cause suffering. Therefore, no matter how clever they might seem, they must be evaluated with caution.

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

But this emotional aspect of human perception is easily

understood by a nondualist. We have learned that all objective perception is actually consciousness-of-self. The external world is reflected and represented in one's own self, like a distant city reflected in a mirror, and one's consciousness-of-self thus gives rise to a knowing of the world. But what happens if the internal representations of the world do not become completely transparent? What happens if one sees just a little bit of the mirror surface in addition to seeing the distant city? What happens if consciousness of physiological changes in one's body leaks through into one's perception of some external object or event, blending with that perception? The answer is that one experiences that blending as an emotional coloration of the external perception.<sup>110</sup>

Thus, the human experience of seeing a beautiful flower is a combination of the perceived details of the flower (light frequencies, shape, texture, aroma, etc.), the narrative about flowers that runs in one's propositional thought stream (youth, fertility, life force, romance), and the perception one has of one's own physiology as it is affected both by the flower and by the narrative (endorphin release, heart rate, 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 content of Mary's consciousness is only her own self, and the content of John's consciousness is only his own self. In other words, each is gazing at the flower but 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

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<sup>110</sup> See Della Rocca, *Spinoza*, pp. 113–114.

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 . . . ? 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. (“Epiphenomenal Qualia,” p. 130.)

—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 proving that consciousness is something that exists independent of all the physical facts governing conscious experience. Consider the moment that Mary steps out of her black-and-white room and first sees a ripe red tomato hanging on a vine in the afternoon sunlight. On the one hand, we have all the physical facts related to the sunlight, the tomato’s surface, the reflected light, Mary’s eye, her neural system and brain, her brain’s electrical activity, etc. On the other hand, we have Mary’s subjective experience of seeing a red tomato for the first time—consciousness, that is, with “red tomato” as its content. 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 additional.

But the difference between the physical facts related to Mary



seeing a red tomato and Mary's actual consciousness of a red tomato is not that the latter is an additional fact distinct from all the physical facts; rather, the difference lies in two distinct ways that one can be aware of something—one inferential, mediated by the senses, and distorted; the other direct, unmediated, and perfect.

In the case of inferential awareness of a thing, one gathers data about it from the impressions it makes on one's sense organs and then constructs a narrative about it based on a catalog of stored archetypes. Everything then appears to be matter, not consciousness, and Mary's seeing of a tomato involves sunlight, the tomato's surface, reflected light, the eye, the neural system, the brain, the brain's electrical activity, etc. By contrast, direct and unmediated awareness of a thing as it is in itself is simply a matter of being that thing. Everything then appears to be consciousness, not matter, and Mary's seeing of a tomato is the condition of being Mary's brain when it is reflecting and representing a red tomato in the form of neural spiking frequencies.

Thus, Mary's consciousness is not an additional fact, distinct from all the physical facts involved in the act of seeing a red tomato; rather, her consciousness is the experience of *being* one of those physical facts. Mary observes the electrical activity in her brain directly (from the "inside") instead of inferentially (from the "outside"), and when observed directly, not inferentially, it turns out to be consciousness. And no two observers can see the same tomato in the same way, because each is conscious only of his or her own self, not of the tomato. Only the tomato is truly conscious of the tomato, and only a bat knows what it is like to be a bat. We are all seeing the world by gazing into differently shaped mirrors, and then we are arguing about what the world looks like.

## 5. The House of Mirrors

We live in a house of mirrors and think we are looking out the windows.

—Friedrich Salomon Perls (1893–1970 C.E.)

Consciousness-of-self (which is unmediated and perfect) becomes subject-object consciousness (which is mediated and distorted) by a process of seeing past one's own self to gather information about the world that one's own self is reflecting and representing. And this phenomenon does not describe only higher-order animals. All things are affected by, and thus internally reflect to some extent, the things that surround 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 that the more perfectly one replicates the external world in one's own being, the more perfectly one comprehends the true nature of the world. And conversely, the more one investigates and accurately understands the true nature of the external world, the more perfectly one replicates it within. Thus, one *becomes* the universe by investigating it and knowing it ever more perfectly. And perhaps becoming a thing by knowing it ever more perfectly is a suitable definition of love. The human soul can, therefore, be characterized as a mirror in a house of mirrors, and love cleans the glass.

Thoughtful people sometimes ask themselves, Why am I *me*? Why was I born as *this* person and not *that* person? Why do I happen to be the consciousness of this particular body and not that of a beggar on the street or a billionaire or a bird? Such thoughts fail to recognize that consciousness is one. In our discussion of Vedānta, we mentioned the simile of sunlight streaming through a window lattice, each ray of light, pouring through its own aperture,

appearing to be distinct from the others. Likewise, the sense we have of being a particular individual in a particular place is just a trick of the mind or, to put it a different way, a trick of the brain. Consciousness is one, but it simultaneously shines within a diversity of structures, giving rise to a sense of individuality that is merely an illusion. When gazing at the reflection of the sun in a series of water-filled pots on a ledge, the sun appears to be many, and when looking at all the conscious beings in the world, each pursuing its own purposes, consciousness appears to be many, but there is only one sun, and there is only one consciousness. That is the teaching of Vedānta.

Therefore, we are individuals only insofar as we are empirical beings, perceiving the world through the mediation of our senses rather than resting in the universal nondual consciousness that we are. Only as empirical beings are we souls inhabiting a vast external universe. As empirical beings, our knowledge of the universe is based on its reflection and representation within our own selves, and therefore it is *indexical*. Like the image of the world that is reflected in the mirrored surface of a ball ornament, everything for us is distorted relative to a particular point of observation.



And like a collection of such ornaments, each of us reflects the others reflecting the others, and so on. But even then, we all share one consciousness, and we are all iterations of the same indivisible universe.

Suppose one were to make a map of the world that was so accurate and perfect that it included (on a smaller scale) every detail of the world, and therefore it included even the map itself, and even the map-within-the-map was so accurate and perfect that it, too, included every detail of the world, and so on. And because the world is dynamic and changing, one's map, too, would need to be dynamic and changing. Needless to say, one would face insurmountable practical difficulties pursuing such a map project, but assume, for purposes of a thought experiment, that the project is doable and that one has done it. In that case, the map one has made would *be* the world; it would be one scale of reference in a world that was a perfect fractal, and in a perfect fractal, no scale of reference is distinguishable from any other.

Now, add that this map of the world is conscious of itself. In that case, the map, by reason of its consciousness-of-self, would know the world perfectly, and it would experience its identity with all that is. That is so, because a perfect map is not a mere representation of reality; it is indistinguishable from reality. But while this perfect map was under construction, before it became perfect in each of its details, it would be a representation, not a replica, of the world, and therefore, in its consciousness-of-self, it would not experience an identity with all that is, but rather a sense of separation.

This idea is wonderfully illustrated by the paintings of René Magritte. Perhaps *The Human Condition* (1933) best captures the

point.<sup>111</sup> Magritte described the 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 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.”<sup>112</sup> Later, discussing his art in a letter to a friend, Magritte noted the impossibility of human beings seeing anything other than imperfect representations of reality. “How can anyone enjoy interpreting symbols? 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.”<sup>113</sup>

In other words—and here we return to our thought experiment involving a map—while the map is still under construction, it is only a representation of reality, and therefore its consciousness-of-self is a mere interpretation of reality—a symbol. Suppose, in particular, that this half-constructed map was made with diminishing detail in proportion to distance from a particular point of reference. Then, the map’s consciousness-of-self would take the form of a perceiver located at that point, interposing a subject-object divide between itself and the surrounding world.

And it is useful at this point to stop discussing maps and to

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<sup>111</sup> Other Magritte paintings that are relevant in this context 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).

<sup>112</sup> Magritte, *La Ligne de Vie II*, quoted in Torczyner, *Magritte: Ideas and Images*, p. 156.

<sup>113</sup> Letter from René Magritte to Achille Chavée, Sept. 30, 1960, quoted in Torczyner, *Magritte: Ideas and Images*, p. 70.

discuss living organisms instead. Each such organism knows the world by reflecting it, and thus each is, in its own being, an imperfect map of the world, distorting the world relative to particular location in space and time. We see, then, that each of us, by becoming a more perfect map, becomes the world, and as others do the same, we close the gap that separates us from one another. It is the indexicality that we impose on the world that makes us feel that we are separate individuals. Each of us is a map of the same universe, but for each of us there is a different “You are here” arrow at the center of the map. We need to remove that “You are here” arrow.

## Part Five: 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. . . . 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. (*Pratyabhijñāhṛdayam*, com. to *sūtra* 1.)

—Kṣemarāja (10th–11th century C.E.)

We are aware of an external world. Why do we call it “external”? We do so because it is something we know by inference from the effects it has on our own self. Our knowledge of it is mediated by the sense organs and therefore imperfect. And since we know it only by inference, according to a narrative we have constructed from distorted and grossly insufficient data, we understand relatively little about it. But if instead of inferring the objects in the external world, we could know them in a manner that was direct and unmediated, what would be their true form?

Well, we know the true form of *one* of the things in the external world. We know the true form of a human brain (or perhaps a part of one). We know it by *being* it, and therefore—at least as to it—our knowing is direct and unmediated. And we also know the form a human brain appears to have when it is viewed from the “outside”—that is, when it is known only inferentially, the way a physiologist knows it. It follows, then, that the true form of any external thing (a tree, a rock, a mountain, etc.) is as different

from its inferred form as the experience of *being* a human brain is different from the material form a brain appears to have when it is perceived empirically. And it also follows that the true form of any external thing is *consciousness*, just as the true form of a living brain—its form when known directly—is consciousness.

Many philosophers and scientists—unable to free themselves from Cartesian dualism (or its twin, the subject-object divide)—take the physical universe as 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 without it.<sup>114</sup> For them, the physical universe does not depend on consciousness; rather, consciousness depends on the physical universe. These philosophers and scientists happily accept the existence of matter, space, and time, and based on an ontology of the physical, they imagine such silly 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 that have no consciousness. These philosophers and scientists do not wonder about the existence of the physical universe, but they wonder why, for certain complex organic structures, there is something it is *like*, subjectively, to be that thing. They wonder, in other words, how it could be that some physical things are conscious.

But *existence* is just as much of a philosophical puzzle as consciousness. Where, or in what, is this vast expanse of space-time located? What is its ontological foundation and source? And how did it come to contain all these galaxies and blackholes, fermions and bosons, and all the rest? And most important, if it all could still exist independent of consciousness, then what possibly could be its significance? These questions are all answered when the problem of existence finds its solution in consciousness.

Consciousness exists—nothing else exists. It has no location,

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<sup>114</sup> See, e.g., Chalmers, *The Conscious Mind*, pp. 75–76.



size, or duration. It didn't come into existence, nor can it cease to exist, for space, time, and change are only ideas that arise within consciousness. Consciousness *is*, and therefore it can't not be. It has no support nor source. It is not a conglomerate, not an amalgam, not divisible into parts. Nothing is separate from it nor outside it. It is without limitation, dependent on nothing, free. It is alone. It is its own purpose, which is only to delight in itself. 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.

The whole physical universe, then, is happening in consciousness, and it only appears to be a material thing, extended in space and time, because we perceive it inferentially (from the "outside") instead of experiencing it directly (from the "inside"). Undoubtedly, each of us can affirm, paraphrasing Descartes's famous formula, *I am conscious; therefore, I am*. But it is the assertion of this book that the converse, too, is true: *I am; therefore, I am conscious*. To be is to be conscious, and it is nothing more.

