

Comparative Perspective on Dualism: Descartes and Samkhaya

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Abstract

The present paper attempts to bring about the point of comparison between aspects of Cartesian and Sankhayan dualism. In order to arrive at this, first I shall discuss what ontology and metaphysics is and what is the difference between these two. Secondly, In brief I shall discuss what the various theories of “reality” are. And finally I shall compare the dualistic aspect of both Cartesian and Sankhayan Philosophy and present its brief analysis.

Comparative philosophy—sometimes called cross-cultural philosophy—is a subfield of philosophy in which philosophers work on problems by intentionally setting into dialogue sources from across cultural, linguistic, and philosophical streams. Comparative philosophers most frequently engage topics in dialogue between modern Western and Classical Asian traditions, but work has been done using materials and approaches from Islamic and African philosophical traditions as well as from classical Western traditions. It is important to note here that scholars have warned of three basic difficulties while doing comparative philosophy i.e. 1) *Descriptive chauvinism*: a fault which consists in recreating the other tradition in the image of one’s own. This is reading a text from another tradition and assuming that it asks the same questions or constructs responses or answers in a similar manner as that one with which one is most familiar. 2) *Normative skepticism*: it consists of narrating the views of different philosophers and traditions and suspending all judgment about their adequacy. When teaching the history of Western philosophy, some philosophers never really offer any critical view that puts aside a thinker’s claims. 3) *Incommensurability*: it was David Wong (1989) who has offered a view of the ways in which philosophical traditions may be incommensurable. One kind of incommensurability involves the inability to translate some concepts in one tradition into meaning and reference in some other tradition. A second sort is that some philosophical models differ from others in such fundamental ways as to make it impossible for the advocates to understand each other. Wong thinks that some forms of life may be so far from a person’s experience and philosophical tradition that she is unable to see the merits in another view. The third version of incommensurability is that the traditions differ on what counts as evidence and grounds for decidability, thus making it impossible to make a judgment between them. Nonetheless comparative philosophy is a growing field of study for it helps in generating better knowledge about and across cultures.¹

It is in this background of comparative philosophy that, here in this paper it is my attempt to bring about the point of comparison between aspects of Cartesian and Sankhayan dualism. In order to arrive at this, first I shall discuss what ontology and

¹ Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, *Comparative Philosophy*.

metaphysics is and what is the difference between these two. Secondly, In brief I shall discuss what the various theories of “reality” are. And finally I shall compare the dualistic aspect of both Cartesian and Sankhayan Philosophy and present its brief analysis.

In general, Ontology finds its reference mostly in pre-Socratic philosophy of that of Thales, Anaximander and Anaximenes etc, all of whom were concerned with the prime element and its existence. For example, For Thales, water is the primary element, similar to Anaximenes saying air is, similar to Heraclitus saying that fire is. All these are fluid elements, unlike earth. Water is the principle of all things for Thales, which is very similar to Heraclitus saying all things flow and change like a river while maintaining this is basically fire. Thales saw that water breaks things into their components, which he saw as evidence that water was the primordial element. For Anaximander, the basic element out of which spring the others is not water but the limitless, the infinite, Apeiron, unlimited by time or space (temporally and spatially infinite), unlimited in potency and power, unlimited by quality or quantity. And Anaximenes argued that through dissipation and concentration all substances are produced from air. Air condenses into visual vapor, fog and rain, and from water, as Anaximander supposed, is condensed earth and even stone. The two agree that earth is condensed water, but Anaximenes argues that water is itself not the primary element, the most elemental element, but condensed air. Air, when dissipated, ignites and becomes fire.²

On the other hand Metaphysics generally covers topics such as cosmology (space and time), determinism and free will, mind and matter, ontology (being, existence, reality), necessity and possibility, identity and change, among others. While Ontology is just *one of those subtopics* of metaphysics; it focuses on the categories of being and whether things can be said to exist or not. It was in the Aristotelians philosophy that we find first mention of the word metaphysics. The word ‘metaphysics’ is derived from a collective title of the fourteen books by Aristotle that we currently think of as making up “Aristotle’s Metaphysics.” Aristotle himself did not know the word. (He had four names for the branch of philosophy that is the subject-matter of Metaphysics: ‘first philosophy’, ‘first science’, ‘wisdom’, and ‘theology’.) At least one hundred years after Aristotle’s death, an editor of his works (in all probability, Andronicus of Rhodes) entitled those fourteen books “*Ta meta ta phusika*”—“the after the physicals” or “the ones after the physical ones”—, the “physical ones” being the books contained in what we now call Aristotle’s Physics. The title was probably meant to warn students of Aristotle’s philosophy that they should attempt Metaphysics only after they had mastered “the physical ones,” the books about nature or the natural world—that is to say, about change, for change is the defining feature of the natural world.³ This is the probable meaning of the title because Metaphysics is about things that do not change. In one place, Aristotle identifies the subject-matter of first philosophy as “being as such,” and, in another, as “first causes.”

