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DESCARTES MEETS SAMKHYA

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ABSTRACT

One of the great shortcomings of Cartesian Mind-Body Dualism has been what is known as the Mind-Body Problem. Specifically, how does the mind (an immaterial substance) affect the body (a material substance) and vice versa. The credit for the identification of this problem is often given to Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia. One of the first Indian philosophical traditions, Samkhya, provides a strict Dualism as Descartes does but does not encounter the Mind-Body Problem. Samkhya avoids the problem of mind-body interaction by drawing the dividing line differently than Descartes does. Instead of dividing the world into mental and physical, Samkhya divides the world into consciousness and the physical world which includes the mind and will. This paper argues that this avoidance of the Mind-Body Problem makes Samkhya a less-problematic Dualist structure. However, the Samkhya metaphysics does seem to sacrifice free will. This is because agency in the Samkhya worldview, has to belong to the physical world by process of elimination. It seems that ascribing agency to unconscious matter is impossible and so Samkhya does not provide us any assurance of freedom.

INTRODUCTION

For any Substance Dualist, one of the primary problems that has to be addressed is the Mind-Body Problem. While the term 'Dualism' has various uses, in this paper I am referring to the usage within Philosophy of Mind. Dualism is the view that the mind and body are very different kinds of things (Robinson). This may seem intuitive because our experience of the physical world is almost nothing like our experience of purely mental phenomena. Thoughts and feelings come and go, seemingly without rhyme or reason. Additionally, we only ever have access to our own mind and not the minds of others, which is nothing like the physical world in which two people can both identify whether an animal is a cat or dog. This separation of mind and body, however, calls into question how they interact with each other. When I want to move my finger, it moves,

and when I touch a hot stove, I *feel* pain rather than my body simply moving away on its own. Likely the most famous Substance Dualist within modern Western philosophy, is René Descartes. Another form of substance Dualism predates Descartes' view by hundreds of years. This version comes from ancient India, originating around 300-600 C.E. (Larson 4). The Samkhya philosophical tradition emphasized substance Dualism but drew the dividing line not between mental and physical, but between consciousness (or pure awareness) and the physical world. This paper aims to argue that this form of Dualism avoids the Mind-Body Problem that vexes so much of western Dualist theories. This paper will discuss Descartes' principal argument for a dualist metaphysics, describe Samkhya metaphysics, and argue that the Samkhya view avoids the Mind-Body Problem that faced Descartes. Later, I will also discuss one of the major costs Descartes might face if he were to have adopted this form of Dualism, that being the loss of free will.

The Modal Argument for Dualism

One of Descartes' arguments in favor of Dualism, and thus a distinction between mind and body as separate substances is contained in a brief passage from *Discourse IV*:

And then, examining attentively that which I was, I saw that I could conceive that I had no body, and that there was no world nor place where I might be; but yet that I could not for all that conceive that I was not (Descartes "Discourse" 27).

In other words, it is conceivable that we imagine our mind without a body or that we can conceive other minds without a body. We even might see this in science fiction in situations where characters' minds are swapped or put into different bodies. All the mental content: personality traits, memories, thought patterns, etc. are transferred to some other body. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy labels this argument as *The Modal Argument* (Robinson). The scholar Douglas Long articulates the argument more fully in a 1969 paper.

- (1) I can conceive of myself being conscious without a body.
- (2) By the *Cogito*, I must exist if I am conscious.
- (3) Therefore, I can conceive of myself existing without a body.

Long adds additional premises to strengthen this argument:

- (4) Nothing logically impossible is conceivable.

- (5) Therefore, my existence without a body is logically possible.
- (6) If it is logically possible for something to exist without a particular attribute, then that attribute is not part of the thing's essence.
- (7) Therefore, a body is not a part of my essence. (Long 5)

Long's argument focuses on Descartes' goal of proving that bodily attributes are not involved in his essence. Yet it also functions perfectly well as an argument for a distinction between mind and body. Just as we can imagine a car without wheels, we can also imagine a mind without a body. The car without wheels is still a car so the wheels are not a part of what makes it a car. If we can imagine a mind without a body, they must be two distinct things that could exist separately in a logically possible world.

