

## A Buddhist Philosophical Critique of Naturalizing Mind

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My basic thesis is that any attempt to isolate mind as a distinct entity or essence leads to incoherencies and intractable problems of explanation. This is due, in large part, to the attempt to find the ‘intrinsic’ nature of mind in isolation from the causal conditions within which it occurs. For implicit (and often explicit) in the notions of ‘essence,’ ‘substance,’ ‘nature,’ or ‘intrinsicity’ is the idea that these are *not* caused, that they are not involved in a complex web of causal interrelations. And insofar as science investigates causal relationships, such a notion of mind would also be outside the purview of science.

The attempt to isolate the ‘mental’ part of experience from the material part, such as we find in Cartesian substance dualism, is the most egregious example of this and accounts, in large part, for the intractable nature of the body/mind problem. We can’t put back together what we have posited as ontologically separate. If the material elements are completely insentient, and the sentient elements are completely immaterial, how can there be any relation between them? How can there be any interaction between them? It is the vestiges of this way of thinking that prevent us from ‘solving’ the mind/body problem, and hence from clearly and *non-reductively* relating the varieties of human experience, such as spiritual experience, to the body/brain. And insofar as material means non-mental, the project of ‘naturalizing mind’ cannot avoid reductionism. This, though, is not news for most of us.

Buddhist modes of analyzing experience are philosophically relevant to this discussion because their starting point is not the ontological distinction between mind and body, but the causal relationship between them. Consciousness, in early Buddhist thought at least, is a process that only occurs with the coming together of objects and their respective sense faculties; as such, it is a function of an interrelated pattern of interaction and not an intrinsic property of any single part of it. In this sense, early Buddhist thought is commensurate with scientific approaches to consciousness in a way that substance dualism (and its descendents) are not: it defines consciousness in terms of causal relations rather than in terms of essential entities or intrinsic natures. Indian Buddhist thinkers, in fact, argue that the notion of an essential entity or an intrinsic nature is incompatible with a causal view of things. It leads, they argue, to just the kind of incoherencies we find in the mind/body problem. This is the potential relevance of Buddhist thought to our discussion.

### Buddhist Critiques of Essentialism

The two major schools of Indian Buddhist philosophy, Madhyamaka and Yogācāra, have complementary approaches to these problems. The Madhyamakan school was initially developed by the philosopher, Nāgārjuna (ca. 1<sup>st</sup> c. CE), who argued that the notion of an unchanging essence (*svabhāva*), existing independently in its own right, could not play a *causal* role in how things come to be precisely because it is independent

and unchanging. This is because ‘coming to be’ is a temporal process and an unchanging nature does not change. If its unchanging essence were to be a cause, then it would be eternally causing for ever and ever. It is therefore incoherent to posit an unchanging essence within a temporal pattern of causal interaction. If mind is actually an essence, it is outside the realm of causation, rendering mind-body interaction inconceivable—hence, the mind-body problem for essentialists.

Similar problems are found in the idea of an essential nature, defined again as something that stands on its own, *independent* of something else. Take for example, the idea that the *essential nature* of mind is intentionality, that is, having an object or being ‘about’ something. But these two are incompatible: an essential nature is not dependent on something else, yet intentionality, by definition, refers to something else: an object. So either this essential intentionality is indeed *not* dependent on something else, in which case it would not be intentional; or else it *is* dependent on something else, in which case it would not, by definition, be essential. The notion of essential or ‘intrinsic intentionality’ is thus incoherent, an artifact of substantialist or essentialist thinking. Mind or consciousness, like other phenomena, is better seen as part of an integrated pattern of causal interaction than an essential substance existing in solipsistic isolation.