This kind of metaphysics dominated the whole of the western philosophical tradition following Plato and Aristotle’s theory of forms. Though both Plato and

² Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, *Presocratic Philosophy*.

³ *Ibid*, *Metaphysics*.

Aristotle's theories of form were different from each other, they exercised an unprecedented influence over whole of the western philosophical traditions. However they were also being challenged by scholars like David Hume and Martin Heidegger who challenged the particular concept of metaphysics had acquired over a period of time. Hume criticized the notion of causation and therefore rejected the knowledge of all sorts. On the other hand Martin Heidegger became the first one to actually distinguish between ontology and metaphysics where he focuses only on phenomenological ontology for he was only interested in "Dasein". For the later Heidegger, "western philosophy," in which there occurs forgetfulness of being, is synonymous with "the tradition of metaphysics." Metaphysics inquires about the being of beings, but in such a way that the question of being as such is disregarded, and being itself is obliterated. The Heideggerian "history of being" can thus be seen as the history of metaphysics, which is the history of being's oblivion. However, looked at from another angle, metaphysics is also the way of thinking that looks beyond beings toward their ground or basis. Each metaphysics aims at the *fundamentum absolutum*, the ground of such a metaphysics which presents itself indubitably. In the wider sense of this term, metaphysics is thus, for Heidegger, any discipline which, whether explicitly or not, provides an answer to the question of the being of beings and of their ground. In medieval times such a discipline was scholastic philosophy, which defined beings as *entia creatum* (created things) and provided them with their ground in *ens perfectissimum* (the perfect being), God.⁴

Further if we look at the ways in which reality had been defined or analyzed we would find that these can broadly be categorized as monism, dualism and pluralism. Monism is the philosophical view that a variety of existing things can be explained in terms of a single reality or substance. The wide definition states that all existing things go back to a source which is distinct from them. A commonly-used, restricted definition of monism asserts the presence of a unifying substance or essence. Pluralism is a term used in philosophy, meaning "doctrine of multiplicity", often used in opposition to *monism* ("doctrine of unity") and *dualism* ("doctrine of duality"). And dualism is the position that mental phenomena are, in some respects, non-physical, or that the mind and body are not identical. Thus, it encompasses a set of views about the relationship between mind and matter, and is contrasted with other positions, such as physicalism, in the mind-body problem.

Dualism is closely associated with the philosophy of René Descartes (1641), which holds that the mind is a nonphysical substance. Descartes clearly identified the mind with consciousness and self-awareness and distinguished this from the brain as the seat of intelligence. Hence, he was the first to formulate the mind-body problem in the form in which it exists today. His dualism can be explained as follows:

⁴ Ibid., Heidegger, M.

Discriminating material and mental substances⁵

| Material substance | Mental substance |
|---|--|
| Attribute of spatial extension | Attribute of thought (non-spatial!) |
| Modes of extension (form, location, texture, weight) | Modes of thought (images, emotions, beliefs, desires) |
| Public* | Private* |

Descartes' problem was that how so different and yet such mutual influence is possible between these two. Therefore he asked:

1. How could an event in an immaterial mind alter a material object?
2. How could a physical event produce a change in an immaterial mind?

Answers to these questions can thus be found through the doctrine of “interactionism”. Causal interaction between the mind and the body occurs in the pineal gland. “Animal spirits”, fluids made up of extremely fine particles flowing around the pineal gland, cause it to move in various ways, and these motions of the gland cause conscious states of the mind. Conversely, the mind can cause the gland to move in various ways, affecting the flow of the surrounding animal spirits. This in turn influences the flow of these fluids to different parts of the body.

At this juncture it is interesting to note the dualistic theory of reality can also be found in Indian tradition and most sophisticated of it is that of Samkhyan doctrine of Purush and Prakriti.

Samkhya is one of the most prominent and one of the oldest of Indian philosophies. An eminent, great sage Kapila was the founder of the Samkhya School. The Samkhya philosophy combines the basic doctrines of Samkhya and Yoga. However it should be remembered that the Samkhya represents the theory and Yoga represents the application or the practical aspects. Samkhya is dualistic realism. It is dualistic because it advocates two ultimate realities: *Prakriti*, matter and *Purusha*, self (spirit). Samkhya is realism as it considers that both matter and spirit are equally real. Samkhya is pluralistic also because of its teaching that *Purusha* is not one but many. The Samkhya proposes that some finest and subtlest stuff or principle underlies all physical existence. Samkhya names it as *Prakriti*. *Prakriti* is the primordial substance behind the world. It is the

⁵ Thilly, pp. 206-207

material cause of the world. *Prakriti* is the first and ultimate cause of all gross and subtle objects.