The Mind-Body Problem

While Princess Elisabeth seemed to accept Descartes' separation between mind and body, she pointed out that the picture had not quite been filled in yet. Princess Elisabeth, as well as other philosophers of the time, were quick to ask Descartes for an explanation as to how the mind and body influenced each other if they were two different kinds of substances (Tollefsen 61). Princess Elisabeth explains in a letter to Descartes, why given Descartes physics, mind and body interaction is impossible.

For it seems that all determination of movement happens through the impulsion of the thing moved, by the manner in which it is pushed by that which moves it ... Physical contact is required for the first two conditions, extension for the third. You entirely exclude the one [extension] from the notion you have of the soul, and the other [physical contact] appears to me incompatible with an immaterial thing. (Descartes "Correspondence" 62)

Princess Elisabeth explains that under a billiard ball picture of causation, contact is required for one object to affect another. Since an immaterial mind/soul cannot make contact with a physical body, the method of interaction is left as a mystery if not a significant flaw for Mind-Body Dualism. While this problem is obvious when discussing the mind's influence on the body, it is also equally problematic for the other direction. The body undoubtedly influences our mind, whether it's the feeling of pain, our behavior changing when drinking caffeine, or the way we can't seem to think after intense exercise. If the mind and body are truly distinct substances, this body to mind interaction should be as equally impossible as mind to body interaction.

The Samkhya Response

To answer the question of mind-body interaction, perhaps the wisdom of the East can be of use. The Samkhya school of Indian thought is the oldest of the six orthodox Hindu schools. It influenced all the following orthodox schools and has deeply influenced the rest of Indian thought. This school expresses a strictly dualistic view of the world, just like Descartes. This Dualism also appears in Yoga philosophy. The Samkhya school of Indian thought is at the root of the other five orthodox Hindu schools (Burley vii). It influenced all the following orthodox schools and has deeply influenced the rest of Indian thought. What makes the Dualism of Samkhya-Yoga interesting, is that instead of placing the dividing line between mind and matter, Samkhya thought divides the world into consciousness or pure awareness, and the physical world which is called *Prakriti* (Schweizer “Dualism in Samkhya-Yoga” 847). This pure awareness is called *Purusha* and is distinct from the mind which is part of *Prakriti*. We will have to clarify these two terms before progressing. I will stick to using the Sanskrit terms in hopes of avoiding confusion with past conceptions of consciousness and mental activity. The mind, in Samkhya philosophy, is divided into three different faculties. These three faculties in Sanskrit are: *Manas*, *Buddhi*, and *Ahamkara*.

Manas is often translated as mind, but for this paper that would be quite confusing, and in fact *Manas* is only one facet of the western conception of the mind. Paul Schweizer states that *Manas* is viewed like an organ and is deeply involved in perception (Schweizer “Dualism in Samkhya-Yoga” 848). In Bryant’s introduction to the Yoga sutras of Patanjali, he elaborates that *Manas* is where emotions and preferences are processed. It is where the processing of sense data occurs. As data is received, it makes sense of it, sorting and analyzing the raw data (Bryant lii). It may be helpful to view *Manas* as referring to the various brain regions where data is received and processed. This data is sorted into a scheme so that it can be understood by the intellect, the next division of the mind (Bryant lii).

Buddhi, roughly translates to intellect or reason, and refers to higher level processing. It is where abstract thinking occurs. Schweizer also compares *Buddhi* to the Greek word *nous* which also translates to intellect. *Buddhi* is still regarded as *Prakriti* and is not consciousness itself (Schweizer “Dualism in Samkhya-Yoga” 848). “(*Buddhi*) is characterized by the functions of judgment, discrimination, knowledge, ascertainment, will, virtue, and detachment.” (Bryant li). The third division of the mind is the ego. In Sanskrit it is called *Ahamkara*. *Ahamkara*, appropriates ex-

perience to itself. It roughly fits the western conception of the self, the idea that *I* am looking, or *I* am reasoning (Bryant li-ii).