The materialist examines the physical universe and finds unconscious matter, but what is the materialist actually conscious of when perceiving all that unconscious matter? Only his or her own self, which is shimmering with *consciousness*. Where, then, is all the unconscious matter? It is nothing but an inference drawn from data received through sense organs. Certainly, the materialist would agree that his or her own brain is constructed of the same subatomic particles as the rest of the universe. So, if the materialist experiences the true unmediated form of his or her own brain as consciousness, then surely the same must hold true for everything else in the universe—or at least the materialist should have some philosophical basis for drawing a distinction. It makes the most sense, then, in light of the subjective experience we all have of being conscious, to assume that consciousness is the ground of

being and that nondual consciousness-of-self is the true form of *all* things. They only appear to be material when we know them sensorially, by their reflections within ourselves.

Many people assert that consciousness exists only a little bit here and there, a special feature of complex organic structures. If a great cataclysm destroyed all those organisms, then, it is sometimes asserted, the universe—full of swirling galaxies, stars, and planets—would continue as before, but known by no one and nothing. On Earth, 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 the notion of an unknown and unknowable universe is doubtful, if not preposterous. If there could be one such known-by-nothing universe, then why not a million billion? What is the point of imagining such universes, and what would be the point of their existence?

Consciousness is the *purpose* of existence. The universe exists only to be known. And consciousness also marks the horizon of existence. The absence of consciousness implies nonexistence. And by “nonexistence” is not meant nothingness, for nothingness implies space and time. Rather, the absence of consciousness is simply impossible, because consciousness and being are the same thing.

But here we are not intending to validate a primitive form of panpsychism whereby rocks and mountains, statues and stupas, all have human minds. When we say that consciousness and being are the same thing, the term “consciousness” refers only to each thing’s consciousness-of-self. The problem some philosophers have when considering panpsychism is that it is very difficult for

them to imagine a rock<sup>115</sup> or a frying pan<sup>116</sup> having thoughts. In other words, philosophers reject panpsychism because they make the assumption that a human mind, or something close to it, is what it means to be a conscious thing. But if we drop that assumption and instead merely consider the possibility that consciousness-of-self is the underlying stuff of existence, then we have solved the “hard problem” of consciousness: Consciousness is, and nothing else is; it is without size or duration; and its purpose is only to revel in its consciousness of itself.

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<sup>115</sup> Chalmers, *The Conscious Mind*, pp. 297–299.

<sup>116</sup> Della Rocca, *Spinoza*, pp. 108–118.

## Part Six: Freedom 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. (Letter 21.)

—Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677 C.E.)

As philosophies go, determinism doesn't win many popularity contests. No one wants to be controlled. It cuts us at 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 own 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 one's ego that most resists determinism.

But as Spinoza pointed out, “[i]t is no obstacle to the truth of a thing that it is not accepted by many.”<sup>117</sup> We don't decide philosophical questions by majority vote. Rather, it is we who 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 twam asi*); the difficult part is *believing* it. Significantly, many people who reject determinism, insisting vehemently that they have the freedom to choose, are quite comfortable with the idea of

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<sup>117</sup> *Short Treatise* II, xxvi, 10.

divine foreknowledge. They are quite comfortable, that is, with the idea that God's knows in advance *what* they will choose.

The laws of physics imply a fully deterministic universe that denies the possibility of personal agency, and both Vedānta and Kashmiri Shaivism embrace that principle, albeit with some nuance. 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." (*Ethics*, IP33.) But Spinoza—for whom thought and matter are the same thing—goes even farther. He argues that determinism applies even to the psychic 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 comprehensive determinism, a determinism that makes one's thoughts as rule-bound and inevitable as  $E = mc^2$ . For most people, personal agency defines the very thing they imagine themselves to be, and therefore Spinoza might as well be asking them to die. Prominent teachers of moral philosophy often urge their followers to relinquish the ego-sense, and many people readily accept the validity of that advice, but few consider what relinquishing the ego-sense really implies. It implies the absence of personal agency and, hence, the elimination of the self. Few people are willing to take moral philosophy that far. So, unless Spinoza can replace the self he takes away with one more magnificent, most people will continue to prefer the lie of personal agency over the truth of determinism. And why is personal agency the "lie" and determinism the "truth"? Because the laws of physics govern the human brain just as surely as they

do the planets.

The sense we have of personal agency is directly related to the Cartesian paradigm of a soul that pilots a body. But if we consider that the universe is a single interdependent unity that operates according to fixed laws and that cannot be divided into isolated parts, then our resistance to determinism will slowly dissolve in favor of a much nobler conception of what we are and what it means to be free. In short, the small self that we imagine ourselves to be does not actually exist, and therefore the question of its freedom is simply irrelevant. Ramana Maharshi (1879–1950 C.E.), the sage who attracted many people to nondual philosophy, taught that one should “enquire for whom is this destiny and [thus to] discover that only the ego is bound by destiny . . . and that the ego is non-existent.”<sup>118</sup>

There is no point in arguing about whether the wings on a pig are covered with pig hair or feathers, because pigs don’t 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 have individual souls. And as for one’s true self—universal nondual consciousness—it is supremely free and independent, much more free 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 (Cartesian) construction of who they are. And some of those fables and fantasies are the daily fare of religion.

Spinoza was not opposed to religion or to the religious life—quite the contrary.<sup>119</sup> He appreciated the ability of prophets, acting by way of the imaginative faculty of the mind, to inspire and

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<sup>118</sup> Mudaliar, *Day by Day with Bhagavan*, p. 266.

<sup>119</sup> In his *Theological-Political Treatise*, Spinoza distinguished between philosophy and religion, arguing that each had its appropriate role and that they were mutually compatible.

motivate people toward lives of piety and moral rectitude. The rituals, ceremonies, holidays, iconography, cosmogony, moral precepts, and lore of religion all add a special richness to life, and these metaphorical teaching tools educate in a way that dry philosophical prose cannot. Like a poem, a song, or a painting, the images of religion reach deep into the hidden parts of the mind and communicate at an archetypal level. Their validity for Spinoza was not their philosophical truth; rather, it was their emotive power.

Spinoza recognized that, for most people, religion fills a psycho-spiritual gap left open by determinism. In a world that functions solely in accordance with deterministic physical laws, how can we say that actions have moral qualities? Of course, every act has its consequences. But in a fully deterministic world, what basis is there for imagining any *moral* consequences of an act? 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 in modern culture. Indeed, it was with a desire to validate moral behavior that Spinoza wrote his masterpiece, the *Ethics*.

In many cases, people are only able to love God because they imagine God to have anthropomorphic qualities like kindness, compassion, self-sacrifice, providence, justice, and even righteous anger. More important, it is those qualities in God that cause people to cultivate similar qualities in themselves. Neither Spinoza's "infinite intellect" nor Vedānta's Brahman—impersonal as they are—is likely to evoke tears of heartfelt devotion or to inspire a selfish man to repent. Religion offers us a God that has an inner psychological life very much like an idealized version of our own, a loving and just God that we can emulate, a personal God that philosopher-saints like Buddha, Śāṅkara, or Spinoza dare not take away.

All that is true, and yet it is also true that religion meets us where we are, and it speaks to the doubts and fears we feel in that place. And, as noted, most people imagine themselves to be an

individual soul piloting a body, and they don't want to wake up from that dream. And for one who is dreaming that dream, nothing reinforces the dream more powerfully than the belief that one can exercise one's freedom to choose, and nothing disturbs the dream more powerfully than the body's obvious mortality. Thus, our greatest fears are the loss of agency and the inevitability of death. The first implies that we do not really exist as individuals, and the second implies that our existence is fleeting, relatively meaningless, and will end too-often in pain.

It is no accident, then, that the two main topics of religion are moral choice and the immortality of the soul. Religion consists of stories, stories that people like to tell, and people like to tell stories about heroes who, exercising their freedom of choice, navigated extremely difficult moral dilemmas. They like to tell stories about the adventures of the individual soul before bodily birth and after bodily death. And they even like to tell a few stories that might guide a person, by increments, toward a different, truer sense of self.



## 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? (“About Free Will”)

—Albert Einstein (1879–1955 C.E.)

When confronted by Spinoza’s deterministic view of the universe, one 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 free will, that is—and that this direct experience disproves determinism. “For who would deny,” Tschirnhaus asked, “except by contradicting his own consciousness, that I can think, in my thoughts, that [now] I will to write, and that [now] I do not will to write[?]” But Spinoza responded that this feeling of freely exercising one’s will is a mere illusion.<sup>120</sup> Surely, when one is

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<sup>120</sup> The question and Spinoza’s response actually appear in a letter Spinoza wrote to a Leiden medical student named Georg Hermann Schuller (1651–1679 C.E.), but in that letter, Spinoza answers questions posed by Tschirnhaus. (Letter 58.)

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 exercises freedom of 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 thing occurring of necessity from all the things that preceded it, there is no wiggle room that would allow for the exercise of free choice.

And quantum randomness offers no solution to the puzzle, because quantum randomness is fully constrained by fixed probabilities. Therefore, it, too, leaves no room for the exercise of true freedom. Thus, according to Spinoza, Tschirnhaus's experience of exercising free will—now choosing to write, now choosing not to write—proves nothing more than that “that the mind is not always equally capable of thinking of the same object.” (Letter 58.)

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 the 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 consequence of all that precedes it, or, at least, a fixed probability based on all that precedes it. Yes, one is the decider, but only in a purely mechanistic sense, for the outcome is governed by immutable laws.

A story about Albert Einstein illustrates the point.<sup>121</sup> Einstein was once seen on Nassau Street in Princeton, looking pensive as he waited for the walk signal. A student asked, “Professor Einstein, what are you thinking?” 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, “Whether to have chocolate or vanilla.”

So, let’s 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. Imagine further that both options are equally desirable 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, “Can I have a scoop of the chocolate, please?” And you think to yourself, “I *chose* the chocolate.”

But you didn’t choose anything, 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

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<sup>121</sup> This story was related to the present author by his father, who was a student at Princeton in the mid 1950s. It was told on campus at that time.

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 made by Spinoza in his response to Tschirnhaus. The passage has already been quoted above, but here is a fuller version:

[L]et us conceive something very simple—say, a stone which receives a certain quantity of motion from an external cause which sets it in motion. Afterward the stone will necessarily continue to move . . . , because it has this quantity of motion. Therefore, this permanence of the stone in motion is compelled, . . . because it must be defined by the thrust of the external cause. What is to be understood here concerning the stone should be understood concerning any singular thing whatever . . . : that *each thing is necessarily determined by some external cause to exist and produce effects in a certain and determinate way*. Next, conceive now, if you will, that while the stone continues to move, it thinks, and knows that . . . it strives to continue to move. Of course since the stone is conscious only of its striving . . . , it will believe itself to be free, and to persevere in motion for no other cause than because it wills to. *And this is that famous human freedom that everyone brags of having, and 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 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 . . . .<sup>122</sup>

What Spinoza is saying 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 the choice leads us to believe that we are making “free” choices. And Spinoza makes the same point more formally in the *Ethics*. He writes: “[M]en are deceived in that they think themselves free . . . . 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 noted, the same idea appears also in Śāṅkara’s Vedānta. In his commentary on the *Bhagavad Gītā*, Śāṅkara says: “It is, indeed, the ignorant who identify themselves with the cause and the effect, with the not-Self. But not the wise; for, these latter do not identify themselves with the cause and the effect since they know that the Self is distinct from the cause and the effect.”<sup>123</sup> And in *Crest-Jewel of Discrimination*, Śāṅkara says: “The body moves hither and thither, impelled by the vital force. [¶] A log of wood is carried by the river to lower or to higher ground. [Likewise, the] body, carried by the river of time, enjoys or suffers the effects of past actions.”<sup>124</sup>

Similarly, the nondual texts of Kashmiri Shaivism describe choice as a mechanistic process that we then falsely interpret to be an exercise of agency. A passage from Kṣemarāja’s *Spanda-*

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<sup>122</sup> Letter 58.

