

COGNITION AND CONSCIOUSNESS IN THE YOGA-SAMKHYA PHILOSOPHY – INTERSECTIONS WITH CURRENT DEBATES IN THE PHILOSOPHY OF MIND

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Abstract: This paper explores the intersection of Yoga-Samkhya philosophy with contemporary debates in the philosophy of mind. While mainstream philosophy of mind has primarily embraced physicalism, asserting that everything has an underlying physical basis, it still fails to account satisfactorily for why or how exactly consciousness, and in particular its phenomenal aspect, would arise from neural structures and mechanisms. The paper argues for the relevance of ancient Eastern philosophies, specifically Samkhya-Yoga, in addressing persisting dilemmas regarding the relationship between the body, mind, and consciousness.

The Samkhya philosophy, rooted in metaphysical dualism between material (*prakṛti*) and spirit (*puruṣa*), introduces a perspective different from Western Cartesian dualism. The mind, in Samkhya, is considered part of nature or matter, distinct from consciousness or spirit. The article explores how Samkhya's ideas on the mind-body relationship, the role of intellect (*buddhi*), and the concepts of *gunas* (qualities of matter) and *koshas* (sheaths or aspects of human being) could enrich modern discussions.

Samkhya proposes a form of panpsychism, suggesting that consciousness is inherent in everything, while differentiating between an immaterial, immutable and unchanging witnessing consciousness (*puruṣa*), free from the constraints of physicality, time and space, and unaffected by the continuous fluctuations of the material mind.

The article concludes by asserting that considering Samkhya-Yoga's perspectives could reframe current debates, providing a constructive alternative to both Cartesian dualism and prevalent physicalism in understanding consciousness. The ancient philosophical insights from Samkhya-Yoga might offer valuable contributions to the ongoing discourse in the philosophy of mind.

Keywords: Samkhya-Yoga, Philosophy of mind, alternative dualism, panpsychism, consciousness.

1. Introduction

Most of contemporary philosophy of mind has so far been deeply entrenched in physicalism, which conceives of the world as essentially physical – meaning that all things and phenomena existing in the world are physical or have underlying physical processes – and strives to accommodate minds and consciousness in this physicality, by drawing on recent advances in biology, computer science, cognitive psychology, and neurosciences. However, in spite of the incredible pace of progress in these disciplines in the last decades, which enabled the empirical identification of ever more accurate correlates between behaviors, mental processes and neural (physical) activity, the widely-held assumption that this psycho-neural parallelism entails a causal or identity relationship remains an assumption, as there is no conclusive evidence for such causality and no satisfactory explanation for why or how exactly consciousness, and in particular its phenomenal aspect, would arise from neural structures and mechanisms. Some philosophers posit the impossibility of ever being able to give consciousness an adequate physical account. And if consciousness or any part of it cannot be accounted for in physical terms, this means that physicalism, the default position of modern science, is no longer a viable stand (Kim, 2011).

This paper aims to argue for the relevance of century-old ideas from Eastern philosophies, in particular the Indian Samkhya-Yoga schools of thought, for several of the ongoing controversies in the philosophy of mind.

The quasi-general lack of any reference to Eastern currents of thought in western Philosophy of Mind textbooks is astounding, given the intricacy and complexity of the models of the mind and consciousness they proposed.

It is our belief that considering these ideas can enrich and perhaps help advance the discussions on some of the persistent dilemmas on the relationship between the body, the mind and consciousness. They could potentially offer an alternative to the Cartesian metaphysics which, in

spite of being considerably more recent than these doctrines, is considered to have laid the cornerstone of the discipline of philosophy of mind, by formulating the mind-body problem, which remains, to these days at its center. In one way or another, all current views on the relation between physicality and a mentality inclusive of consciousness position themselves in some sort of response to the substance dualism asserted by Descartes. By formulating a consciousness-mind problem instead of the mind-body one, the Samkhya-Yoga could offer a change of reference point that might yield fresh insights.