Prakriti is the non-self. It is devoid of consciousness *Prakriti* is unintelligible and gets greatly influenced by the *Purusha*, the self. It can only manifest itself as the various objects of experience of the *Purusha*. *Prakriti* is constituted of three *gunas*, namely *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*. The term *guna*, in ordinary sense means quality or nature. But here, it is to be understood in the sense of constituent (component) in Samkhya. *Sattva* is concerned with happiness. While *rajas* is concerned with action, *tamas* is associated with ignorance and inaction. *Sattva* is the *guna* whose essence is purity, fineness and subtlety. *Sattva* is the component concerned with lightness, brightness and pleasure. *Sattva* is associated with ego, mind and intelligence. Its association with the consciousness is the strongest. Though *sattva* is an essential condition for consciousness, it is not sufficient. It should be remembered that consciousness is exclusively the *Purusha*. *Rajas* is concerned with the actions of objects. It is associated with activity and motion. In material objects, motion and action are the results of *rajas*. In living beings not only activity and restlessness, but pain also are caused by *rajas*. *Tamas* is the constituent concerned with the inertia and inaction. In material objects, it resists motion and activity. In living beings, it is associated with coarseness, negligence, indifference and inactivity. In man, it manifests itself as ignorance, insensitivity and inaction. The relation between *Purusha* and *Prakriti* may be compared to that between a magnet and a piece of iron. *Purusha* itself does not come into contact with *Prakriti*. But it influences *Prakriti*. Thus, the *Prakriti* is prompted to produce. As the *gunas* undergo more and more changes, *Prakriti* goes on differentiating into numerous, various world-objects. Thus it becomes more and more determinate. This is what is termed as evolution.⁶

In evolution, *Prakriti* is transformed and differentiated into multiplicity of objects. Evolution is followed by dissolution. In dissolution the physical existence, all the worldly objects mingle back into *Prakriti*, which now remains as the undifferentiated, primordial substance. This is how the cycles of evolution and dissolution follow each other. According to Samkhya the radical interactions among the three *gunas* disturb the state of equilibrium in *Prakriti*. Then there may be dominance of one or the other *guna*. This disequilibrium, with certain other influencing factors, prompts *Prakriti* to differentiate into world-objects. The evolution results in 23 different categories of objects. They comprise of three elements of *Antahkaranas* or the internal organs as well as the ten *Bahyakaranas* or the external organs. Among all these, the first to evolve is *Mahat* (the great one). *Mahat* evolves as a result of preponderance of *sattva*. Since it is an evolute of *Prakriti*, it is made of matter. But it has psychological, intellectual aspect known as *buddhi* or intellect. *Mahat* or intellect is a unique faculty of human beings. It helps man in judgment and discrimination. *Mahat* helps to distinguish between the subject and the object. Man comes to understand the self and the non-self, the experiencer and the experienced as distinct entities with *Mahat*. *Mahat*, by its inherent association

⁶ Dasgupta, pp. 460-462

with *sattva*, possesses qualities like luminosity and reflectivity. *Buddhi* can reflect *Purusha* owing to these qualities.⁷

The second evolute is *ahamkara* (ego). It arises out of the cosmic nature of *Mahat*. *Ahamkara* is the self-sense. It is concerned with the self-identity and it brings about awareness of “I” and “mine”. According to the Samkhya there emanates two sets of objects from *ahamkara*. The first set comprises of the *manas* (mind), the five sense-organs and the five motor organs. The second set consists of the five elements which may exist in two forms, subtle and gross. The five subtle elements are also called *tanmatras*. These five subtle elements or *tanmatras* are: elemental sound, elemental touch, elemental colour, elemental taste and elemental smell. They are *shabda*, *sparsha*, *rupa*, *rasa* and *gandha* respectively. The gross elements arise as a result of combination of the subtle elements.⁸

Now as we have seen that both Descartes and Samkhya Doctrines proposes dualism as far as theory of reality is concerned, nonetheless, it is interesting to note that both of them are very different in their approach and viewpoints. First, the basic conception of the terms mind, body and soul is very different in each of these philosophies. For example for according to Descartes body is only material and not mental, while in Samkhya we have found that the material principle that is Prakriti is both spatio-temporal. Similarly mind is only temporal for Descartes while it is neither temporal not spatial for Samkhyans. Further one can argue that Samkhya dualism seems much more elaborated and well explained as compared to Cartesian dualism for Samkhya presents an elaborated evolutionary explanation of their doctrine which one cannot find in Cartesian account of dualism.

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⁷ Ibid, pp. 462-463

⁸ Ibid.