<sup>123</sup> *Bhagavadgītābhāṣya* XIII, 2, translated in Mahādeva Śāstri, *The Bhagavad-Gītā*, reprinted in Deutsch and Dalvi, *The Essential Vedānta*, p. 280.

<sup>124</sup> *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi* 549–550, translated in Prabhavananda and Isherwood, *Shankara’s Crest-Jewel of Discrimination*, pp. 123–124. Similar ideas appear in the *Ashṭāvakra Gītā*, which may have been authored by one of Śāṅkara’s students. See *Ashṭāvakra Gītā* XI, 2–4; XVIII, 25.

*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 *Spanda* principle [(i.e., the dynamic aspect of universal consciousness)] not only moves the senses but rather by infusing consciousness into the supposed experien[cer] makes him [(or her)] 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 *Spanda* principle into him. . . . ¶ 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*.<sup>125</sup>

In this passage, Kṣemarāja is making the point 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 a choice so to desire and so to act. And that, of course, is exactly what Spinoza says in his letter answering Tschirnhaus’s doubt. A similar idea appears in the *Yoga Vāsiṣṭha*:

[T]here is no causal connection between the mind and the senses, but there is the coincidence of the thought and of the manifestation of the sense organs—just like a crow

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<sup>125</sup> *Spanda-Nirṇaya*, com. to *Spandakārikā*, section 1, verse 8.

sits on a palm tree and accidentally [(i.e., by random coincidence)] the fruit drops from it, and it appears that the crow dislodged it! (III, 67.)<sup>126</sup>

All these passages deny the reality of the individual soul's subjective sense of agency. 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 meta-mind in which one forms the desire that goads one's senses of perception and action, then in what meta-mind does one form the desire that goads that desire? One has merely shifted the problem, not answered it. And if one cannot find the chooser, then one cannot find an individual soul that has agency, and if one cannot find an individual soul that has agency, then one cannot find a self, at least not a self that resembles the soul of Cartesian dualism.

The Buddhists call that experience “emptiness” (Sanskrit: *śūnyata*), and whether one is a physicist or a Buddhist (or both), emptiness can be a scary realization, for if “non-self” (Sanskrit: *anātman*) is true, then all that remains of a person is epiphenomenal consciousness. 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 doozy. But—spoiler alert—the lead character (you) dies at the end.

### 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

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<sup>126</sup> The *Yoga Vāsiṣṭha* also denies human agency. See, e.g., *Yoga Vāsiṣṭha* IV, 38; VI, 1:53.

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, once 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?

—New Testament, Rom 7:15–24 (RSV)

Poor Paul. He has split himself in two by deciding he likes some of the things in God's show but not others. And because it is all God's show and because Paul likes only part of the show, Paul must be worshiping a made-up god of his imagination, not the God that actually is. And it is no answer to blame the devil, for either the devil is a second god in competition with God, in which case God is not truly God, or the devil is only doing what God wants, in which case it is all God's show, and Paul is hating God's show, calling it evil and wretched. Poor Paul.<sup>127</sup>

Paul's familiar dilemma raises the question, What does it mean to be free? There is, of course, the freedom *to gratify* one's passions, but if we think that free choice means a sort of libertarian (libertine?) freedom to indulge, we are in grave error. The freedom

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<sup>127</sup> This book is not intended to be an explication of the book of Romans, which is one of the greatest texts of the ancient world and, in my view, the most theologically interesting of all the Christian scriptures. By way of his faith theology, Paul may have arrived at an understanding not completely unlike that proposed in this book. See, e.g., Rom 3:20, 8:1. On Paul having split himself in two, see Sigmund Freud, "Instincts and Their Vicissitudes," p. 136 ["In so far as the objects which are presented to [the ego] are sources of pleasure, it takes them into itself . . . ; and, on the other hand, it expels whatever within itself becomes a cause of unpleasure . . . "].



to indulge implies only the absence of artificial constraints such as those imposed by parents, community, or government; it doesn't imply true freedom. On the contrary, one 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. The person has only substituted one form of external control for another. And the freedom *from* one's passions also does not imply free choice, although it certainly offers a measure of personal autonomy.

Suppose a perfectly free being freely chooses good. Is that freedom? One would think so. But if this free being freely chose good, then it must be good by nature, because, being free, its choice of good could not have been compelled by anything 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, which is good—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 predisposition, evil can never be done?

Must, then, a free being that is good by nature choose to do something outside its nature—choose to do *evil*—to prove its freedom (that proof being a greater good that outweighs the evil)? That hardly seems right, for if this free being chooses to do evil because of the greater good of proving its freedom, then it would still be doing good, and it would not have proved anything. And if this free being chooses to do evil for the sake of evil, then this being would be evil by nature, not good by nature. And either way, its actions would still be determined by its inner essential nature.

Perhaps, therefore, we need to redefine freedom not as the freedom to exercise a particular choice but as the freedom to express one's inner essential nature unimpeded by external forces. Freedom, in other words, is the freedom to be the sole cause of an action rather than a concurrent cause; it is the freedom to have

one's action arise from who or what one is, not from some external compulsion. Philosophers call that freedom "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 by one's inner essential nature. It is "soft" because it involves a certain sort of free will. One's "will" (i.e., one's inner essential nature) is "free" (i.e., not overcome by external compulsion). One is not a puppet hanging from the strings of external circumstances, forced to dance to their tune. One is rule-bound and controlled, but one is controlled from within, not from without.

Take, for example, the situation of a person who overeats sweets despite a strong desire to lose weight. Human beings have evolved to desire foods that promote health, because that desire makes them better survivors. Therefore, if one is presented with a food choice (say, fresh fruit or moldy fruit), and if one desires and chooses the food that promotes health (say, the fresh fruit), one cannot be said to have exercised one's free choice. Rather, one has merely acting in accordance with one's innate bodily programming, a programming that evolved to promote one's survival.

But in the wild, which is where human beings did most of their evolving, sweet foods promote health, because they are relatively rare and they supply a great deal of energy. But in today's industrialized world, sweet foods do not always promote health, because we have access to them in quantities that far exceed their useful value. Because the evolution of our bodily predisposition for sweet foods has not caught up with our technological ability to provide ourselves with massive quantities of such foods, we tend to overeat sweets. We do not do so, however, if we use our reasoning powers—which is also a part of the body, and which is also a product of evolution—to overpower our bodily predisposition for sweet foods.

The point is, however, that whatever one does (whether one

overeats sweets or not), one does not do it as an exercise of free choice; one does it because some decisionmaking algorithm has dominated the situation—either the logic of one’s reasoning powers or the impulse of one’s bodily predisposition for sweet foods. And this same point can be made about every choice. As regards every choice, there will be some internal programming that determines the option one selects. Thus, our ability to use our reasoning powers to “choose” against overeating from a box of sweets does not prove human freedom any more than a chess-playing computer proves computer freedom. But what it does prove is the ability of our essential nature rather than the proximity of the box of sweets to determine our actions, because our reasoning powers are the means by which we ensure that we are controlled from within, not from without. Moreover, those same reasoning powers enable us to understand the world around us as it is, not as it appears to be, and in that way, Spinoza explains, they make our thoughts more like God’s thoughts.

In summary, the freedom we desire is not really freedom at all; the freedom we desire is that our actions should flow from who or what we are in our essential nature, not from some external compulsion. And because we desire that freedom, we desire that our reasoning powers should prevail over the impulses of our bodily predisposition. Hence, Paul’s indictment of his own bodily predisposition: “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. Paul understood that his reasoning powers were proof of his connection to the mind of God and also to immortality, and by contrast, he saw his natural bodily predisposition as a sort of imprisonment, explicitly associating “sin” with the bodily mortality.

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 a person or soul with agency). Rather, it was his bodily predisposition that did it. And the converse, too, is true. If Paul could sometimes resist the thing he had reasoned not to do, then, again, it was not *he* that did it (again, in the sense of a person or soul with agency). Rather, it was his essential nature that did it. And with that insight, one begins to wake up and see that there is no doership and that there never was any doership. It only seemed otherwise because one was dreaming that one was an individual soul piloting a body. Paul—who frequently relied on Hebrew scripture to support his ideas—needed to reread the Adam and Eve story from the book of Genesis and to consider more carefully what it teaches about free choice. (See Appendix Two, page \_\_\_\_.)

Here, then, we can return to the question we asked at the outset of this chapter. Suppose a perfectly free being freely chooses 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. It is not the freedom to will or do something that is contrary to what one is. Rather, it is the freedom to express one’s essential nature unimpeded, and that is the only freedom anyone should desire.

#### **4. Effortless Effort**

As for what [your friend] has maintained next—that if we are compelled by external causes, no one could acquire a habit of virtue—I do not know who has told him that it cannot happen from a fatal necessity, but only from a free decision of the mind, that we should have a strong and constant disposition. (Letter 58.)

—Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677 C.E.)

“But wait a minute!” you might object. “If choice is a mere 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, but you are mistaken if you think that such behavior is justified by soft determinism. Only a fool’s version of determinism imagines, fatalistically, that good will come without effort or that hardship will come despite it. If good is “fated,” then why not effort, too? Put another way, 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.” Everything is fixed by the laws of cause and effect, but what you do right now is an integral part of that cause-and-effect system, and therefore what you do right now is the measure of both your essential nature and what will happen to you at a future time.

People tend to confuse determinism with fatalism, and they tend to think that freedom of choice is necessary to make us hardworking, self-restrained, and morally upright. And you will look long and hard to find a moral theologian who preaches to a general audience that there is no freedom of choice. Rather, they will all assert that one *has* such freedom and that one must exercise one’s freedom by choosing what is noble and rejecting what is harmful. And these moral theologians might also point out that doing good is often unpleasant and undesirable, and that people are naturally inclined against it, whereas doing evil is often attractive and profitable, and that people are naturally inclined in favor of it. Therefore, they will conclude, only the carrot and the stick can cause weak-minded people to do what is beneficial and to avoid evil.

It doesn't seem to occur to these moral theologians that if people are naturally inclined to act in a particular way, it cannot be called "evil" anymore than it is evil for animals to follow their natural instincts. Rather, it is merely an expression of the way in which God (or, if you prefer, natural circumstance) has created human beings. At worst, then, the so-called "evil" that a person is naturally inclined to do is an act that violates the social contract, not one that violates some moral code of natural origin. And likewise, the good that the moral theologian seeks to enforce by preaching freedom of choice is a socially constructed good, not a natural good.

This point is not intended to suggest that the socially constructed good is invalid or that it can be lightly cast aside. For purposes of regulating human behavior, we can tentatively define "good" as that which offers the greatest possible benefit for the most possible people, or, more precisely, that which enables the most possible people to express outwardly their inner essential nature. That definition is, of course, just a starting place, and it would need to be refined to account for the protection of natural resources, plant and animal life, and the personal interests of the weaker members of society. The point is, however, that when good is defined in such terms, the socially constructed good very often (not always) satisfies the definition. It is to our mutual advantage to live in a healthy society, and a healthy society must enforce the precepts that foster that mutual benefit. In many cases, therefore, an intelligent person will naturally choose the socially constructed good, just as animals that live in social groups do. But the same cannot be said for less thoughtful members of society, and here the arguments of the moral theologian are quite valid.

