Discussion and Comments

The Possibility of *Dehātmavāda:* A Critique of Pandit Badrinath Shukla

Ācārya Badrinath Shukla's very clear and lucid exposition of "The Body is Itself the Self" doctrine which is called *dehātmavāda* and which is developed by him from within the classical system of Nyāya, is extremely striking and original. By modifying certain Nyāya concepts he builds up a powerful case for giving up the very idea of the Self as a substance (*dravya*) distinct from the body complex. He does this by rejecting the traditionally accepted difference between these two and arguing instead for identity between the Self and the body associated with the *manas*. In Nyāya, an entity can legitimately be accepted as a *dravya* if and only if it has certain very specific sets of qualities that cannot belong to any other type of entity. On such ground, it has been held in Nyāya that specific qualities like knowledge, desire, will etc. cannot characterize any of the other *dravyas* like the five elements, space, time etc. and hence the Self, which alone possesses knowledge, desire etc. has to be admitted as a distinct *dravya*.

Hence, in Nyāya, there is a general link between the notions of a certain entity being classifiable as a distinct *dravya* and that entity in turn possessing some very specific qualities or sets of them. Therefore, technically, the peculiar "*dravya* hood" of any entity can be denied in Nyāya only by showing that the qualities believed to be very specific to that entity are not in fact specific to it. Shukla adopts this strategy throughout his paper and argues that specific qualities like knowledge etc. that are attributed only to the Self can in fact be regarded as the *general* qualities of the physical or material body (*deha*) itself. He argues that the *deha* itself, standing in a special kind of relationship with the mind, can account for all

the specific or special qualities like *jñāna* etc. traditionally associated only with the Self. On this ground he concludes that the concept of a distinct Self in Nyāya is avoidable and it is in fact superfluous (called *'atiriktātmavāda'* by Shukla). He of course anticipates serious objections to his move from the classical point of view and attempts, in a very serious and even a very characteristically classical style, to provide answers to them all. It is one of the most beautiful papers in Sanskrit I have ever read in a very long time indeed.

This move of Shukla has very far reaching consequences because the concept of the Self as a distinct entity is central not only to Nyāya but to virtually every other orthodox system of Indian thought. Besides, all those schools consciously reject the idea of the body itself being the Self which is abundantly clear from their systematic and vigorous refutation of the Cārvāka school. Shukla's move therefore has the effect of showing that all these orthodox schools are not only a bit extravagant in postulating a distinct Self but are also considerably uncritical in failing to examine whether that concept is invariably needed. Shukla has worked out his argument specifically only for the Nyāya school, but it very much appears to me that his paper can be read at a very different level from where it appears to also provide what may be identified as a sufficiently general "argument-form." This argument-form can be applied—with needed instantiations of variables as required in the case of specific schools—to other orthodox schools like Mīmāmsā to reject the concept of the Self in them also. Such an exercise could result in the rejection of the notion of the Self as an unjustified concept in all the other schools as well. For this additional reason also, we must seriously examine Shukla's thesis of *dehātmavāda.*

There is a great deal of technical sophistication in the arguments of Shukla and he has also taken care to state that the redundancy of the concept of the Self in Nyāya which he is propounding in his paper is a very distinct 'possibility' (*sambhāvyatā*) within Nyāya. He argues in favour of this possibility of redundancy because he thinks that it results in considerable conceptual economy while, at the same time, not also compromising the basic tenets of the Nyāya school. According to me this in itself is a very major step in original philosophizing because what any original philosopher of any school

does is to explore a certain new possibility in his own way and extend or improve the system of thought in unexpected ways through such an exercise. Therefore Shukla is making a very original move albeit from within the framework of classical Nyāya. This move brings into play several possibilities and also raises many fresh issues most of which are certainly considered by Shukla himself while some very unlikely ones that would not at all occur to a classical mind, seem to have escaped his attention. I would like to critique here a small sample of such issues which have not been considered by him.