One might object that no one seriously thinks that an ‘essential entity or nature’ is truly *independent* of causal processes, this is just a straw-man. If so, then we accept the notions that ‘entities’ and their ‘natures’ as merely convenient names for concatenations of conditions, what Karl Popper calls a “*nominalist* interpretation, as opposed to an Aristotelian or *essentialist* interpretation. In modern science, only nominalist definitions occur, that is to say, shorthand symbols or labels are introduced in order to cut a long story short.”<sup>1</sup> In other words, what appears to be an essential entity or nature is, strictly speaking, just a component of some larger field of causally interrelated phenomena—the ‘long story’ these shorthand symbols conveniently designation. Buddhists call them ‘conventional designations’ (*prajñapti*).

Consider, for example, the advent of evolutionary thinking. Not only had “Darwinism... banished essentialism—the idea that species members instantiated immutable types,”<sup>2</sup> but, according to Ernst Mayr, “the ability to make the switch from essentialist thinking to population thinking is what made the theory of evolution through natural selection possible.”<sup>3</sup> ‘Essentialist thinking’ had to be overcome because essential entities are, by definition, removed from the causal patterns wherein and whereby things come about. This transformation occurred, and occurs, in multiple disciplines. Indeed, it virtually defines modern thought.

This shift in thinking from essentialism to patterns of causal interaction is the focus of the second school of Indian Buddhist philosophy, Yogācāra (4-7<sup>th</sup> c. CE). Accepting these logical critiques of essentialism, Yogācārins emphasized their

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<sup>1</sup> Popper, *The Open Society and its Enemies*, 1952, II, 14; cited in Gombrich, *How Buddhism Began*, 1996,

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<sup>2</sup> Richards, *The Emergence of Evolutionary Theories of Mind and Behavior*, 1987, p. 4.

<sup>3</sup> Mayr, *Toward a New Philosophy of Biology* 1988, p. 15f

epistemological ramifications. They argued that the basic epistemological problem—and hence the basic spiritual problem—is that we falsely imagine (*abhūta-parikalpita*) that the subjective dimension of experience is truly separable from the objective dimension, that we actually *are* independently existing subjects distinct and separate from equally independently existing objects. They claim, moreover, that we ordinarily and nearly universally reify our experiences into this subject-object dualism, and see and think and act in terms of reifications rather than causal relations.

This not only enables us to imagine we are separate from the larger causal networks in which we are embedded, it also encourages us to ignore the effects of our actions (*karma*) upon this larger world. They argue that such reifications, and philosophies articulating them, like Cartesian dualism (and its derivative, reductive materialism), are not only incoherent—they are also harmful. However, we can see more clearly, think more coherently, and act more constructively, they argue, when we fully comprehend the causal embeddedness of our lives and adjust our actions accordingly, in part by conceptions of mind and world that reflect this causal embeddedness. One eventually comes to recognize that both subject and object are “dependent on others” (*paratantra*), which, when “fully perfected” (*pariniṣpanna*), becomes the ultimate realization in Yogācāra thought. Hence, there is a spiritual dimension to well conceived causal models.

### Materialism and Qualia as Cartesian Descendants

In this ‘Buddhistic’ view, the body-mind problem arises from conceptually separating two of the components of any experiential process—the bodily and mental dimensions—and reifying them as ontologically independent entities or natures. Most scientific and philosophical approaches to mind seem to accept certain aspects of essentialist or substantialist thinking inherited from Cartesian dualism, i.e. the assumption that subjective and objective realms are distinct.<sup>4</sup> The arena of this dualism, though, has shifted from the relatively gross level of body and mind to the more subtle levels of brains and experience, and neurons and *qualia*, paralleling a shift, roughly speaking, from ontology to epistemology. Nevertheless, the basic issues remain the same.