A weak-minded man who has raped, or even murdered, in pursuit of some myopic conception of personal advantage has not done a natural evil; rather, he has done the sort of thing that predatory animals often do, effectively reducing himself to their level. It may be that he has never lived in a healthy society or that

he otherwise lacks the ability to recognize the mutual advantage of conforming his conduct to a socially constructed norm. But, by committing rape or murder, this weak-minded man has seriously undermined the mutual benefit that is the purpose of the social contract, and the most effective way of regulating this man's behavior might be through a system of reward and punishment that is direct and unambiguous, and by telling the man that he has the freedom to choose his actions and that he should choose those that lead to reward and avoid punishment.

And as the moral theologian also knows, such methods will motivate ordinary people, too, increasing their industriousness and moral rectitude. But that is so only for people who are immersed in Cartesian dualism, imagining themselves to be souls piloting bodies. Such people tend to believe that effort is linked to (and dependent on) freedom of choice. But the truth is that there is no shortage of effort even in a fully deterministic world, especially if we focus our attention on those people who achieve great things. A wise philosopher embraces effort but renounces personal *ownership* of that effort, thus converting it into joy. A fool, by contrast, renounces the effort itself—and then bemoans the difficulties that follow.

But what does it mean to renounce personal *ownership* of one's effort? Ramana Maharshi (1879–1950 C.E.) was once asked, “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 sage.

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

“What for . . . does the body come into existence?” Ramana asked. “It 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.*"<sup>128</sup>

In other words, nothing can constrain a person who is ripe for awakening from realizing that his or her true identity is not the body but the universal consciousness in which effort is effortless. A passage from Kṣemarāja's *Spanda-Nirṇaya* expresses a similar principle, using the name Śaṅkara to refer to the universal 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) [universal] Consciousness, which is non-dualistic and is the Highest Bliss . . . . 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.*<sup>129</sup>

Kṣemarāja is saying here that by renouncing one's false sense of agency, one realizes one's identity with something much greater: the universal consciousness. But by describing the universal consciousness as "Highest Bliss," Kṣemarāja is also implying that the sense of effort only exists if one imagines one has agency.

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 example 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

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<sup>128</sup> Mudaliar, *Day by Day with Bhagavan*, pp. 91–92, italics added.

<sup>129</sup> *Spanda-Nirṇaya*, com. to *Spandakārikā*, section 1, verse 1, italics added.



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; it was forgotten as soon as it was felt. 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 gains this or suffers that.

Everything that occurs in this world is governed by the laws of physics, but when the laws of physics brought you, the reader, into the world, did those laws create a weak-minded fool who would cease all effort upon learning that freedom of choice is a mere illusion? Of course not! Therefore, if you feel some internal resistance to effort, ask yourself *who* is resisting. You will find that it is your false self that is resisting, the self that thinks it has freedom of choice, the self that keeps a careful tally of merits and injustices, the self that clings to the notion of a person who should not have to do this or who should receive that. Why pay that false self any mind now that you know it to be unreal? Why give it power over you? There is no resistance to the effort required to indulge a pleasure. Therefore, one's resistance to effort is merely a matter of having rejected some part of God's wonderful show. That resistance is mere static that can (and should) be tuned out in favor of expressing one's essential nature in every moment. Consciousness revels in toil and in rest, knowing each to be, like shadow and light, the forms of its own play.

It must be noted, however, that the *feeling* of choice (i.e., the *feeling* of personal agency) remains even for one who is awake to nondual truth. It may be that all the deliberations that go into a decisionmaking process have a physical substratum and are physically determined, but if one is going to function effectively, allowing self-optimal decisions to unfold, one must certainly cultivate the *feeling* that one is exercising one's power of choice. In other words, even after recognizing that freedom of choice is a mere illusion, one needs to play along *as if* it were real, for we evolved as creatures that imagined themselves to have such

freedom, and we are hardwired to operate most effectively based on that self-conception. The only practical difference, then, between one who is awakened to nondual truth and one who is not is that the awakened person makes choices *as if* choices were possible, whereas others make choices *believing* choices to be possible. But that difference is not insignificant; it implies peace of mind for the awakened person and psychic turmoil for everyone else.

So, let the moral theologians preach about freedom of choice, and let them beseech their listeners to exercise that freedom in favor of industriousness and moral rectitude. Such teachings are suitable for the general congregation. But for you, the thoughtful philosopher, the realization that choice is an illusion does not cause you to cease your effort to promote good in every moment. Rather, it spurs you to greater effort, while renouncing the thought of being a person who makes an effort. For you, effort is effortless, and moral good is the gentle path. So, keep this great mystery close to the heart and, as an effortless expression of your essential nature, be calm and carry on.

## 5. Punishment

And as for what [your friend] adds finally—that if [determinism] is assumed, all wicked conduct would be [morally] excusable—what of it? For evil men are no less to be feared, nor are they any less destructive, when they are necessarily evil. (Letter 58.)

—Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677 C.E.)

As noted, the primary reason for the dogma that we have freedom of choice is to justify reward or punishment for those who comply with or violate society's precepts. 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 the crime? We have all experienced moments when, in the throes of hot passion or the flights of misguided deliberation, we do something we later wish we had not done. If, however, we go over the event in our mind, we see that in the moment that we acted, 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 the influence of an irresistible impulse or under a wrong-headed conviction? We all know he *was*, for why else would he have so acted? 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 actions.

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" means to have one's actions determined by one's essential nature. Consider the statement, "John is good." The speaker probably does not 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 cat's eyes. 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 freedom of choice that empowers John to be good; rather, it is the way John is constructed at the core of his being that does so. In brief, our ability to assess a person's moral character implies that there is something essential in a person that determines behavior when external compulsions are absent, which, in turn, implies soft determinism, not freedom of choice.

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,” “lazy,” “selfish,” etc. Whatever the adjective used, the speaker is saying that John’s essential nature matches that description and governs his actions when he acts autonomously. Therefore, one who relies on freedom of choice as a justification for punishment is faced with an intractable dilemma: 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, in which case we can legitimately judge a person’s future conduct from his or her past actions, but the person, then, has no true freedom of choice, and therefore relying on freedom of choice as a justification for punishment is fallacious.

Indeed, true freedom would imply the absence of any governing principle directing a person’s behavior, in which case the person’s choices can only be random and, hence, blameless. It seems, then, that *determinism*, not freedom of choice, 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. We do not account right or wrong to a pair of dice unless the dice have a predisposition to roll in a particular way, and likewise we cannot account right or wrong to a person unless the person has a predisposition to act in a particular way.

And it is no answer to say that a person’s predisposition is not a fixed thing, that it is instead something that the person forms and reforms over time, and that a person can make free choices about how that ongoing formation of self proceeds. That answer merely shifts the analysis: Either (1) the person forms his or her predisposition by random decision, in which case moral assessment of the person is impossible; or (2) the person forms his or her predisposition based on an underlying essential nature, in which case that essential nature is ultimately what is determining

the person's actions, and the person has no freedom of choice.

What we really mean, then, when we justify punishment by reference to freedom of choice is not that the wrongdoer's actions were truly free. What we really mean, rather, is that the wrongdoer's actions were not the result of some *external influence* (psychological or physical), and therefore those actions accurately tell us something about the person's inner essential nature. As we concluded in our discussion of Paul's Letter to the Romans, "freedom" could be thought of as the name we give to determinism when actions are determined by an actor's own essential nature, not by external influences. But Spinoza used a different label. For him, the phrase "power of acting" referred to the measure of a thing's ability to be the sole cause of an event rather than a concurrent cause—its ability, that is, to act rather than to react. Moreover, Spinoza argued that an increase in a person's "power of action"—what we might call a person's "self-actualization"—is the key to true happiness. (*Ethics*, IID2; *id.*, IIP11, Schol.)

Spinoza drew no distinction between human behavior and the flow of forces that deterministically govern the rest of the natural world. He wrote: "I do not think it right to laugh at nature, and far less to grieve over it, reflecting that men, like all else, are only a part of nature." (Letter 30.) Fire does not need to justify its tendency to burn, and a lion does not need to justify its tendency to kill. Nature has produced a world of incomparable beauty, and its punishments require no further justification. And if human society is organized to produce the greatest possible benefit for most possible people, while also protecting the natural world and the interests of the weak, then it does not need the dogma of free choice to justify its punishments.

That said, society only has an interest in controlling antisocial behavior at its source. It may be that most wrongdoers act primarily under the influence of external forces. Some wrongdoers might be weak-minded, easily swayed by bad company or the pull of destructive habits. Other wrongdoers might be misinformed, and

that misinformation might have hardened into a false conviction or a deep-seated distrust, distorting the person's judgment and influencing his or her behavior. In such cases, it might be that a punitive approach does not best serve society's valid interest in preserving the peace.

## 6. Theodicy

[T]hey 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 and inconstancy, 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 that 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, that is, 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. (*Ethics*, III, Preface, italics added.)

—Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677 C.E.)

In Spinoza's assessment, God didn't create a universe that has any evil in it at all, neither natural evil, nor human evil. But people nevertheless imagine evil, projecting their flawed and artificial 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 doubt God's sovereignty. 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 these modern-day Jobs that their god is as much an invention of their imagination as the so-called good and evil they assign to the events they are witnessing. They fashion an idol that shares their fabricated conception of good, and then, because many things fall short of that conception, 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. (See Appendix Two, page \_\_\_\_.) But Spinoza saw the matter differently. He argued that, however we might define good for purposes of regulating human society, the only valid measure of good for purposes of judging God's creation is what actually is.

A person who declares anything in the universe to be evil—whether that thing is a natural event or a product of the human will—is an idolator, worshiping an invented god. But a person who rejects nothing, celebrates all that is, and recognizes that the human will is itself only a part of nature, that person has found God. In short, the universe is perfect, for if it is not perfect, then God is not perfect. Spinoza said 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.)

Thus, according to Spinoza's view, if one is confronted by

something one imagines to be evil, one's only option is to reimagine it—or to reimagine God, which amounts to the same thing.

Not surprisingly, the Upanishads, too, deny the existence of evil, whether natural evil or human evil. In the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, for example, we read about a person (man or woman) who knows Brahman:

Him these two do not overcome—neither the thought “Hence I did wrong,” nor the thought “Hence I did right.” Verily, he overcomes them both. What he has done and what he has not done do not affect him. [¶] This very [doctrine] has been declared in the verse: This eternal greatness of a Brahmin [(i.e., a knower of Brahman)]/ Is not increased by deeds (*karma*), nor diminished./ One should be familiar with it. By knowing it,/ One is not stained by evil action. [¶] Therefore, having this knowledge, having become calm, subdued, quiet, patiently enduring, and collected, one sees the Soul just in the soul. One sees everything as the Soul. 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 [(i.e., a knower of Brahman)].<sup>130</sup>

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-

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<sup>130</sup> *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 4.4.22–23.



world is freed from evil. Therefore, verily, upon crossing that bridge, if one is blind, he becomes no longer blind; if he is sick, he becomes no longer sick. Therefore, verily, upon crossing that bridge, the night appears even as the day, for that Brahman-world is ever illumined.<sup>131</sup>

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

Such a one [who knows Brahman], 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 (*spr̥ṇute*) himself (*ātmānam*) from these [thoughts]. For truly, from both of these [thoughts] he saves himself—he who knows this! [¶] Such is the mystic doctrine (*upaniṣad*)!<sup>132</sup>

Finally, in the *Kaushītaki Upaniṣad*, we read:

There 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.<sup>133</sup>

So he who understands [Brahman]—by no deed whatsoever of his is his world injured, not by stealing, not

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<sup>131</sup> *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 8.4.1–2.