Some may think that these three divisions encompass all of mental life. However, consciousness itself is missing from the picture. In Sanskrit, *Purusha* roughly translates to consciousness or pure awareness (Schweizer “Dualism in Samkhya-Yoga” 849). It is ever present, no matter the content of the mind. You may think of consciousness as a space in which thoughts appear. Thoughts and feelings come and go, but the space is ever present and unchanged, like a cup that may contain different contents at any given time, but still remains the same cup.

While our sense of selves as a student, teacher, or Star Wars fanatic, are all ephemeral, consciousness is present throughout and remains unchanged. Samkhya-Yoga states that this consciousness is our true eternal self, the spectator and witness (Krishna XIX). According to Samkhya-Yoga and Hindu philosophy broadly, we are not the thoughts in our heads, but pure awareness, Consciousness, *Purusha*. Many people seem to think that they are the experiencer, the subject. We say ‘*I* am sad’ or ‘*I* am a father, engineer, philosopher etc.’ We claim that *we* are running, writing, drinking, etc. Samkhya and Yoga philosophy both claim that this perception is mistaken and this confused way of seeing the world is called *asmita* (Bastow 194). The Scholar David Bastow quotes Narayana: “Purusha, because of the reflected image of knowledge, pleasure etc. a modification of Buddhi, appears to be affected by knowledge, pleasure, etc.” (Bastow 194). Here Narayana is describing the illusion that consciousness (*Purusha*) is subject to change with our emotions and sensations. According to the Samkhya school, thoughts, feelings, and perceptions are unconscious and material. After all, they are within the mind which is physical (*Prakriti*). *Purusha*, however, is merely the witness and is unchanged (Sankhya Karika XIX). Narayana’s description of consciousness resembles that of a mirror. The mirror is always reflecting something and the mirror itself is colorless, it merely takes on the color of what it reflects. The mirror does not change when new things are put in front of it, only the image changes. So, the Samkhya philosopher would claim that it is mistaken to say *I* am affected by experience. *I* (*Purusha*) am the true self, so when we say “*I* am hurt” or “*I* am happy” it is more accurate to interpret this as saying my *mind* feels hurt or happy. The mind is affected, not the self, and not consciousness. With a little concentration, you may see the truth of this conception. When paying attention to your mental activity, you may notice that thoughts merely appear without us choosing to think them. We are not the authors of our emotions or thoughts, consciousness did

not produce them. We merely perceive mental phenomena through consciousness. It may be helpful to ask: did you decide to think a particular thought? You may have even had experiences where you were disgusted with your own thoughts. Something horrible and immoral appeared in your head, a desire to injure or kill someone for annoying you, a flash of some racial prejudice, something that you would despise another person for thinking and yet you had the very same thought. There is no need to blame yourself. You cannot control your thoughts and so you must accept them. Consciousness is often compared to a light so you may think of the phenomena as turning on a lamp in a dark room. Without the light, you cannot perceive what's in the room. Yet, that doesn't mean that the contents within the room are nonexistent. The chairs, shelves, cups, etc. are still there. Just so, our thoughts and feelings are still present without the light of consciousness revealing them.

Sometimes the question is posed like so, "how do conscious states depend on brain states?" This furthers the confusion. Most people are unaware of the divide between mind and consciousness. The answer to the question requires us to see mental life as three aspects rather than two. Mind states are dependent on brain states, and we are conscious of mind states by the light of consciousness, which is unchanging. Perhaps another analogy would be a computer. When you have the computer turned on, it is still processing and receiving signals, but without the monitor, you cannot see what the computer is doing. Consciousness in this case, is like the monitor. It doesn't change the signals it receives; it is merely aware of them. This is not a perfect analogy because it is important to remember that while when we use a computer, *we* are watching the monitor, our mental life only consists of the computer and the monitor. There is no one behind the monitor watching. So, when the decision to drink the coffee appears in your mind, it wasn't your consciousness producing the thought, it merely appeared. Swami Vivekananda, a modern day philosopher-yogi, describes the relation between mind and body as such:

"The body is just the external crust of the mind. They are not two different things ... they are but two aspects of one thing; When the mind is disturbed, the body also becomes disturbed." (Prabhu and Bhat 192)

Vivekenanda stresses here that the body and mind are two parts of the same whole. It is unclear if Vivekenanda may be discussing the brain rather than the *mind* (although discussing the brain only strengthens his point). When our body is tired, our mind becomes tired, when our body is energized, our mind is energized. Consciousness, however, remains unchanged.

