

PHYSICAL MONISM — A MYTH FOR MODERNS?

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In my attitude to religions I am uneasily between those who think religions are farrogos of nonsense and tissues of lies and those who feel there is some spiritual reality to which we humans need to respond. For I can be very moved by traditional religious myths and doctrines and ceremonies - they cater for parts of *me* that are real - but I do not believe the traditional interpretations of their role and significance.

The first strategy most in my position embrace is to attempt to convince ourselves and others that traditional believers don't really believe what they think they do. We 're-interpret' traditional beliefs and actions in ways compatible with our (modern) world-view. It is a little arrogant to tell others - generations of others - what they really believed, and we have been reprimanded for this enterprise from time to time.

A second avenue seems worth exploring. Can I be moved by the modern scientific world-view, which I do by and large accept, in the same ways as traditional metaphysical viewpoints move me? Instead of twisting traditional views to suit my current beliefs, can I transfer my emotional allegiance to where my intellectual allegiance now lies?

One traditional metaphysical viewpoint which affects me deeply, one widely influential in the past and still today, is spiritual monism of the sort portrayed in much Indian scripture, especially the *Upanishad* and the writings of Shankara. In this article I discuss some of the things spiritual monism seems to do for its adherents, then urge that a physical monism can do these things as well. By 'physical monism' I mean the modern scientific picture of the universe treated mythologically, that is used as a basis for human emotional and moral adjustment to life.

1. Spiritual monism gives us a picture of our place in the scheme of things, not as an isolated unrelated entity, but as an integral part of a vastly greater whole. All is Brahman; That art Thou. The emotional satisfaction gained can be very great and very basic. It is like a lost child finding her family, like the 'belonging' one can feel in one's own land, but multiplied a thousand times and in relation to the whole exciting universe not just a tiny portion of it. And in the teaching of the *Upanishad* and of Shankara, for example, this is the effect it is meant to have: in place of our experience of being an individual entity buffeted by other separate entities we are to experience the bliss of belonging. It should be noted, however, that the effect *could* be different. We could feel annihilated as an individual, insignificant and despairing before the vastness of Brahman. Indeed, Ramanuja contends that this *would* be the undesirable effect of Shankara's doctrine if its claims were seriously attended to.¹

2. As a result of the feeling of unity, spiritual monism can give a basis for moral feeling and action. By breaking down the feeling of individuality it can help break down selfishness. This has often been expressed strikingly to me by Hindu friends, one of whom was not completely convinced of the truth of spiritual monism but still stressed its moral power: "'I'm not sure if there really is a *para-atma* . . . but I can see the importance of believing there is for then one has a basis for the belief that you and I are the same sub-

stance, and thus a basis for breaking down hostility and the habit of seeing differences." This should lead us to feel concern and compassion for each other. 'What is the real message of the *Ramayana*? To show compassion and love to one another, for all are part of *para-atma*, and since all are of one substance, all should care for each other.'²

Again, however, there is ambiguity in spiritual monism. I am convinced that morally it often does work in this way, extending and sustaining our fellow-feeling. But equally clearly it can and does result also in a sophisticated selfishness: a concentration on seeking one's own bliss by withdrawal into the mystical experience of unity, indifferent to relationships with and concern for others.

3. In spiritual monism, this vision of unity and the resulting basis for moral feeling and action is not something imposed from outside the believer. It is our own essential nature, consciousness, which is the key to the transforming experience. Atman, our self-luminous awareness, is Brahman, Supreme Reality. This is a point sometimes stressed by spiritual monists in comparison with theistic systems, especially of the Hebraic variety, where one's transformation is believed to be dependent on something external to oneself, namely the will of a separate God.

4. And yet, despite the intimacy and familiarity suggested by the belief that our essence is identical with Supreme Reality, spiritual monism gives its adherents a basis for a sense of wonder and awe and mystery. Brahman is immensely greater than this apparently individual speck of it that I think is me. Brahman is incomprehensible, cannot be grasped by the mind, that before which words turn back³ - necessarily so since it is the whole of which 'we' are apparent parts, and the part cannot fully comprehend the whole.