<sup>132</sup> *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* 2.9.

<sup>133</sup> *Kaushītaki Upaniṣad* 1.4.

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.<sup>134</sup>

He does not become greater (*bhūyas*) with good action, nor indeed lesser (*kanīyas*) with bad action. [¶] This one [(i.e., Brahman)], 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.<sup>135</sup>

Consistent with these upanishadic texts, Śāṅkara, too, describes an ultimate state in which moral distinctions are transcended.<sup>136</sup> But nondual Kashmiri Shaivism goes even further, using moral transcendence to justify backroom ritualized violations of religious and social norms.<sup>137</sup> Here, Kashmiri Shaivism becomes the subject of legitimate criticism.

The point being made by scriptural passages that validate moral transcendence is not that a person can or should act as a self-

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<sup>134</sup> *Kaushītaki Upaniṣad* 3.1.

<sup>135</sup> *Kaushītaki Upaniṣad* 3.8. See also *Maitri Upaniṣad* 6.18 [“Then, being a knower, shaking off good and evil./ He reduces everything to unity in the supreme Imperishable.” and “So, with the Brahman-knowers, faults/ Do never any shelter find.”].

<sup>136</sup> *Brahmasūtrabhāṣya* II, 1, 22, II, 3, 48, translated in Thibaut, *The Vedānta-Sūtras*, reprinted in Deutsch and Dalvi, *The Essential Vedānta*, pp. 240, 248; *Vivekacūḍāmaṇi* 433, 503, 545, translated in Prabhavananda and Isherwood, *Shankara’s Crest-Jewel of Discrimination*, pp. 105, 117, 123. Similar ideas also appear throughout the *Yoga Vāsiṣṭha*.

<sup>137</sup> See, e.g., Sanderson, “Meaning in Tantric Ritual”; Sanderson, “Purity and Power among the Brahmins of Kashmir”; Sanderson, “Śaivism and the Tantric Traditions.”

indulgent libertine or that moral ideals are simply meaningless. On the contrary, actions have consequences, transgressive actions usually have very unpleasant consequences (both for the actor and for the target of the action), and an intelligent person will pursue the general good. Moral ideals evolved and continue to exist because they foster one's personal self-actualization and because they goad one toward a more perfect (less indexical) understanding of the world. Thus, the point being made by these scriptural passages that validate moral transcendence is not that moral ideals are meaningless but that one is never alienated from God on account of the things one may have done.

But can the world really be perfect and devoid of evil if it has holocausts and earthquakes, epidemic diseases and wars? A wise philosopher will certainly try to prevent and guard against such calamities, but a wise philosopher sees no natural evil in suffering and death. Our sense organs allow us to perceive only a minute fraction of the universe, and we perceive it by way of a distorted and inadequate reflection, resulting in a flawed narrative about a soul that inhabits and pilots a body. But that's not what we really are. The fact is that bodies die—if not after 20 years, then after 90 or more. Consciousness, however, is eternal (i.e., outside time), and when eternity is the scale of reference, calculating the difference between 20 and 90 years is like measuring the waist on a mosquito.

## **7. The Perfect Freedom of God**

I say that a thing is free if it exists and acts from the necessity of its own nature alone, and [that it is] compelled if it is determined by something else to exist and produce effects in a certain and determinate way. For example, 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 free necessity. . . . I should like your friend, who raises these objections to me, to tell me how he conceives [1] the human virtue which arises from the free decree of the mind [(i.e., freedom of choice)] to coexist with [2] God's preordination. If he confesses . . . that he does not know how to reconcile these things, then he is trying to hurl at me the spear by which he himself is already pierced through. (Letter 58.)

—Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677 C.E.)

God created a magnificent universe that is constructed in every detail according to elegant physical laws, and this universe plays itself out across time, each new configuration determined by the configuration that preceded it. Some people are troubled by that model of reality. They want time to be mutable from moment to moment. They don't like imagining time to be a fixed landscape, analogous to the spatial dimensions. For them, determinism seems to reduce the infinite possibilities associated with freedom to the single possibility associated with the laws of physics. Thus, determinism seems to them to limit the scope of God's creative freedom. What they fail to recognize is that an infinite thing doesn't need to renounce determinism to prove its freedom, for infinity is the very definition of freedom.

Indeed, the so-called "freedom" that permits a choice from moment to moment is actually a constraint, not a freedom, for if a choice must be made, then only one of an infinitude of possibilities can become *actual*, while the others must remain only *imaginary*. God, therefore, is much more free if every possibility can be actualized. Infinity, not choice, is the measure of God's freedom. Spinoza describes God's perfect infinite freedom this way:

. . . [S]ince 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) . . . .  
(*Ethics*, IP16, Dem.)

. . . . [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 from the necessity of his nature. (*Ethics*, IP17, Cor. 2.)

In these passages, Spinoza is defining God's freedom in terms of God's infinitude and thus the absence of any external constraints.

In Kashmiri Shaivism, the Sanskrit words *svatantra* and *svātantrya* are used to express this same freedom. The point expressed by these Sanskrit terms is that God, or universal consciousness, is dependent on nothing outside itself, which means that there is nothing that can act as a limiting factor with respect to God's creativity.<sup>138</sup> In other words, the freedom of God is not the petty freedom of choosing one possibility over another; rather, the freedom of God is the freedom to manifest *all the possibilities*. In the *Spanda-Nirṇaya*, Kṣemarāja explains this absolute freedom, referring to God by the name Śaṅkara:

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,

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<sup>138</sup> Singh, *Pratyabhijñāhṛdayam*, p. 122, n. 14.

because nothing can veil His nature.<sup>139</sup>

It is valuable to consider in this context the “many worlds” interpretation of quantum mechanics. This controversial scientific theory proposes that, when a quantum-level measuring event occurs, every place where, according to mathematical probability, a subatomic particle *might be*, it actually *is*, in some world. Moreover, because in our world the measuring event locates the particle in only one of those possible locations, it follows that in other worlds (i.e., in parallel versions of the universe), similar measuring events are locating the particle in the other locations where the particle might be. The universe thus splits into multiple versions of itself whenever a measuring event takes place.<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>139</sup> *Spanda-Nirṇaya*, com. to *Spandakārikā*, section 1, verse 2. See also *Spanda-Nirṇaya*, com. to *Spandakārikā*, section 1, verse 1 [“The glorious great Lord by His power of absolute Freedom assuming the subjective roles of Śiva, Mantramaheśvara, Mantreśvara, Mantra, Vijñānākala, Pralayākala, and Sakala and the role of [the] sphere of objects appropriate for each subject, in the process of gradual descent, displays [all things on all levels of manifestation] . . . .”], com. to *Spandakārikā*, section 3, verse 13 [“The Power of Absolute Freedom of the Lord” produces all things out of letters.]; *Pratyabhijñāhrdayam*, com. to *sūtra* 20 [“And the Highest Lord is full of the flow of bliss, because of His being free from all desire, because of His being fully perfect, because of His being the essence of absolute freedom . . . .”]; Yogarāja’s com. to *Paramārthasāra*, verse 1 [“Notwithstanding his self-manifestation as all, his nature is that of supreme consciousness characterized by his own absolute undivided freedom shining as the highest non-dual illumination.”].

<sup>140</sup> The “many worlds” interpretation summarized in the main text was proposed by Bryce Seligman Dewitt and R. Neill Graham based on Hugh Everett’s 1956 doctoral thesis. See Dewitt and Graham (editors), *The Many Worlds Interpretation of Quantum Mechanics*. For a critical discussion of the “many worlds” interpretation, see Barrett, “Everett’s Relative-State Formulation of Quantum Mechanics”; Barrett, *The Quantum Mechanics of Minds and Worlds*.

According to this theory, it is only the indexicality that we impose on the universe—our point of view relative to the whole—that causes us to measure the subatomic particle in a particular location. Everything that can possibly occur in the universe *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. But notice the wording used above: “Everything that can possibly occur in the universe *does* occur . . . .” The universe, in its perfect freedom, actualizes every *possibility*, not every strange phantasm of the human imagination, and we know from long experience that, in the fullness of time, all the possibilities of the universe tilt toward beauty.

Thus, the wealth of possibilities that people associate with freedom of choice is not reduced, by determinism, to just a single possibility. Rather, 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. Freedom of choice, by contrast, only *seems* to offer a wealth of possibilities. It fails to deliver on its promise, because in a universe governed by choice rather than infinitude, only one of the wealth of possibilities becomes actual. Spinoza makes this point very persuasively:

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. . . . [¶] . . . [¶] . . . [T]hey prefer to maintain that God is . . . not creating anything except what he has decreed to create by some absolute will. [¶] But I think I have shown clearly enough that from God’s supreme power, *or* infinite nature, infinitely many things in infinitely many modes, that is, all things, have necessarily flowed . . . . 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., italics added. See also *id.*, IP32, Cor. 2.)

In other words, freedom, for Spinoza, is the ability to choose all the possibilities, not just one. Professor Einstein can have the chocolate and the vanilla.



## Part Seven: Time and Eternity

### 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. (Letter 4.)

—Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677 C.E.)

In light of what we have learned up to this point, 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. Consciousness and matter are one; the human soul *is* the human brain, or some component of it. The human brain, or some component of it, is conscious of itself by being itself, and it infers an external world from modifications it observes within its own self. Therefore, although 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 mind, and what remains is the consciousness-of-self of the dispersed parts.

Nonetheless, the universal consciousness is what one always was. And because that consciousness is the ground of being, nothing can ever 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 even a bit the universal consciousness that shined in and through that person. The

universe was sparkling with consciousness before the person died, and it continues to do so no less brightly after the person dies. Nothing changes other than the images that appear and disappear in consciousness.

Immortality, according to this way of thought, is a matter of merging one's identity 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 flow of events in the universe, there is a sort of memory—a "soul print," one might say—of one's individual soul. Kṣemarāja says, for example: "It is never witnessed that [(i.e., it never occurs that)] the produced product, such as the jar, can conceal the nature of the agent, such as the potter, etc."<sup>141</sup> Rather, the jar is the *soul print* of the potter, and all one's soul prints are part of an eternal chain of cause and effect, 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 somewhat arbitrary.

Consider, too, that all things in the universe unfold 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 not. It follows, therefore, that the complex forces that once converged to bring a particular human body into existence will do so again, in a very 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 uninterrupted existence.

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

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<sup>141</sup> *Spanda-Nirṇaya*, com. to *Spandakārikā*, section 1, verse 2.

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?<sup>142</sup>

What this poetic passage tells us by way of metaphor is that, after being “cut down by death,” a person will arise again, like a new tree growing up from the roots of a felled tree. But 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 acted with gainful intent.

Many people, however, 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, but 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 to a new existence. In short, they want

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<sup>142</sup> *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 3.9.28.

*continuity of self* from one body to the next, just as they have continuity of self from one day to the next.<sup>143</sup>

The truth is, however, that if we are talking about the individual soul, we don't even have continuity of self from moment to moment. A thought experiment will help illustrate the point. Suppose a powerful god has the ability to create human beings from raw organic material. Further suppose that this god decides, prior to creating Peter and Paul, every personality trait that Peter and Paul will have. Then, this god creates Peter. 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 train travel; today, he finds he prefers driving a car. 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 continuing existence; rather, the point is to show that the continuum of one's existence might well be quantized, like frames in a movie, rather than a true continuum, and ten-thousand small

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<sup>143</sup> Of course, there is consciousness even in dreamless sleep, for one knows one was asleep. What characterizes dreamless sleep is that, despite one's consciousness, sensory perceptions are neither interpreted nor recorded into memory, and the imagination is inactive.

deaths just don't feel as bad as one big death.