2. A brief overview of the history and main tenets of the Samkhya and Yoga philosophies and the points of intersection with current notions in the philosophy of mind

Samkhya is the oldest of the six orthodox *darshanas* or doctrines of Hindu philosophy, which were codified during the medieval period of Brahmanic-Sanskritic scholasticism, and which are called orthodox (*astika*) because they accept the *Vedas* as their scriptural authority. Its earliest written text, *Isvara Krsna's*, is assumed to date back somewhere between the 3rd and 5th century BCE. Samkhya is the doctrine with the greatest influence on the classical yoga theories and practices, as exposed by Patanjali in the *Yoga Sutras*, one of the earliest, and the most well-known treaty on yoga, compiling and systematizing ancient techniques, previously only subject to oral transmission through master-disciple initiation. In spite of the fact that Yoga, unlike Samkhya, does take a more theist stance, by adding a divine entity to Samkhya's 25 elements of reality, the two systems are strongly related and, as a consequence, are often treated together.

Without involving any concept of God, the Samkhya philosophy still advances a metaphysical dualism between material (*prakrti*) and spirit (*purusa*), while at the same time asserting the fundamentality of the latter. According to Eliade (1954/2009, p. 8), "The meaning of the term

Samkhya seems to have been “discrimination”, the chief end of this philosophy being to dissociate the spirit (*purusa*) from the matter (*prakrti*.) Unlike the Cartesian dualism that posits an ontological difference between mind and body, in Samkhya and Yoga philosophy, the distinction line is drawn between nature/matter and spirit, with both body and mind being considered to be part of the first. In that sense, similar to what Chalmers classifies as type F monism (Chalmers, 2003), this view shares some theses with both physicalism (postulating both body and mind to be simply different “states” or “densities” of matter) and substance dualism (claiming the existence of a transcendent, immortal self of pure and universal consciousness which underlies and is the ultimate source of the physical reality itself).

Consciousness, equated in Samkhya with this transcendent self, is stripped of most of the components it denominates in Western terminology and is narrowed down to pure spirit, who cannot receive any attributes or be in any relations, and of whom all one can say is “that it *exists* and that it *cognizes* (meaning, of course, that metaphysical cognition resulting from contemplating its own way of being)” (Eliade, 1954/2009, p. 12). Spirit is completely autonomous and inert, an indifferent and passive observer. But, while being clearly distinct from nature or matter, it is at the same time “intrinsic” to everything in existence, in a manner that is similar to the one in which Chalmers describes Bertrand Russell’s arguments for the existence of intrinsic properties of the fundamental physics systems:

“Perhaps the intrinsic properties of the physical world are themselves phenomenal properties. Or perhaps the intrinsic properties of the physical world are not phenomenal properties, but nevertheless constitute phenomenal, properties: that is, perhaps they are protophenomenal properties. If so, then consciousness and physical reality are deeply intertwined. This view holds the promise of integrating phenomenal and physical properties very tightly in the natural world. Here, nature consists of entities with intrinsic (proto)phenomenal qualities standing in causal relations within a spacetime manifold. Physics as we know it emerges from

the relations between these entities, whereas consciousness as we know it emerges from their intrinsic nature. As a bonus, this view is perfectly compatible with the causal closure of the microphysical and indeed with existing physical laws" (Chalmers, 2003, p. 37)

Samkhya and Yoga do not account for how the pure spirit became entangled with primordial matter in the first place, invoking an epistemological gap similar, again, to that suggested in the current day discussions of consciousness: grasping the cause and origin of the existing paradoxical relationship between spirit and nature is held to be beyond the current capability of human understanding. That is because human cognition is mediated by *buddhi* or the intellect, one of the constituents of the mind, which is nothing but a more subtle form of matter. The intellect's cognition is only limited to phenomena of the same ontological substance, therefore it cannot know the spirit or the conscious Self.