The Mind-Body Problem is only a problem because of the division between mind and body, especially a division between mind and brain. If the two are separate substances with one being immaterial, the question becomes one of cause and effect. How does the mental *will* cause the body to move? According to Descartes' own metaphysics, an intention to move is unextended and immaterial because it is a quality of mind. Yet, the body, and the act of motion, is extended and physical. (Hatfield 3.4). This is Princess Elisabeth's primary question; how does an immaterial mind interact with a material body? (Hatfield 3.4). Samkhya-Yoga thought, however, would label any intention to move as physical just as the actual movement is physical, as *Buddhi* (which is associated with will) is an aspect of physical *Prakriti* (Bryant li). So now we can see why Samkhya philosophy doesn't grapple with the same problem Descartes does. By putting thoughts and actions on the side of the physical, the mechanistic view of causality is preserved. A thought appears, it has material properties, and thus affects the material body.

This conception of thoughts as physical better fits the scientific understanding as well. Under the largely monist view of science, thoughts and feelings are signals produced by the brain. In fact, these signals are not immediately conscious either. The Neuroscientist Benjamin Libet found that the decision to move one's finger could be observed a few hundred milliseconds before the participant was conscious of the decision (Libet 623). Chung Siong Soon found a similar phenomenon in 2008 but was able to predict movement up to 10 seconds before the conscious decision (Soon et al. 543).

Deciphering Descartes on Free Will

If Descartes were to have adopted the Samkhya-Yoga version of substance Dualism, while avoiding the problems raised by Princess Elisabeth, he may have disliked some of the implications. One of these important implications is that it is unclear whether Samkhya-Yoga metaphysics allows for free will. Although, to see if Descartes is really sacrificing anything, we have to understand what he means by free will.

Descartes' views on free will have been somewhat confusing and contradictory in his various writings. The conflict scholars face is determining Descartes' qualifications for freedom. In some places, Descartes seems to define free will as 'the ability to have done otherwise.' That is to say, when I pick up a glass of water, to have free will, it must have been possible for me to have grabbed my tea instead. There must be nothing internal or external that is *causing* my choice to drink water. In his fourth

meditation, Descartes seems to accept this notion of free will when he writes: 'there is no reason pushing [the will] in one direction or another.' (Wee 392)

Descartes seems to believe that when faced with a decision, if the reasons for either choice are equal, the will is what ultimately makes the final decision. In these situations, the will is indifferent to the choices presented (Wee 392). Still, Descartes seems to believe that when the weight of reason is towards one choice, say, tea over water, and there are still reasons against tea, the will remains indifferent and still could choose water (Wee 393). This is a similar stance to that of non-causal libertarianism, that the will is in primary control and to be free, it must not be causally determined even if those determinants are the agent's own mental states (O'Connor and Franklin). So, if I am in fact a robot designed to always choose tea over water, then I am causally determined. According to libertarianism, I as a human being, am not causally determined to choose tea or water and so I am free.

In other places it seems that Descartes defines freedom very differently from the above conception. In the same fourth meditation, Descartes claims that the freedom exercised when the will is indifferent is the 'lowest grade of freedom' (Wee 393). In a perhaps confusing way, Descartes declares that the greatest freedom is realized when a clear and distinct perception of reason pushes the will to accept that perception (Embry 3) Descartes goes on to claim that in these cases, the will acts freely but also could not have done otherwise. "... the more I am inclined towards the one, whether because I clearly know that in it there is the reason of truth and goodness, ... the more freely do I choose and embrace it." (Descartes "Discourse" 115)

This is more similar to that of Classical Compatibilism, according to which, self-determination only requires that an action is determined by one's strongest motivation (O'Connor and Franklin). This means that even though the cause was outside of the agent's control, if the cause was within the agent, the action was free.