The first issue concerns a re-examination of why the concept of a distinct Self which is viewed as redundant by Shukla has all along been regarded as essential by all the classical orthodox schools. There is no doubt about most of the schools bringing in the concept of the Self to account for the phenomenon of consciousness. There is also no doubt about those schools distinguishing the Self from the body, the senses and the mind. Though the senses, the mind and the Self are all viewed as being equally and necessarily involved in the process of knowing etc., yet it is equally agreed by them all that neither the senses nor the mind, by themselves, can properly account for the phenomenon of consciousness. In all the classical schools the senses and the mind are, by general consent, material in their character and constitution (*bhautika* or *prākṛtika*) and they all uniformly lack consciousness, that is, they are *acetana*. Also, in all these schools, the phenomenon of consciousness is unquestionably primary and every form of knowing, desiring etc. are just impossible in the absence of consciousness. It has been generally thought by the classical schools that there may very well be consciousness by itself which is not at all involved in any process of knowing, desiring etc. but there cannot simply be any knowing, desiring etc. *without* consciousness. As the sole contributor of the element of consciousness, the Self is the most indispensable element for the classical schools of Indian thought. Not only here in India but in the West also consciousness as something distinct from matter is a tenet of firm belief.

In spite of all this, the issue may still be raised, as Shukla has powerfully raised, whether at all it is necessary to view consciousness as an entity really distinct from knowing, desiring etc. The issue

becomes possible because we need not accept consciousness as a distinct and separate phenomenon and instead choose to regard it merely as a *characteristic* of certain forms of physical activity. On such a view, knowing, desiring etc. would all be treated as forms of "*conscious* activity." All knowing is basically characterized by awareness. Therefore, a statement like "I knew Mishra entered the room, but I was not aware of it" would be meaningless. But, on the other hand, a statement like "I was aware of someone entering the room, but I did not know that it was Mishra" is perfectly meaningful. In this latter instance, the speaker claims awareness, but still has no definite knowledge. Therefore it turns out that just as there is an impossibility of knowing without also being aware, there is also a possibility of being aware without necessarily knowing i.e., knowing exactly or definitely. The above impossibility and possibility together logically lead to the conclusion that knowledge and awareness, although inseparably related, must still somehow be distinguished from each other and they cannot be held to be absolutely identical.

Although the above conclusion looks fair and inescapable, we do encounter problems in applying it. For example, when I know how to add correctly and also actually perform an addition, I say that I "know" that 199 + 241 is 440. I can also be said to be aware of this fact. But then, there are also calculators and computers that do precisely the same addition and many other additions absolutely correctly every time, but we do not admit that these machines either "know" the sums or that they are "conscious" or "aware" of the additions they are making. Ever since computing machinery was invented during the early part of the previous century, there has been a running controversy among scientists and philosophers in the West as to whether "intelligence"—which is generally regarded as the peculiar feature of only living and conscious beings—can also be attributed to lifeless and inert (*jaḍa*) machines like computers. Not being able to deny that computing machines behave in an "intelligent" way by doing very many tasks which only intelligent human beings can do, some scientists and philosophers have chosen to describe the behaviour of such unconscious machines as "artificial" intelligence in sharp contrast to the "natural" intelligence that is peculiar only

to conscious human beings. They argue that machines may act intelligently or exhibit intelligent behaviour without really being intelligent like humans. Only humans are "really" intelligent because only they are really "conscious", "aware", or in other words, "know."

The central point of this whole debate about artificial intelligence is whether consciousness is a distinct and human phenomenon not exhibited by anything else which is material in this universe. The core issue is whether an entity like a computer, exhibiting some behaviour that is indistinguishable from that of a conscious human being, should also be regarded as having consciousness. This problem was brought to the attention of philosophers by Alan Turing, the famous computer theorist, as far back as the fifties of the previous century.[1] While the debate started by Turing is still continuing, a super computer named "Deep Thought" developed by IBM in USA played chess against Kasparov—an unbeaten chess champion at that time—and also defeated him, thereby raising many serious and interesting questions. Could this super computer have made its moves without, in some very fundamental way, "knowing" the moves made by Kasparov? Or else, as a lifeless machine, if it did not "know" anything—either the rules of the game or the moves made by its opponent—how at all could it ever manage not only to play but also defeat the reigning world champion? On the other hand, if it did indeed "know" or "understand" the moves made by Kasparov, was it also "conscious" or "aware" of those moves? We may probably agree that this computer behaved very much like someone who knew chess very well but it still was not, on that account alone, was also "conscious." Would we then grant some kind of "understanding" and "skill" to this super computer, but still recoil from conceding any kind of "consciousness" or "awareness" to it?[2] Whatever that may be, as ordinary humans we all would never hesitate to deny that this computer possesses a "Self" just like ourselves.