This then, in part, is what spiritual monism could offer us if it were possible to believe it. How far can physical monism, which I think is incomparably better supported by evidence and reason, provide the same benefits?

1. Certainly physical monism gives us a basis for a sense of the unity of all things. The sciences are dedicated to the search for a unified theory which can account for all the phenomena we can observe or imagine. While they have still a long way to go in this search, a picture is emerging which does place us in the scheme of things not as isolated, unrelated entities but as integral parts of a vastly greater whole. There is a basic energy which is the same throughout the vast reaches of the universe and which manifests itself in a fantastic variety of living and non-living forms. Interestingly, there was for a while in the development of the sciences a parallel to the spiritual monist doctrine of *maya*, the belief that the diverse manifestations of Brahman are inferior, appearances only. There was a tendency, perhaps still alive amongst physicists, to regard physics as the *real* science, chemistry as less ultimate, and biology, let alone psychology, as dealing with complex appearances of energy, not with energy itself. But I think this has largely gone. All is regarded as equally 'real', it is just that we view reality in different ways for different purposes. We need to see it all as energy to sense the unity pulsating through all; but we need also to see the rich diversity to sense how wonderful this unity is. Physics without biology would give a very austere picture of the universe, just as biology without physics would give a bewildering picture of the world.

The sciences, then, are giving an increasingly detailed basis for a sense of

unity with all things. Shankara advises us to realize unity with Brahman by meditating on *Upanishad* and on transcendental unity. Physical monism might suggest, rather, that we study modern physics and chemistry and biology and astronomy - these at least - and then 'meditate', that is reflect on their significance for our attitudes and actions. Thus we can sense the unity of all life through our knowledge of the basic common factor of cell reproduction which does in fact link us to all forms of life, including plant life. Thus also we can sense the unity between us and inorganic things through our knowledge of the basic common factor of energy. Further, we can wonder at the scope and vastness of this unity as we contemplate the incredible picture of the universe that modern astronomy gives, a picture matching at length in the west the spaciousness of the ancient Indian mythological view. Then indeed we would have a basis for a sense of unity in terms of what the universe is really like. In one sense, at least, it would "not depend on the will of man, but merely on what really and unalterably exists"⁴ if the modern picture of the universe is in its broad outline accurate.

This modern picture has not often been used for its emotional effect in this way, but here and there one can find poets and sages hymning it; thus, Rabindranath Tagore:

The same stream of life that runs through my veins night and day runs through the world and dances in rhythmic measures.

It is the same life that shoots in joy through the dust of the earth in numberless blades of grass and breaks into tumultuous waves of leaves and flowers.

It is the same life that is rocked in the ocean-cradle of birth and of death, in ebb and in flow.

I feel my limbs are made glorious by the touch of this world of life. And my pride is from the life-throb of ages dancing in my blood this moment.⁵

The emotional parallel with spiritual monism is complete in that here, too, there is ambiguity. This same modern picture of the universe can and has resulted in a feeling not of exhilarating unity but of annihilation, insignificance. Nietzsche said: "Since Copernicus, mankind has been rolling from the centre towards x."⁶ And Steven Weinberg, a physicist, muses as he flies over the fluffy clouds and winding mountainous roads of Wyoming:

"It is very hard to realize that this all is just a tiny part of an overwhelmingly hostile universe. It is even harder to realize that this present universe has evolved from an unspeakably unfamiliar early condition and faces a future extinction of endless cold or intolerable heat. The more the universe seems comprehensible, the more it also seems pointless.

"But if there is no solace in the fruits of our research, there is at least some consolation in the research itself. Men and women are not content to comfort themselves with tales of gods and giants, or to confine their thoughts to the daily affairs of life; they also build telescopes and satellites and accelerators, and sit at their desks for endless hours working out the meaning of the data they gather. The effort to understand the universe is one of the few things that lifts human life a little above the level of farce, and gives it some of the grace of tragedy."⁷

This contrast between Tagore and Weinberg highlights the fact that this picture of the universe, presented as scientific theory, is value-neutral. As

physical monists, we have to mythologize it, that is, use it emotionally in our attempts to adjust to life. How we do this doubtless depends on many complicated factors. But more Tagores and more Weinbergs holding up for us their varying valuations would certainly be of assistance to us in creating or deciding on our own.