According to Samkhya and Yoga, *prakṛti*, the metaphysical substance supporting all material or phenomena is also the substance of the mind. This substance homogeneity between the mind and the physical body eliminates the dilemma of mental causation, as the question of how two entities belonging to different realms could have effects on one another becomes irrelevant when both entities are seen as being part of the same realm.

Prakṛti, the primordial matter has three different inherent "modes", qualities, or ways of being that are found in all its manifestations in variable and unstable proportions. These 3 different qualities of the matter, called *gunas*, are: *sattva* (the quality of translucence, intelligence, harmony), *rajas* (the quality of dynamism, transformation, striving) and *tamas* (the quality of inertia, stagnation, opaqueness).

The manifest matter is seen to consist of a mix of five elements: ether, air, fire, water and earth, each with different levels of density or subtlety (with the earth element being the densest and ether being the most subtle). In this taxonomy of the natural elements, ether is the controller of the embodied or experienced mind, called *antah karana*, sometimes translated as the inner instrument. The air/wind element is

what controls the pranas or energies of the body, the fire element is said to rule over the activity of all the sense and action organs (including the *antah karana*), while the sense organs themselves (eyes, ears, nose, mouth and skin) pertain to the water element. Finally, the action organs (speech, legs, hands, excretory and reproductive organs) are ruled by the earth element.

The body-mind system is experienced as five different *koshas* or *sheaths*: *annamaya* (the body of dense physical matter), *manomaya* (the body of mind, *antah karana*), *pranamaya* (the body of vital energies linking the gross and the subtle), *vijnanamaya* (the body of higher understanding or realization) and *anandamaya* (the body of beatitude or bliss). Experience of the five *koshas* is gradual and uneven (Niranjanananda Saraswati, 1993/2009, p. 37-40).

The five-kosha model could be seen as a possibility to account for the *why* or *how* of the mind-body *supervenience*, which asserts, in its strong version, that every mental phenomenon has a physical substrate or supervenience base (Kim, 2013).

This *antah karana* or experienced mind, which could be equated with the western term of individual mind, has four functional constituents called *ahamkara* (ego/sense of I), *manas* (the lower mind or organ of cognition), *chitta* (memory) and *buddhi* (the intellect).

- *Mannas* is the component of the mind responsible for perception, for organizing raw sensations coming from the sense organs and the senses and for carrying out the lower cognitive functions of primary analysis and decision.
- *Buddhi* (the intellect), in contrast with *mannas*, is the faculty of reason performing higher level cognitive functions requiring intuition, insight and reflection (Schweizer, 1993).
- *Chitta* (memory storage) is the seeing aspect, the one observing and recording “all gross, subtle and causal manifestation, and experiences of consciousness and energy” (Niranjanananda Saraswati, 1993/2009, p. 37). *Chitta* is inert and lacks all intentionality.

- And finally, *ahamkara* (ego) is the sense of I, it is what gives a definite identity to the body-mind complex, the generator of subjectivity; that appropriates and thus personalizes the experiences of the *manas* and *buddhi*.

The *ahamkara* (ego) component of the mind can perhaps be equated with the generator of subjective experience, what Nagel called “what it is like to be” in a certain state (Nagel, 1979), or to Ned Block’s notion of P-consciousness (Block, 1997).

But what is important to highlight here is that, in the Samkhya-Yoga view, the whole realm of *prakṛti*, mind and hence first-person experiencing included, is “inherently unconscious and thereby incapable of producing consciousness as an effect” (Schweizer, 1993, p. 848). So all mind states and all processes happening in the mind are inherently unconscious, or happening in the dark. By their nature, they cannot be in any relation with the conscious spirit which is, in its unchanging and immutable essence above all experience. The only way for experience to come under the light of consciousness is for that light, which is of a different ontological character, to be reflected in the intellect. Because *buddhi* (the intellect) is the most *sattvic* (refined, translucent, subtle) component of the mind, it has the capacity to reflect the light of the Self/conscious spirit and shine it on whatever contents are ascending to the intellect. It is only in this way, through the mediation of the intellect that the light of consciousness is shined on the contents of experience.