If we say that computers may have some kind of knowledge but not any type of awareness, can we also say along the same lines that human beings may also have knowledge but no awareness? I do not think that most classical Indian philosophers including Shukla would agree to that. Therefore, it turns out that humans and computers are both capable of some form of knowledge but while humans are

conscious, computers can never be.[3] Then it has to be concluded that just any kind of knowing whatever cannot automatically and necessarily be associated with awareness. For example, the kind of "machine-knowledge" found in Deep Thought cannot also be an instance of awareness on its part. Therefore it must be conceded that the element of knowing and the element of awareness cannot belong to one and the same entity in all cases. Hence it cannot be held that any entity that knows is also invariably conscious. Further, when an entity that knows also happens to be conscious, the element of awareness in that entity cannot be assigned to the material or the physical aspects of that entity. It has to be assigned to something which is non-material and this is exactly what the Self happens to be in the case of all humans. Therefore the postulation of an entity called the Self that helps us to properly account for consciousness in humans and the absence of such Self in computing machinery is both necessary and quite understandable, and hence the concept of the Self cannot be dismissed as redundant.

The process of knowing can be accounted for with the help of a number of elements like the senses, the neural network, the electrical activity of the brain and so on, but the process cannot in its *entirety* be accounted for in such purely material (*bhautika*) terms alone.[4] If an assemblage of entirely material components as found within the human body could by itself know and also be conscious as *dehātmavāda* contends, then the computer which is also nothing but an assemblage of just another kind of material components like wires, chips, sensors, and electronic circuits should also be able to know as well as be conscious exactly like humans. But, for most classical Indian thinkers, this is not—and also cannot be—the case. Therefore, maintaining as in *dehātmavāda* that the material body itself is conscious is analogous to maintaining that a computer is conscious since in both the cases there is no need to separately account for consciousness by resorting to a special entity like the Self. For this reason, in order to make a fool-proof case for *dehātmavāda* which attempts to account for awareness in entirely material terms, the special link of consciousness with knowledge, desire etc. has to be deliberately broken. But this would have the undesirable result of familiar conscious processes like knowing, desiring etc.

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—normally and typically found among all humans—suddenly turning into utterly unconscious, mysterious processes. Or else, the quality of being conscious will have to be unwillingly attributed to an assemblage of purely material components that are universally regarded as *lacking* in consciousness (*acetana*)—thus making the entity in question totally self-contradictory in character.

Therefore, if either conscious processes like knowing etc. should not thus become purely mechanical and utterly unintelligible, or if some entities should not end up with self-contradictory features to be compulsorily attributed to them, a clear distinction must be maintained between material entities and consciousness. When this is done, the case for a non-material entity that accounts for the exclusive feature of consciousness, i.e. the Self, becomes absolutely indisputable and inevitable. Questioning the need for such an entity would be absurd. But the *dehātmavādin* totally denies the very possibility of such a distinct Self by identifying it with the material body itself. This naturally compels him to transfer all the distinct features of the Self like knowing, desiring etc. to the physical body.

Nyāya is a strictly logical system where a Self had to be postulated as the locus of certain peculiar qualities like knowing, desiring etc. which could be located only in it and never in any other substance. These qualities are observed in experience and are hence very real. Such real qualities must have an equally real location like the Self. The several elements and features associated with the knowing process etc. may be transferred to a material entity like the *citta*, the *antaḥkaraṇa*, the mind,[5] the physical body or even one of the parts of the physical body like the brain, but finally there must remain at least one element, feature or quality that cannot be so transferred to the material sphere viz. the element of consciousness. If the Self were to be completely eliminated and its quality of consciousness were also to be re-located or transferred to the physical body, then, in the place of the recently destroyed *dravya* (the Self) one new *dravya* would be created which will have the quality of being conscious (*cetana*, a quality newly transferred from the Self to the physical body) and also the quality of being non-conscious (*acetana*, *jaḍa* which is an already existing quality of the physical body). But this new *dravya*, the "enriched physical body", is the common locus

of mutually contradictory qualities—a very perfect example of a "logically impossible object." I suppose that it is not a very happy situation.