For example, people often think of the brain as ‘dead matter’ and then wonder how something that is *essentially* insentient could ever give rise to what is *essentially* sentient (as if neurons were not, in fact, living cells). Moving beyond these vestiges of substance dualism, which is largely ontological, we now raise questions concerning *property dualism*, which are more epistemological. We ask how we can account for the experience of color, for example, which can be approached in two different ways. The wavelengths involved are physical properties open to objective measurement and fully embedded in causal mechanisms, while color, on the other hand, is a ‘qualia,’ an experiential property accessible only to the experiencing subject (which is why color blindness can go undetected) and only indirectly amenable to qualitative analysis. In other words, physical properties are susceptible to objective, public, *third-person*

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<sup>4</sup> I have benefitted immensely, especially in this portion of the paper, from Edward Feser’s incisive *Philosophy of Mind*, 2006, although not agreeing with him on all points.

*analyses*, while experiential properties—‘qualia’—are only accessible through subjective, private, *first-person accounts*.

Notice the underlying structure of this. We now have an *epistemological dualism*—between the objective and subjective—whose distinguishing criteria parallel Cartesian ontological dualism. What was formerly the body-mind problem has become a subject-object duality: ‘experience’ is the subjective realm and neurons, etc., are the objective. In contrast to Yogācāra Buddhist analyses of the *interdependence* between subject and object, which together gave rise to experience, these two are still seen as incommensurate epistemologies or discourses. And one or the other of them is typically considered paramount.

Eliminative or reductive *materialism*, for example, claims that experiential accounts can be effectively eliminated by reducing all apparent subjective experiences to their *truly real* material bases. ‘Qualia,’ what we appear to experience, have no independent reality and hence requires no autonomous explanation—they are purely *epiphenomenal*, mere by-products of material processes. In effect, all 1<sup>st</sup> person accounts are valid insofar as they directly reflect, or may be reduced to, 3<sup>rd</sup> person accounts. In this view, we can never truly explain our behavior by appealing to experience—to our desires, feelings, or intentions, since they are all epiphenomenal; we must, in principle, discern their material substrate. Indeed, not only is our desire to understand our minds a mere by-product of material processes, so is any sense we might entertain to the contrary. We are automatons only imagining we are agents—such is the logic of reductive materialism.

In part as a response to this unappealing (and incoherent) vision, many posit an intrinsic *subjectivity*, the flip side of a subject-object dichotomy. If mind is intrinsically intentional, if it is intrinsically ‘about something’, then it possesses its own nature and properties independently of its material substrate. As Feser (2006, 172; emphasis added) succinctly explains:

brain processes, composed as they are of meaningless chemical components, seem as inherently devoid of intentionality as sound-waves or ink marks. Any intentionality they have *would also have to be derived from something else*. But if anything physical would be devoid of intrinsic intentionality, whatever does have intrinsic intentionality would thereby have to be *non-physical*... it seems to follow that the mind has intrinsic intentionality, and thus is non-physical.

But if our intentional objects, our qualia, were truly independent of any material basis, they would not be involved in *causal* interactions between body and mind. We could neither explain why we *seem to experience* red when we see a stop-sign, since this seeing would occur independent of our retinas and visual faculties; nor how this seeming experience of red could be connected our actually stopping, since, again, it is intrinsically non-physical. Intrinsic subjectivity is thus as epiphenomenalistic as materialist objectivity.

The notion of qualia thus resembles a Cartesian immaterial essence, which rendered causal interaction between body and mind so inexplicable. And insofar as the notion of qualia assumes an underlying ontological dualism between body and mind or, better, an epistemological dualism between 3<sup>rd</sup> and 1<sup>st</sup> person discourses, it has not addressed the problem. Indeed, insofar as subjectivity is exclusively defined as 1<sup>st</sup> person and private, and science only involves what is 3<sup>rd</sup> person and public, subjectivity *in principle* remains outside the purview of science (Feser, 105). The unbridgeable gap remains, but the boundaries are now drawn between subjective and objective aspects of experience—a distinction both reflected in and reinforced by their respective methodologies. We need a better model.