In fact, even matter itself is not continuous as it glides through space. Rather, it consists of wave functions expressing probable locations, and its movement through space is quantized. So, what then can we say about an individual soul, the existence of which is derivative of a complex configuration of matter? The continuity of one's individual self that one seeks after the body's death does not exist *before* the body's death. So, if one is not scared to be alive, then why be scared to die?

Consider another thought experiment, and here we will draw once again 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 molecule (type, location, charge, momentum, etc.), converting one's material existence into data. The scanning process destroys one's body, but because one's exact molecule-for-molecule 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 distant location (or perhaps out of matter derived from the transporter's own energy beam). Moreover, because this reconstructed body is a perfect molecule-for-molecule replica of the original scanned body, even reproducing the exact kinetic energy and electrical charge of each molecule, the new body is alive and conscious with the same memories and thoughts as the original, and it has all the same abilities as the original. Needless to say, building this device would be no mean feat, 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 continuity. In other words, the version of oneself that appeared in the distant location would be completely distinct from one's former self, but one would subjectively *feel* that one was the same person.

And if that is so, then perhaps the continuity of an individual 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 physical continuity with the body we had before, constitutes a different person. In other words, 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 some getting used to. And, of course, the cycles of time that characterize the universe can be thought of as a giant transporter device that converts a person into information and then reconstructs the person, albeit with only a nonspecific recollection of his or her past. What more can we want?

Many people find comfort in the models of immortality taught by the religions of the world. Hindu, Buddhist, Jewish, and Christian scriptures suggest, for example, that the consciousness of a person reincarnates in a new mortal body in this world.<sup>144</sup> And Jewish, Christian, and Muslim scriptures add that the soul can acquire an immortal body.<sup>145</sup> But these scriptural discussions of the afterlife are often 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 has

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<sup>144</sup> See, e.g., *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 5:3–10; *Bhagavad Gītā* 2:11–53, 4:5; *Majjhima Nikaya* 136; Isa 26:19; Ezek 37; Job 19:25–26, 33:22–30; Eccles 1:9–10; 1 Clem 24–26.

<sup>145</sup> See, e.g., Pss 23:6, 49:15–16, 73:23–28; Dan 12:1–3; 1 Cor 15:35–58; 2 Cor 5; *Qur’an* 2:82, 4:122, 41:8, 64:9, 98:7–8.

gained from past experiences, but no specific memories.<sup>146</sup> And if that model of immortality is comforting for those who are religion-minded, then the memory of every detail of one's past life is not essential to immortality. Indeed, even during the life of one's present body, memories are constantly in flux. At best, memory is a relatively low resolution sketch of what one has actually experienced, and over the long term, what one primarily carries into the future is a narrative and a set of values.

In summary, the cycles of time (*samsāra*) offer us a perfectly acceptable form of immortality. The complex forces that once converged to bring a particular human body into existence will do so again, and when that occurs, it will be one's reborn self. And that future body need not be *precisely* like one's present body to be a valid future self, for even in the course of a single lifetime, the body is constantly changing, and there is no particular reason to prefer genetic stasis over incremental genetic improvement.

All beings, therefore, are immortal, and the desire we have for the continuity of an individual self merely reflects the fear of death that evolution has hardwired into us. That continuity does not exist during the lifetime of one's present body, and it need not exist after one's present body dies. A new tree grows up from the roots of a 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, when the “weak immortality” of periodic bodily return will do the job just fine.

Beings arise and subside in consciousness. Each has its natural arc of life, and its death is its perfection. Perpetuating that which has reached its natural end serves no purpose. The underlying consciousness is eternal. The only thing that dies is the narrative one is authoring about a person who lived at a particular time and place. But not to worry. There will be other narratives—unless, that is, one has gone outside time.

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<sup>146</sup> See *Bhagavad Gītā* 4:5.

## 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., physical 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!*

—*Maitri Upaniṣad* 6.14–15

In the previous section, we talked about the cycles of time. According to Vedānta, time exists only in relation to the periodic change of some observed object. In theory, the periodic change of any observed object could serve to calibrate time, but the sun, because of its unmistakable prominence, is symbolic of all the others. In Vedic thought, moreover, time is circular, unfolding in planetary cycles that constantly realign in ever-new ways. And Vedānta further teaches that all physical organisms are governed by time. Put another way, physical organisms are subject to decay and death. In the Upanishads, the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth is called *saṃsāra* (from the Sanskrit root *saṃsṛ*, meaning “to revolve,” “to cycle”), and Vedānta philosophy offers us the key by



which we can escape that temporal cycle.

For most of us, a lifetime of 90 years seems far too short, but to an elderly person with a tired body, a lifetime that goes on forever might seem almost wearisome. In our quest for immortality, forever is not really what we seek; really what we seek 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. But how do we “transcend time”?

Some religious-minded people imagine that God created the universe at a particular point in linear time—say, 5,780 years ago—and that it has existed ever since, revolving and spinning its way to what we find before us today. But if we think about it more deeply, we realize that the notion of Creation occurring at a particular point in linear time is a very silly one. It implies that there was an empty expanse of space and time, and God suddenly decided to create a universe to fill space and evolve through time. But if space and time preceded the creation of the universe, how were they measured? How, in other words, can there be space and time without some change in the relative position of two things? Therefore, God must have created space and time *when* God created the universe. But if that is so, then we have no basis for saying that Creation occurred at a particular point in linear time, because time itself is one of the created things. Creation, therefore, must occur *outside time*, in which case it occurs continuously, yesterday, today, and tomorrow.

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.) According to this psalm, God (YHVH) did not just create a universe way back in the hoary past and leave it to unfold. Rather, God created this day, even this moment, whatever it might contain. Spinoza makes the same point. He asserts: “God is not only the cause of things’ beginning to exist, but also [the cause] of their persevering in

existing, *or* (to use a Scholastic term) God is the cause of the being of things.” (*Ethics*, IP24, Cor.) In other words, things have no being, no persevering in existence, without the universal consciousness as their support in every moment. Creation, therefore, is an eternal event (i.e., outside time), and as Spinoza explained, “in eternity, there is neither *when*, nor *before*, nor *after*” (*Ethics*, IP33, Schol. 2), because “eternity can neither be defined by time nor have any relation to time” (*id.*, VP23, Schol.). In eternity, there is no arising and subsiding; there is only God’s thought and all that it implies, indestructible, untouched by time. Spinoza explains:

We 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 their ideas involve the eternal and infinite essence of God. (*Ethics*, VP29, Schol.)

What Spinoza is saying in this passage is that there is an essence in each thing that exists as an eternal idea in God’s mind, and everything that a thing will ever be in the dimensions of space and time is implied by that essence. Thus, from the point of view of God, all the events that will ever transpire in the unfolding of time exist in an eternal now. Just as the fixed landscape appears to a dizzy person to be moving, so that eternal now appears to a person immersed in the dimension of time to be time-flow. But the spreading out of space and time is a mere appearance, merely a way of organizing the data.

In the *Spanda-Nirṇaya*, Kṣemarāja’s uses the term *spanda* to explain the principle that all of time exists in an eternal now that never changes and that can never cease to be. The Sanskrit word

*spanda* means a “slight movement,” but in the context of the *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 of different aspects (i.e., phase progression), is actually unchanging and eternal. Kṣemarāja says:

In reality, . . . nothing arises and nothing subsides. . . . [I]t 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.<sup>147</sup>

If one considers the question carefully, one realizes that periodicity is merely a way of describing what a circle looks like in the dimension of time, and outside time, that same periodicity, that same circle, is an eternal idea that is not subject to any change at all. And because God has the eternal idea of an infinitude of such circles, each slightly different in size, there is no phase synchronicity among the countless periodic things that populate the universe. And from that absence of phase synchronicity, there arises the illusion of linear history.

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 essence and its actualization in space-time. Essence is nothing other than the eternal ideas from which everything in the universe is logically derivable. And the actualization of essence is the unfolding in dimensions of space and time of all that is implied by those eternal ideas.

Essence never came into existence, and it cannot cease to exist. Only its actualizations in space-time can come into existence and cease to exist. In the dimensions of space and time, new iterations of one’s body can appear and disappear, but none of

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<sup>147</sup> *Spanda-Nirṇaya*, com. to *Spandakārikā*, section 1, verse 1.

those bodies could ever appear or disappear in the dimensions of space and time if they did not exist as an eternal essence outside space and time, unaffected by the changes space and time imply. Spinoza explains the point this way:

[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. (*Ethics*, VP23, Schol.)

And there is no greater satisfaction than the experience of one's own existence as an eternal idea in the mind of God, and that occurs every time one leaves a "soul print" on the flow of time. Insofar as one's actions come from within, emerging as an expression of one's essential nature rather than being caused by external circumstances, one feels one's existence as a thought that God cannot un-think.

## **Conclusion**

There is no mind-body problem. Rather, the only thing we can ever be conscious of is our own self. What we call “matter” is merely the relatively dull and often lifeless way things appear to be when our knowledge of them is mediated through the senses and inferred from their effects. What we call “consciousness” is the true form of things, experienced directly, as they are in themselves. And that consciousness is indivisible, because it is antecedent to anything that could divide it; it is indestructible, because it is antecedent even to time.

I, the writer of this book, and you, its reader, are one. The only thing that separates us is the indexicality we impose on the universe because of the imperfections in our sensorial perception of it. Our true form, which we can experience when we withdraw from the senses, is the entire universe without the “You are here” arrow at its center.

## Appendix One: Some Citations to South Asian Sources

### 1. Material World Is Merely Name and Form

The Upanishads assert that everything in the material world is Brahman and that any apparent differentiation is merely name and form. Here is a sampling of texts:

*Bṛhadāranyaka Upaniṣad* 1.4.7 [“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.’”];

*Bṛhadāranyaka Upaniṣad* 1.6.3 [“Name and form are the real. By them this Life is veiled.”];

*Bṛhadāranyaka Upaniṣad* 4.1.2 [“Verily, by speech . . . a friend is recognized. By speech alone . . . the Rig-Veda, the Yajur-Veda, the Sāma-Veda, the [Hymns] of the Atharvans and Aṅgirasas, Legends (*itihāsa*), Ancient Lore (*purāṇa*), Sciences (*vidyā*), Mystic Doctrines (*upaniṣad*), Verses (*śloka*), Aphorisms (*sūtra*), Explanations (*anuvyākhyāna*), Commentaries (*vyākhyāna*), what is offered in sacrifice and as oblation, food and drink, this world and the other, and all beings are known. The highest Brahman . . . is in truth speech.”];

*Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 6.1.4 [“Just as, my dear, by one piece of clay everything made of clay may be known—the modification is merely a verbal distinction, a name; the reality is just ‘clay’ —”];

*Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 6.3.2–3 [“That divinity [i.e., Being] bethought itself: ‘Come! Let me enter these three divinities [i.e., heat, water, and food] with this living Soul (*ātman*), and separate out name and form.”];

*Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 7.2.1–2 [“Speech (*vāc*), assuredly, is more than Name. Speech, verily, makes known the Rig-Veda, the Yajur-Veda, the Sāma-Veda, the Atharva-Veda as the fourth, Legend and Ancient Lore as the fifth, the Veda of the Vedas [i.e., Grammar], Rites for the Manes, Mathematics, Augury, Chronology, Logic, Polity, the Science of the Gods, the Science of

Sacred Knowledge, Demonology, Military Science, Astrology, the Science of Snake-charming, and the Fine Arts, as well as heaven and earth, wind and space, water and heat, gods and men, beasts and birds, grass and trees, animals together with worms, flies, and ants, right and wrong, true and false, good and bad, pleasant and unpleasant. Verily, if there were no speech, neither right nor wrong would be known, neither true nor false, neither good nor bad, neither pleasant nor unpleasant. Speech, indeed, makes all this known. Reverence Speech. [¶] He who reverences Speech as Brahman—as far as Speech goes, so far he has unlimited freedom, he who reverences Speech as Brahman.”];

*Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 8.14.1 [“Verily, what is called space (*ākāśa*) is the accomplisher of name and form. That within which they are, is Brahman. That is the immortal. That is the Self (*Ātman*, Soul).”];

*Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* 3.2.8 [“As the flowing rivers in the ocean/ Disappear, quitting name and form,/ So the knower, being liberated from name and form,/ Goes unto the heavenly Person, higher than the high.”];

*Praśna Upaniṣad* 6.5 [“As these flowing rivers that tend toward the ocean, on reaching the ocean, disappear, their name and form (*nāma-rūpa*) are destroyed, and it is called simply ‘the ocean’—even so, of this spectator, these sixteen parts [constituting the human person] that tend toward the [Cosmic] Person, on reaching the [Cosmic] Person, disappear, their name and form are destroyed, and it is called simply ‘the Person.’ That one continues without parts, immortal!”].