But it should nevertheless be conceded that it is possible, in a sense, to attribute acts of knowing to the body as Shukla does throughout his paper, because there cannot simply be any act of knowing in the normal sense of that term without the involvement of the physical body. But while doing such attribution, it is quite important to keep in mind the sharp difference between two statements relating to it: (a) there can be no knowing without the involvement of the body, and (b) the entities that are said to "know" are conscious by nature. These two statements are not equivalent in meaning, or they do not share the same truth-value, because while it is impossible for (a) to be false, it is perfectly possible that (b) is not true. Knowing involves not only the body, the mind and their distinctive processes which are all decidedly material in nature, but it also involves the element of consciousness which is neither itself material nor is a unique property of anything which is purely material.

In classical Indian systems, no entity can possess the element of awareness and still be perfectly material in its nature. That is because materiality (*jaḍatva* or *acetanatva*) and awareness (*cetanatva* or *ajaḍatva*) are mutually contradictory properties. Therefore if we hold that a material object can also be conscious and a conscious entity can also be material, we will in effect be holding, as just pointed out above, that mutually contradictory features like "being material or non-conscious" and "being conscious or non-material" can at once characterize the same entity. If that indeed be allowed, it becomes impossible to sharply mark off one entity in the universe from another entity as being either definitely material or definitely conscious in nature. This also amounts to admitting that some entities can be opposed to themselves in their very nature insofar as they simultaneously harbour mutually incompatible or contradictory qualities. In such circumstances it would not at all be possible to maintain that certain processes like knowing etc. are basically conscious processes while processes like digestion etc. are purely physical processes not involving any element of consciousness. Consequently, any difference we wish to maintain between these

two different kinds of processes will be necessarily and completely inconsistent, arbitrary, accidental and contingent.

It was stated and proved above that no entity can possess the element of awareness and still be perfectly material by nature. Likewise, it can also be stated that no entity can completely lack the element of awareness and still be capable of knowing, desiring etc. A proof for this can be constructed very much along the same lines indicated above.

It will also certainly be a mistake if (a) above is offered as the ground for (b) especially as applied to the human body. That is because the fact that there can be no knowing etc. without the body does not logically lead to the conclusion that the body in which knowledge appears must be conscious. The statement (a) can at best point to the necessary condition in the form of the presence of the body etc. being required for the arising of knowledge etc. But then, such pointing to the necessary condition of some or all knowledge does not also amount to *explaining* the necessarily conscious character of such knowledge. A proper explanation would require a demonstration that only because knowledge can arise only with or within the body which is essentially an unconscious material entity, such knowledge also comes to possess its peculiarly conscious character. It is needless to emphasize here the total absurdity of any such demonstration if it is ever attempted.

But it is still possible to argue that the special kind of contact of the mind with the body which gives rise to knowledge etc. also simultaneously gives rise to the conscious character of that knowledge. In that case it is not necessary to invoke something like a distinct Self to account for the conscious character of knowledge etc. All knowledge, even as it arises, would just automatically assume a conscious character. But this argument runs into serious difficulties because while knowledge allows the possibility of being "more" and "less", awareness which is supposed to simultaneously arise with it, does not allow the same. If knowledge and awareness always go together, then there will be this curious fact that while the knowledge of a person may go on increasing with the passing of time, such increase in knowledge is never found to be accompanied by a corresponding "increase" in the awareness of that person.

The knowing process definitely adds to the fund of knowledge a person already has and therefore we can meaningfully say of a person: "His knowledge is more than what it was last year." But, in a similar way, we cannot also say: "His awareness is more than what it was last year." We can say the latter if and only if we completely identify knowledge and awareness, which has already been shown to be incorrect. Hence it is not possible to identify "knowing more" with "being more aware" because there is nothing like "being more aware" with an *increase* in awareness. Awareness is an unchanging accompaniment of all knowledge somewhat like the screen in a dark cinema hall on which a series of pictures are being projected. The pictures keep changing, but not the screen. If there are no pictures, the screen shows us nothing. If consciousness has been compared to light in the classical Indian tradition, it is precisely because of this unique role it plays in making things known to us.