Descartes also seems to believe that Free will is necessary or at least adds to the personal responsibility we have for our actions. An excerpt from Descartes' principles contradicts his view on this 'greater' freedom. In principles 1:37, he states: "it's a supreme perfection in man that he acts voluntarily, i.e., freely; this makes him in a special way the author of his actions and deserving of praise for what he does" (Descartes "Discourse" 9). It is unclear in this passage how Descartes is defining free either as a libertarian or a compatibilist. However, it does seem clear that

freedom (however he's defining it) adds more legitimacy to both praise and blame for our actions. If a man is walking along the street and sees someone who is calling for help, the man can either go and help or continue on his way. If there is no choice, the man will perform one of these actions. If he helps the stranger, it will not have been because he chose to be a good person and assist, it will merely reflect his nature, something he did not choose. If he does have a choice, and decides to help, he will be 'more deserving of praise for what he does.' This would be because there was nothing compelling him to walk away. He could have easily done so but sacrificed his time and energy for someone in need. Conversely of course, with Free Will, people are more blameworthy for their misdeeds. If the man had deliberately chosen to walk away, it would be more heinous. There was nothing compelling him in either direction, and he took the easy route anyway. If the man did not have free will, and walked away, that would mean that he is of a character who is perhaps unkind, but he didn't choose to be that way, he just is, and so he cannot be blamed for being a way that he did not choose.

The scholar Brian Embry attempts to resolve the contradiction between the instances of Descartes writings claiming we can do otherwise and claiming that we are sometimes compelled by clear and distinct perception (Embry 380-381). Embry tries to settle whether Descartes is a compatibilist or a libertarian by filling in some holes between Descartes seemingly contradictory claims. Embry begins by precisely articulating the two different claims. First, the Principle of Alternative Possibilities (PAP) is described as so: "if S performs x at t, the world could have been just as it was at t except that S does not perform x at t." (Embry 6)

This is roughly the principle that an agent is acting freely if they had options open to them at time t (Embry 1). This principle is expressed by Descartes in the quote mentioned above already: "there is no reason pushing [the will] in one direction or another." (Wee 392)

The seemingly contradictory claim is referred to by Scott Regland as 'Clear and Distinct Determinism' (CDD) (Embry 1). CDD is expressed as so: "Necessarily, if S clearly and distinctly perceives that x is good (true) at t, then S pursues (affirms) x at t." (Embry 6) When I fully understand that some action is good, then I necessarily perform that action. One example would be that if I clearly perceive that pulling the drowning child out of the pond is good, I necessarily do it and could not have done otherwise. While this is labeled as and resembles determinism, it is in fact a compatibilist view because Descartes is still committed to the fact that we have free will, even labeling cases like these free (Embry 1). After

a number of proposals for resolving PAP and CDD, Embry concludes arguing that Descartes still affirms PAP while also affirming a conception of CDD that is different than above. Embry calls this ‘Moral CDD’ and articulates it as so: “Given that S is paying attention at t to a clear and distinct perception that x is good (true), the probability that S pursues (affirms) x at t is astronomically high.” (Embry 25)

The two key elements that have been added are the importance of attention and switching from necessity to probability. So, when we are paying attention to a clear perception, the odds that we affirm x dramatically increase although it is still possible that we don’t affirm x. When we are not paying attention, the odds that we affirm x decrease. In this case our agency better resembles PAP, where our will is the only thing determining our actions and no outside factors play a role.

This, I believe, paints Descartes as a libertarian, but introduces an element of probability that in some situations it is incredibly likely that an agent will perform a certain action when that action is fully understood as good. Conversely, Descartes would say that it is incredibly *unlikely* for an agent to choose a different option than the one that is fully perceived as good.