Śaṅkara, who adheres closely to the Upanishads, makes the same assertion in his own writings:

*Brahmasūtrabhāṣya* II, 1, 14, translated in Thibaut, *The Vedānta-Sūtras*, reprinted in Deutsch and Dalvi, *The Essential Vedānta*, p. 228 [“[I]f there is known a lump of clay which really and truly is nothing but clay, there are known thereby likewise all things made of clay, such as jars, dishes, pails, and so on, all of

which agree in having clay for their true nature. For these modifications or effects are names only, exist through or originate from speech only, while in reality there exists no such thing as a modification. In so far as they are names (individual effects distinguished by names) they are untrue; in so far as they are clay they are true. —This [analogy, taken from the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 6.1.4,] is given with reference to Brahman; applying the phrase ‘having its origin in speech’ to the case illustrated . . . we understand that the entire body of effects has no existence apart from Brahman.”];

*Brahmasūtrabhāṣya* II, 1, 22, translated in Thibaut, *The Vedānta-Sūtras*, reprinted in Deutsch and Dalvi, *The Essential Vedānta*, p. 240 [“For that this entire apparent world, in which good and evil actions are done, &c., is a mere illusion, owing to the non-discrimination of (the Self’s) limiting adjuncts, viz. a body, and so on, which spring from name and form, the presentations of Nescience, and does in reality not exist at all, we have explained more than once.”];

*Brahmasūtrabhāṣya* II, 1, 27, translated in Thibaut, *The Vedānta-Sūtras*, reprinted in Deutsch and Dalvi, *The Essential Vedānta*, pp. 241–242 [“By that element of plurality which is the fiction of Nescience, which is characterized by name and form, . . . Brahman becomes the basis of this entire apparent world . . .”];

*Brahmasūtrabhāṣya* II, 1, 33, translated in Thibaut, *The Vedānta-Sūtras*, reprinted in Deutsch and Dalvi, *The Essential Vedānta*, p. 243 [“And, finally, we must remember that the scriptural doctrine of creation does not refer to the highest reality; it refers to the apparent world only, which is characterized by name and form, the figments of Nescience . . .”];

*Brahmasūtrabhāṣya* II, 3, 46, translated in Thibaut, *The Vedānta-Sūtras*, reprinted in Deutsch and Dalvi, *The Essential Vedānta*, p. 247 [“The pain of the individual soul also is not real, but imaginary only, caused by the error consisting in the non-discrimination of (the Self from) the body, senses, and other



limiting adjuncts which are due to name and form, the effects of Nescience.”];

*Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad-bhāṣya* IV, 3, 7, translated in Mādhavānanda, *The Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, reprinted in Deutsch and Dalvi, *The Essential Vedānta*, pp. 261–262 [“It is for this reason that the whole world, to its utter delusion, superimposes all activities peculiar to name and form on the self, and all attributes of this self-effulgent light [(i.e., the self)] on name and form, and also superimposes name and form on the light of the self, and thinks, ‘This is the self, or is not the self; it has such and such attributes, or has not such and such attributes; it is the agent, or is not the agent; it is pure, or impure; it is bound, or free; it is fixed, or gone, or come; it exists, or does not exist,’ and so on.”];

*Vivekacūḍāmaṇi* 228, translated in Prabhavananda and Isherwood, *Shankara’s Crest-Jewel of Discrimination*, p. 70 [“A jar made of clay is not other than clay. It is clay essentially. The form of the jar has no independent existence. What, then, is the jar? Merely an invented name!”];

*Vivekacūḍāmaṇi* 251–254, translated in Prabhavananda and Isherwood, *Shankara’s Crest-Jewel of Discrimination*, pp. 74–75 [same, again using clay analogy];

*Vivekacūḍāmaṇi* 386, translated in Prabhavananda and Isherwood, *Shankara’s Crest-Jewel of Discrimination*, p. 97 [“All things—from Brahma the creator down to a single blade of grass—are the apparently diverse names and forms of the one *Ātman*. They are simply appearances, and not real. Therefore meditate upon the *Ātman* as one and infinite.”];

*Vivekacūḍāmaṇi* 391, translated in Prabhavananda and Isherwood, *Shankara’s Crest-Jewel of Discrimination*, p. 98 [same];

*Vivekacūḍāmaṇi* 398–407, translated in Prabhavananda and Isherwood, *Shankara’s Crest-Jewel of Discrimination*, pp. 99–101 [same].

A similar idea—that the world is created out of letters (the

building blocks of words)—is developed in the texts of nondual Kashmiri Shaivism:

Kṣemarāja’s com. to *Śiva Sūtras*, *sūtra* 4 [“Of this threefold limited knowledge, that which makes oneself consider himself as incomplete and imperfect is the *anava mala*; that which brings a sense of difference in every thing is *mayiya mala*; that which makes one perform good or bad deeds is *karma mala*. Of this threefold limited knowledge, *matrka*, or alphabet from *a* to *ksa*, the mother of the entire universe, is the presiding deity.”];

*Spanda-Nirṇaya*, coms. to *Spandakārikā*, section 3, verses 13, 14, and 15 [same].

## 2. Consciousness-Matter Dualism

Despite his great renown as a nondualist, Śaṅkara often emphasizes a stark consciousness-matter dualism. Here is a sampling of texts:

*Brahmasūtrabhāṣya*, Intro., translated in Thibaut, *The Vedānta-Sūtras*, reprinted in Deutsch and Dalvi, *The Essential Vedānta*, at p. 196 [“It is a matter not requiring any proof that the object and the subject . . . which are opposed to each other as much as darkness and light are, cannot be identified.”];

*Brahmasūtrabhāṣya*, II, 3, 48, translated in Thibaut, *The Vedānta-Sūtras*, reprinted in Deutsch and Dalvi, *The Essential Vedānta*, at p. 248 [“[F]undamentally all [behavioral] obligation is an erroneous imagination existing in the case of him only who does not see that his Self is no more connected with a body than the ether is with jars and the like.”];

*Brahmasūtrabhāṣya* III, 3, 54, translated in Thibaut, *The Vedānta-Sūtras*, reprinted in Deutsch and Dalvi, *The Essential Vedānta*, p. 255 [“[I]n 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.”];

*Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad-bhāṣya* IV, 3, 7, translated in Mādhavānanda, *The Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, reprinted in Deutsch and Dalvi, *The Essential Vedānta*, p. 263 [“All these assumptions [of Buddhism] are contradictory to this Vedic path of wellbeing that we are discussing, since they deny the light of the self as distinct from the body and illumining the consciousness of the intellect.”];

*Bhagavadgītābhāṣya* XIII, 2, translated in Mahādeva Śāstri, *The Bhagavad-Gītā*, reprinted in Deutsch and Dalvi, *The Essential Vedānta*, p. 278 [“It is a well-ascertained truth that that notion of identity of the individual Self with the not-Self,—with the physical body and the like—which is common to all mortal creatures is caused by *avidyā* [(‘ignorance’)] . . . Similarly consciousness never actually pertains to the body; neither can it be that any attributes of the body—such as pleasure, pain and dullness—actually pertain to Consciousness, to the Self; for, like decay and death, such attributes are ascribed to the Self through *avidyā*.”];

*Vivekacūḍāmaṇi* 154–164, translated in Prabhavananda and Isherwood, *Shankara’s Crest-Jewel of Discrimination*, pp. 57–59 [denying any connection between *Ātman* (consciousness) and the body];

*Vivekacūḍāmaṇi* 194–226, translated in Prabhavananda and Isherwood, *Shankara’s Crest-Jewel of Discrimination*, pp. 65–69 [same];

*Vivekacūḍāmaṇi* 384, translated in Prabhavananda and Isherwood, *Shankara’s Crest-Jewel of Discrimination*, p. 97 [same].<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>148</sup> The same consciousness-matter dualism appears in Śaṅkara’s sub-commentary to Vyāsa’s commentary to the *Yoga Sūtras*, although it is disputed whether Śaṅkara is the actual author of the sub-commentary. See *Yogasūtrabhāṣyavivarāṇa* IV.14–23.

### 3. The Material World is Consciousness

A central principle of nondual Kashmiri Shaivism is that all things are forms of consciousness. Here is a sampling of texts:

Kṣemarāja's intro. to *Śiva Sūtras*, *sūtra* 1 ["consciousness of Śiva alone is . . . the self of the entire manifestation"];

Kṣemarāja's com. to *Śiva Sūtras*, *sūtra* 1 ["In this world, nothing exists which is outside the range of consciousness (*acetitasya*). . . . [¶] . . . [B]eing deprived of the light of consciousness, they cannot appear at all and thus are unreal; if they appear, then they are consciousness itself (for it is only consciousness that can appear)."];

*Śiva Sūtras*, *sūtra* 15 ["every observable phenomenon and even the void appear as a form of consciousness"];

Kṣemarāja's com. to *Śiva Sūtras*, *sūtra* 16 ["the entire universe [is] the nature of consciousness" (quoting *Vijñānabhairava Tantra* 63)];

Kṣemarāja's com. to *Śiva Sūtras*, *sūtra* 22 ["This experience [of the universe] gleams forth as a form of one's own Self."];

*Spanda-Nirṇaya*, com. to *Spandakārikā*, section 1, verse 1 ["Even while she displays external perception . . . or internal perception . . . , she suppresses the (real) nature of her identity with the perceiver . . . ."];

*Spanda-Nirṇaya*, com. to *Spandakārikā*, section 1, verse 2 ["In this world, whatever—e.g., *prāṇa* (life-force), *puryaṣṭaka* (the subtle body), pleasure, the blue color, etc.—that may possibly be conceived to have the capacity of veiling the Light of Consciousness is nothing if it does not come into light (*na prakāśate*), and if it does come into light (*prakāśamānam tu*), then it is only the nature of Śaṅkara whose very form is Light (of Consciousness). . . . [¶] . . . [¶] . . . How can there be an obstruction of His by [anything in the] world? Because by His obstruction that which is considered the obstructor itself can by no means appear."];