### How this critique might apply to meditation studies

At times this dichotomy seems to be enshrined—rather than overcome—in the search for “neural correlates of consciousness,” particularly in the investigation of meditation practices. While this general approach promises to break through the subject-object dichotomy, there are some cautionary concerns I’d like to address.

The basic problem with framing investigations this way is that it seems to assume the subject-object dichotomy we’ve been discussing. It *appears* to take 3<sup>rd</sup> person, neurological accounts of the brain, on the one hand, and correlates them with 1<sup>st</sup> person, ‘subjective’ accounts of experience, on the other—as if neither of these accounts were problematic, as if both simply ‘tell it like it is’ and all we need to do is match them up.<sup>5</sup>

We need to question our assumptions about scientific knowledge in general and neuroscientific knowledge in particular. As we are well aware, science is a human enterprise, driven by human interests, and both inspired and constrained by human intelligence and ingenuity. In this respect, the 3<sup>rd</sup> person perspective championed by most scientists, as successful as it is, is a subset of all human perspectives. Every scientific statement is simultaneously and unavoidably a human statement about the world. However occluded, ‘1<sup>st</sup> person,’ experiential perspectives are always implicitly present. The interdependence between subject and object, our being-the-world, is not negated by our methodological objectivism.

At another level, all our findings about mind/brain are only intelligible within certain frameworks of understanding. They rely on provisional theories and paradigms that tell us how to interpret data, how to synthesize data, that tell us what *counts* as data. In short, scientific knowledge is itself a kind of interpretation—valid, useful, and rigorous, but nevertheless an interpretation of the world that depends upon our tools of measurement, our modes of understanding, and our means of explanation.

All this is no less true for religious or spiritual traditions. We need to question the idea that Buddhist monks give us an accurate and *literal* description of 1<sup>st</sup> person ‘meditative experience,’ as if their descriptions unproblematically mapped onto the

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<sup>5</sup> This is undoubtedly an oversimplification, my apologies. I do not assume everybody is like Andrew Newberg.

world, even an ‘inner world,’ without interpretation or perspective.<sup>6</sup> Rather, as with any conceptual system (with language itself), monks superimpose a set of terms, with purportedly precise, clear and stable meanings, onto the flux and flow of their own individual experiences. They can do this not simply because they are trained in meditation, but also because they are trained in the traditional terms used to describe meditation. How useful would it be if they used idiosyncratic terms to describe their meditation? How could they have learned it if their teachers did? Rather, they unavoidably use conventional and consensual terms because they have been acculturated as ‘Buddhist meditators.’ And such learning, like language learning and a host of other communicative skills, is inescapably intersubjective. There is no purely subjective, nor purely objective, mode of communication. Their ‘accurate descriptions,’ like our scientific findings, unavoidably mediate experience, world and word in that inseparable, intersubjective *mélange* we call culture.

This is no less true for our experimental subjects, the ‘average’ undergraduate. They have all been socialized and acculturated for twenty years or more and their brains have been radically altered since they were born. Their brains process complex language, social cues and cultural symbols almost instantaneously and mostly automatically. It seems impossible to ever examine an unsocialized or a non-linguistified brain. Even at the neurological level, if I am not mistaken, we are inescapably permeated by culture.

To the extent that these three considerations are pertinent—that neuroscience is a theory-laden human enterprise, that meditators are not naïve informants but already deeply acculturated, and that all adult brains are radically socialized and linguistified—we cannot assume a truly autonomous 3<sup>rd</sup> person discourse set up against an equally autonomous 1<sup>st</sup> person discourse, the correlation of which will give us accurate knowledge about experience. All of these are already inescapably intersubjective; that is, they are already related in their origins. It is not enough for us to *perceive* them coming together, after the fact as it were; we need to *conceive* of them as together from the beginning. This is our next challenge.

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<sup>6</sup> Every Buddhist tradition I know of rejects this kind of correspondence theory of truth, an observation buttressed by the long-running disputes regarding the qualities, content and epistemic claims of various meditative practices.