Samkhya on Free Will

Now let us explore how Samkhya understands agency and free will. Just as before, a key problem we will face in comparing Western and ancient Eastern thought, is that there is often no perfect translation for difficult concepts we may be familiar with in western philosophy. This is certainly true for Free Will. It would seem that Samkhya conceives of agency as “cause of action and thus, by definition, changeable catalyst triggering temporal action.” (Dasti and Bryant 19) In other words, “to be an agent means to be able to *produce*” actions (Dasti and Bryant 20). This way of conceiving agency remains useful as generally people feel that they are the source of their actions or *self-determined* just as classical compatibilists and Libertarians do (O’Connor and Franklin). *If they* are not the source of their actions, then something or someone else is. Thus, we would have no free will. Keep in mind this bridge that I am attempting to make between Samkhya and Western thought on free will. There are unlikely to be direct parallels on each topic, so just as with consciousness, I will be attempting to show how each way of thought can be related.

I have stated above that *Purusha* or consciousness itself, is taken to be one’s true *Self*. So, if this is who we truly are, certainly we would be primarily concerned with this *Self*’s possession of Free Will. Unfortu-

nately for any Libertarians trying to adopt ancient Hindu thought, it is a basic premise in Indian thought that “If something is eternal, then that thing cannot change.” (Dasti and Bryant 19) Since Purusha, the true Self, is eternal, it thus cannot change. This unchanging nature removes any possibility for agency or source of action. In order to freely cause an action, that thing must change in some way. Our brain, which makes sense to be the best possible locus of free will, undergoes change each time we make a decision whether that’s by the nature of brain signals or our brain structure actually changing. Samkhya states that action could only occur within a world of change, not in an entity that is changeless like Purusha. So, given that there are only two realms to work within our dualist framework, agency must belong to Prakriti (Dasti and Bryant 19).

It is, however, a fact that Prakriti is unconscious. It would seem quite odd to ascribe agency or free will to something unconscious. One commentator, Baladeva, shares this sentiment. In response to the Samkhya claim that agency exists only in Prakriti, he writes:

Agency means having direct perception of the means [to accomplish an act], the desire to act, and volition, and this occurs only in a conscious entity. Therefore, the sacred texts state: “the puruṣha is the seer, toucher, hearer, taster, smeller, thinker, knower, and agent.” (Dasti and Bryant 35)

Here, Baladeva is taking the position of a different Hindu school (Vedanta), ascribing agency to Purusha, consciousness. Because Samkhya is the oldest known systematic Indian school of philosophy, other schools emerged as the results of Samkhya’s shortcomings (one of which being a lack of clarity on free will and agency). (Dasti and Bryant 17). Vedanta is one of those schools. Samkhya takes the hardline position that Purusha is only the witness, and nothing more and so it cannot possibly be the agent; Vedanta denies this.

If we accept Baladeva’s very reasonable suggestion that agency requires consciousness, while accepting Samkhya’s assertion that Purusha is only a witness, we are left with a world without free agents at all. This may be incredibly concerning because it would mean we have no free control over our actions, and yet we will have to accept this if we accept the rest of the Samkhya metaphysics described in this paper.

CONCLUSION

It seems clear that Descartes believes in a will just as Samkhya-Yoga does. This is evidenced when Descartes discusses agency by discussing

a will as if it's a particular aspect of a person. "...we consider it a good thing to demonstrate the freedom of our will..." (Wee 394) Here, he even describes it as something that is possessed, (our will). Samkhya-Yoga would describe the will in a similar way. As a reminder, one of the functions of Buddhi, is will (Bryant li). Buddhi is also something that belongs to the body as it is part of Prakriti. So, if Descartes were to modify his substance Dualism to fit the Dualism of Samkhya Yoga, moving the dividing line to be between pure awareness and everything else, he would have to leave behind free will. That is, as long as we accept that to be free, a thing must be conscious. Buddhi and agency, being part of Prakriti (Dasti and Bryant 19), are both unconscious and therefore not free.

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