“Thus conscious thoughts and perceptual experiences take place when *buddhi* receives representational forms, both perceptual and conceptual, from *manas*, the organ of cognition (...). So *buddhi* receives cognitive structures from *manas*, and conscious “light” from *purusha*, and in this manner, specific mental structures are capable of being illuminated by an external source, and thereby these structures are able to appear conscious. But consciousness itself is entirely independent of the particular thought structures it happens to illuminate.” (Schweizer, 1993, p. 848)

It is therefore only the representational forms of objects, and not the objects themselves that can accede to the light of consciousness, because the objects themselves have too big a share of *tamasic* (gross, opaque) qualities to allow the light of consciousness to permeate them. This is a view that agrees to some extent with representational theories of consciousness, such as the higher-order perception (HOP) and higher-order thought (HOT) theories which posit that, to be aware of something requires that we represent that thing in the mind first, and that failure to represent it makes it remain in the dark (or, in Samkhya terms, outside the light of consciousness). According to Samkhya and Yoga, it is the light of consciousness that allows for objects to be known in *buddhi* (which is the component of the mind performing the higher level cognitive functions like insight and intuition). Access to *buddhi*, which could well be equated with the Global Workspace, is also mediated by attention or awareness, which in turn is directed by the *ahamkara* (ego aspect of the mind).

The intertwining of Consciousness and Materiality posited by the Samkhya philosophy could be paralleled to a form of dual-aspect panpsychism, which Chalmers defines as the view that “everything is conscious” (Chalmers, 1996, p. 216). Like panpsychism, which, according to David Skrbina, lies at the intersection of ontology and a theory of mind (Skrbina, 2017), Samkhya proposes at the same time a theory on the nature of things – claiming that consciousness is a prerequisite of all manifestation and an all-permeating constituent of everything in existence, and a theory on the nature of the mind – which is seen as separate from consciousness and belonging wholly to the realm of materiality. By operating a substance distinction between an immaterial, immovable and unchangeable witnessing “consciousness” (*purusa*) that lacks all intention and agency, and “awareness” as a quality or activity of the material mind, Samkhya may actually present a more palatable form of panpsychism, as it seems less counterintuitive to accept the pervasiveness of such a neutral consciousness than that of “mind” or “mentality”.

“Whereas awareness (*antahkaranavrtti*) (namely intellect, egoity and mind) is active, intentional, engaged and at every moment a reflection of subtle materiality; consciousness (*purusa*) cannot think or act and is not ontologically involved or intentionally related in any sense to primordial materiality other than being passively present. (...) Samkhya philosophy thereby rejects idealism without giving up an ultimately transcendent “consciousness”. It also rejects conventional dualism by reducing “mentalist” talk to one or another transformation of material “awareness”; and it modifies reductive materialism by introducing a unique notion of “consciousness” that is nonintentional and has nothing to do with ordinary mental awareness.” (Larson & Battacharya, 2014, p. 77).

On the other hand, the *triguna* character of primordial materiality (*sattva, rajas, tamas*) could account for differences in levels of sentience or awareness between various objects existing in the natural world. Thus, while consciousness is intrinsic in everything that exists, not every object would necessarily have to be sentient or aware or have any mind-like qualities, simply by virtue of its proportion of the three *gunas*. This would reconcile panpsychism with emergentist views of the mind.

3. Conclusions

This paper constitutes an attempt to highlight some points of intersection between certain understandings attained by the ancient Samkhya-Yoga doctrines and current strivings in the investigation of mind and consciousness.

I believe that, by offering an alternative to both the Cartesian dualism and the physicalism in which most current standpoints on the issue of consciousness are entrenched, Samkhya-Yoga could allow certain controversies to be reframed in more constructive ways.

Parallels can be drawn between Samkhya-Yoga and the panpsychic worldview that an increasing number of thinkers see as the only viable alternative to the current materialist or physicalist paradigm, which fails to provide a satisfactory account for consciousness.

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