Descartes was the first Western philosopher to argue that consciousness cannot be the property of matter and his influence has mostly survived in the West down the centuries. Phenomenologists accept as a fundamental premise that consciousness is an autonomous entity and treat the material world as something disclosed to a consciousness that is different in nature from the material objects presented to it. Even among the recent philosophers of Artificial Intelligence there is a substantial group which refuses to treat consciousness as a property of pure material objects. But there is also a group which advocates that in principle it is possible to build machines that truly "think" and are "conscious" exactly like human beings. The development of thought in Quantum Physics has slowly but surely led to the unavoidable introduction of consciousness into the realm of material particles and in it there is not much enthusiasm for treating consciousness as something reducible to anything purely physical. The Marxist theory is probably the sole surviving shelter for reductionism—the view that consciousness can be totally reduced to matter and its special states. Thus, there does not seem to be any large scale or near universal support in the West also for the view that consciousness is something derivative and non-fundamental. Therefore no unopposed and very solid support can be derived for Shukla's position even from within Western thought.

It is very much true that Shukla brings in a good deal of conceptual economy in the overpopulated Nyāya system with its variety of substances and qualities, a very vast array of hierarchical universals and countless number of relations among these. But this conceptual economy aimed at by Shukla seems to have been achieved at the cost of explanatory clarity because in the process of achieving economy he renders totally unintelligible the quality of consciousness in Nyāya philosophy, which quality already stood treated rather poorly by its followers.

It appears to me that the concept of a conscious *deha* is just as unintelligible as that of a Self which is made up of only the five *bhūtas*, if not at least just as contentious as that of a conscious computer. The Self in Nyāya was already dangerously close to something material and Shukla has made that Self completely material in his attempt at achieving conceptual economy. But the socio-political theses he evolves out of his *dehātmavāda* at the end of his paper are undoubtedly very interesting and also very positive. Yet I think that those very theses can still be advocated from outside the framework of what Shukla calls *"atiriktātmavāda"* with the Self still having its due place within the system.

The most outstanding feature of Shukla's *dehātmavāda* is its socio-political dimension and message, and as far as I know, Shukla is the very first Indian philosopher in several hundred years who fully remained within a completely classical philosophical system and yet evolved out of it a coherent system of contemporary socio-political theses. May be, man begins to take society seriously only when he begins to take his own body seriously, that is, with a very special kind of seriousness not unknown in classical India. Whatever that be, Shukla leaves us in no doubt about his belief that the lack of focus on socio-political issues in classical Indian thought is a direct consequence of attaching undue importance to the totally redundant notion of the Self. Therefore he proposes to show that his brand of *dehātmavāda* would remedy that defect.

While reading Shukla's paper I was strongly reminded of the story in the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* wherein Indra and Virocana approach Prajāpati seeking instruction about the Self. After making them both wait for thirty two years, Prajāpati tells them that the body is

the Self. The story goes that while Indra came back to Prajāpati again and again for clarification of doubts and further instructions regarding the Self (for which he had to successively wait for a further unit period of thirty two years each time), Virocana never came back even once. Who knows—except perhaps Ācārya Badrinath Shukla—whether Virocana, the *asura,* was really right and Indra, the king of gods, was indeed wrong?

Notes And References

1 It all began with the publication of Alan Turing's paper "Computing Machinery and Intelligence" in *Mind,* LIX, no. 2236, October 1950, pp. 433–60.

2 The Western discussion has taken a very interesting twist with the appearance of John Searle's "Chinese Room Argument" which powerfully attacks the view that computers can "understand." See his paper "Minds, Brains and Programs" in *The Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 3, 1980, pp. 417–24, reprinted in *The Philosophy of Artificial Intelligence,* Margaret A. Boden (ed), Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990.

3 My discussions with several classical Sänskrit scholars like Naiyāyikas, Mīmāmsakas, Sāṅkhyans and Vedāntins have confirmed this although some types of philosophers of Artificial Intelligence from the West would not agree with them at all.

4 This is the classical Indian view in general. The Sāṅkhya theory that the internal organ (*antaḥkaraṇa*) involved in all knowing is a product of primal matter or *prakṛti* is well known. In the West there are reductionist philosophers who argue that all mental states can be accounted for completely in terms of brain states and their theory is known as the "Mind-Brain Identity Theory." Only the Cārvāka would subscribe to such a view.

5 In the classical Indian tradition, the mind is material in character and Nyāya attributes even a physical property to it like size, mind being 'atomic' (*aṇu parimāṇa*) in size.

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