*Spanda-Nirṇaya*, com. to *Spandakārikā*, section 1, verse 5 [“It can be said that here whatever inner object there is (like pain, pleasure, etc.) or whatever external object there is (like blue or yellow [(i.e., sensory perceptions))] [or] whatever subject there is (like the [subtle body], body, and senses) [all these] have evidently no existence . . . as long as they are not experienced. When they are experienced, then being experienced, they are of the nature of consciousness. They are simply consciousness, this is what it comes to.”];

*Spanda-Nirṇaya*, com. to *Spandakārikā* section 1, verses 14–16 [“All that which He [(i.e. the universal consciousness)] manifests is perishable as regards its external form. Its perishableness is, however, nothing else than its submergence of [objective existence] and abiding as the I. Therefore, it is only the objective aspect of the subject, such as the body, etc., which is manifested and withdrawn by the Lord, not the subjective aspect, which is identical with the light of the Supreme “I” . . .”];

*Pratyabhijñāhṛdayam*, com. to *sūtra* 1 [“It is only when *chiti*, the ultimate consciousness-power, comes into play that the universe comes forth into being . . .”];

*Pratyabhijñāhṛdayam*, com. to *sūtra* 15 [“one . . . makes the universe appear as identical with one’s Self”];

*Pratyabhijñāhṛdayam*, com. to *sūtra* 16 [“the entire universe is experienced as identical with the Self”];

*Pratyabhijñāhṛdayam*, com. to *sūtra* 17 [“The exalted *Samvit* (universal consciousness) itself . . . is present as the innermost (reality) of all”];

*Pratyabhijñāhṛdayam*, com. to *sūtra* 20 [“So that then whatever appears—for example, the body [(i.e., organs of perception)], pleasure [(i.e., internal states)], blue [(i.e., external perceptions of color, size, form, tone, taste, odor)], etc.—or whatever is known for certain [using innate intelligence], or remembered, or thought out, in all these cases it is the play of *chiti-śakti* [(‘consciousness-power’)] which flashes forth as the

background (of all experience).”];

*Mahārtha Mañjari*, quoted in Singh, *Pratyabhijñāhṛdayam*, p. 33 [“[It] is Śiva Himself, of unimpeded Will and pellucid consciousness, who is ever sparkling in my heart. . . . The entire world gleams as the wondrous delight of pure I-consciousness.” (quoting Abhinavagupta)];

Yogarāja’s com. to *Paramārthasāra*, verse 5 [“Any object different from him [(i.e., Śiva, or the universal nondual consciousness)], even if the existence of such an object might be hypothesized, would not be perceivable or knowable because it would not be manifest [to consciousness]. Again, whatever is manifest appears because of its identity with his illumination nature.”];

Yogarāja’s com. to *Paramārthasāra*, verses 10–11 [“[A]n object that is differentiated from illumination and therefore not-manifest [to consciousness] cannot be known as different from illumination, since it is both unmanifest and unknowable. Therefore, it must be admitted that such an object is non-existent (*avastu*).”];

*Paramārthasāra*, verse 44 [“[A]nything untouched by illumination . . . is like a flower-in-the-sky; it does not exist.”].

#### 4. Consciousness Is One and Undivided

Nondual Kashmiri Shaivism further concludes that space and time cannot divide consciousness or differentiate souls from one another, because space and time are subordinate to consciousness. Here is a sampling of texts:

Kṣemarāja’s com. to *Śiva Sūtras*, *sūtra* 1 [“Difference in the case of *cit* or consciousness cannot be established either by means of space or time or form, for if these . . . are different from *cit* or consciousness, then being deprived of the light of consciousness, they cannot appear at all and thus are unreal; if they appear, then they are consciousness itself (for it is only consciousness that can appear). Thus it is not possible to attribute difference to

consciousness (i.e., Self) on the basis of difference in space, time, and form.”];

*Spanda-Nirṇaya*, com. to *Spandakārikā*, section 1, verse 2 [“Therefore, nothing whether space, time, or form can be said with propriety to obstruct Him whose work is this whole world, by whose Light [(i.e., consciousness)] it is manifested . . . .”];

*Spanda-Nirṇaya*, com. to *Spandakārikā*, section 1, verses 12–13 and 14–16 [same];

*Pratyabhijñāhṛdayam*, com. to *sūtra* 1 [“[N]ot being able to appear owing to their supposed difference from consciousness-power, they are (as good as) non-existent. . . . Therefore, space, time, and form which have been brought into being and are vitalized by it [(consciousness)] are not capable of [disturbing] its real nature . . . .”];

*Pratyabhijñāhṛdayam*, com. to *sūtra* 7 [“[T]he light (of consciousness) cannot be divided by space and time, and the merely inert can not be a subject.”];

Yogarāja com. to *Paramārthasāra*, verse 6 [“[T]here is no time or space different from him [(i.e., universal consciousness)], that could destroy or affect his unity . . . . [¶] . . . [¶] . . . If space and time existed apart and independent of him [(i.e., universal consciousness)], then there would be a possibility of the superimposition of the opposite quality of multiplicity. But since their very existence depends on pure consciousness revealing them, it must be admitted that the supreme Lord is one, the embodiment of pure consciousness, despite his manifesting as many [out of his own free will].”; underlined textual additions by the present author];

Yogarāja com. to *Paramārthasāra*, verses 10–11 [“Time in the form of the past, the present, and the future does not affect it. This is because time is admitted to be manifested within it, while it itself is beyond birth and death.”].

## **Appendix Two: Freedom of Choice in Hebrew Scripture**

And YHVH—God planted a garden in Eden, from the East, and he placed there the Adam that he [had] formed. And YHVH—God sprouted out from the soil every tree nice for appearance and good for eating, and the Tree of Life in the midst of the garden, and the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. . . . And YHVH—God commanded concerning the Adam, saying: “From every tree of the garden you will surely eat, but from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil you will not eat from it, for in the day you eat from it, you will surely be mortal.” . . . And YHVH—God built 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 naked than all the living beings of the field that YHVH—God had made. And he said to the woman: “Hmm? For 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 be mortal.’ ” And the Serpent said to the woman, “You will surely not be mortal! For God knows that in the day you eat 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 to eat, and it was beneficial for the eyes, and the tree was desirable for the intellect, and she took from its fruit, and she ate, and she gave also to her man with her, and he also ate, and the eyes of the two of them were opened, and they knew that they were naked, and they stitched leaves



of fig, and they fashioned for them[selves] wraps. And they heard the sound of YHVH—God walking in the garden, for the spirit of the day, and the Adam and his woman hid 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 he said, “Your sound I heard in the garden, and I feared, for I am naked, and I hid.” And he said, “Who told to you that you were naked? You ate from the tree that you were commanded ‘Do not eat from it.’ ” . . . And YHVH—God said, “Behold, the Adam [is] like one from us, to know 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.

—Gen 2:8-3:23

The story of Adam and Eve’s rebellion against the commandment of “YHVH—God” is usually understood as scriptural proof that humans have freedom of choice. 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 human beings with freedom, and the proof is that Adam and Eve used their freedom to disobey God’s commandment. A comparison is then sometimes drawn to the healthy psychological development of a youth to 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, although with due respect. The moral, therefore, of the Adam and Eve story is that human freedom is a good that outweighs the evil of Adam and Eve’s rebellion.

But is that really the moral? I don’t think so, for where did the story say that, although God was the creator of all things, Adam

and Eve were the creators of their own thoughts? And where did the story say that God's creation was not governed by deterministic laws? And where did the story say that God was not the ultimate source of Adam and Eve's disobedience? Where, in short, did the story say that Adam and Eve had agency?

The first thing to notice about the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden is that as soon as Adam and Eve disobey God's commandment, thus exercising what seems to be freedom of choice, they develop knowledge of "good and evil." Thus, freedom of choice and moral dualism are presented as two sides of the same coin.

But if Adam and Eve were able to rebel against God, they could do so only because God, who created them, gave them that disposition. Their agency, therefore, was only an illusion. Hence, what the story really teaches us is that our false sense of agency goes hand in hand with our habit of faultfinding about the world around us. By rebelling against God, Adam and Eve began to imagine that they had agency, that they were the masters of their own destiny, and as soon as they imagined themselves to be independent in that way, free to make their own way in the world, they began dividing up God's creation into "good" and "evil."

By this reckoning, faultfinding can be seen as 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 short, the illusion of agency is inextricably linked, in the Bible's account, with the illusion of evil. In truth, there is no freedom of choice, and there is no evil, but as soon as we imagine that we have agency, we also imagine evil. And the converse, too, is true. As soon as we imagine evil, we also imagine we have the freedom to choose good over evil, and then—like Paul in his letter to the Romans—we cannot understand why it is that we sometimes fail to resist those things that we have labeled as evil.

But if the foregoing explication of Adam and Eve's story is

correct, and if the error of dualism is their 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*, to know good and evil"? Doesn't that statement imply that all the members of the entire divine council, including even YHVH, are knowers of good and evil (i.e., dualists), just like Adam and Eve? The confusion 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 is it? Presumably, the Serpent, because he is the one who claims that knowing good and evil will make Adam and Eve "*like gods*." (Gen 3:5.) In short, Adam and Eve ate from the tree of dualistic thinking, and they became dualists, like the Serpent, who is Satan, God's alter-ego according to dualistic theology.

Thus, a close reading of Hebrew scripture suggests that Adam and Eve never really had freedom of choice. They only *imagined* they had it, and then they imagined that they had used their freedom to rebel against God's command, and having so imagined, they began to justify themselves by faultfinding, by persuading themselves, in other words, that God gets it wrong sometimes. They then took upon themselves the task of choosing between things they deemed to be good in God's perfect creation and things they deemed to be evil.

And if person proudly claims to have freedom of choice, then acts of great self-control are the proof of that claim, and irresistible bodily urges are feared and hated, because they undermine one's imagined sense of agency. Therefore, when Adam and Eve took upon themselves the task of choosing things they deemed to be evil, the first thing they chose was the natural bodily urges that God had given them. And since nakedness reveals a person's natural bodily 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 to be evil, and whenever they found 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 letter to the Romans. And although Adam and Eve could not—even after the most careful examination—pinpoint when or how they *chose* to have the thoughts that led to their rebellion against God, they never doubted their freedom to choose, for doing so would have stripped them of the false sense of agency they had gained when they first bought into the lie of Cartesian dualism. God therefore asked Adam, “Where are you?” God knew that Adam, by imagining he had agency, had become indexical. He had become a map with a “You are here” arrow at its center. He had developed a false sense of location within the Garden.

For Adam and Eve, it was their arrogation of agency that constituted their true rebellion. And it was that same arrogation of agency that caused them to superimpose an invented good-evil dualism upon the perfect world that God had made. Among all the days of creation, the only day that God does not call “good” is the second day, the day when God created a “divider” (Hebrew: *mavdil*), for dualism is the great lie. Adam and Eve claimed to have freedom of choice, and then they elevated the relative good of dualism over the absolute good of loving all that is, and so it was . . .

. . . until they awoke from that dualist 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 personal agency that they imagined themselves to have was only a proud lie that had separated them from God.

It was God who created the thought that led Adam and Eve to follow the Serpent’s advice. It was God who created that thought just as surely as God breathed the “breath of life” into Adam’s

brow (Gen 2:7) and just as surely as God created pharaoh's thoughts when pharaoh decided to harass the Israelites (Exod 7:3, 9:12, 10:1, 10:20, 10:27, 11:9-10). The only "sin" was Adam and Eve's belief that they had the freedom to sin. And when they relinquished that belief and accepted that everything is God's show, they stopped their constant faultfinding—they stopped being knowers of good and evil.

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