2. In so far as it does evoke in us a sense of unity, physical monism can provide a basis for moral feeling and action. It can, for example, help break down narrow selfishness, in two ways. Firstly, it can extend one's natural fellow-feeling. Many religions have recognized the natural affection and concern we have for our family and/or close friends and have, in different ways according to their different frameworks, attempted to move us to extend these feelings to the whole tribal or national group, to the whole human species, even, in Indian traditions, to all living things. The trick is to convince us we have something significant in common - same ancestors, same mother or father creator god, same immersion in the round of rebirth. Physical monism has an excellent basis for this extension of fellow feeling; it can point out that we really do share basic molecular structures with all life forms:

"... enough information to evoke the inspiring spectacle of the vast range of controlled activities that constitutes the life of man and of the living world

Even if man is very different it is fundamentally important to realize he is part of the one great living world."⁸ "We are just able to recognize that all men are brothers. Should we not go much further and proceed on the assumption that we are of one flesh, not only with animals but with all plants, fungi and bacteria as well? this concept is the sober scientific truth."⁹

"It could be that there is a soul which leaves this body and enters another, it would be wrong just to reject this idea. But it could be that elements of another's body are in our body now - reincarnation, recycling, in this sense. There must have been billions of people since the beginning, enough to cover the whole surface of the earth. We die, decay, a plant uses the material, someone eats the plant - so in this way there is some of other people in us, and thus the central energy manifests itself in different generations. Perhaps this is how the idea of central energy helps humanity, fellow-feeling; I realize some of your grandfather may be in me and some of mine in you, and I feel that though we are not linked genetically or by ordinary family ties yet we are linked, you are my brother, and so I feel for you. It is up to society how it spreads this idea, but it could work. Some feel this is giving up religion, but I don't think so. The fundamental principle (fellow-feeling, helping one another) is the same, as it has been in all religions. Only beliefs about this or that as god differ."¹⁰

Secondly, physical monism can give a basis for moral feeling and action in terms of enlightened self-interest. By revealing our inter-relatedness with all parts of our environment it can convince us that if we harm one part we could well be harming ourselves. This sort of attack on narrow selfishness has been used a lot in the current ecological debate.

In ways not so directly involving an over-all vision of unity, also, the sciences can obviously contribute to an emotional basis for morality. For example, our survival as a species has been dependent both on aggressive

feelings and actions towards things threatening our group and on feelings of affection towards, and co-operative actions with, members of our group. It is difficult to give a rational justification for preferring the latter and deriding the former; and extending the boundaries of 'our group' (to include all living things), and appealing to enlightened self-interest, goes only part way towards helping us maximise affection and eradicate aggressive feelings. But having these feelings 'set' in the evolutionary picture can help us come to terms with them more realistically, understanding why both are so deep-rooted in our nature.

Of course, as with spiritual monism, there is ambiguity here. None of what is said above prevents us re-affirming narrow selfishness. As easily in a vast inter-related universe as in a small human family I could say "Never mind my fellows, I'll get what I can for myself." Physical monism is neither better nor worse off than spiritual monism in this respect, for the connection between beliefs and feelings is not like that between premises and conclusions in valid arguments.

3. For the physical as for the spiritual monist, for this vision of unity and this basis for morality human consciousness is the key. However, consciousness is the key for the physical monist in a lesser, though still vital, sense.

Firstly, human consciousness is the key in that it has uncovered or created this unitary picture of the universe. It is not, of course, an individual human consciousness that has done this, but the painstaking co-operative effort of countless human minds since before the dawn of history, working wonderfully through religious mythology and philosophical speculation and, at length, through more rigorous theory formulation and experimental testing.

Secondly, it is through our consciousness that we, as individuals, can learn of this world picture and sense its significance and wonder. By this, we do in a sense become part of a greater consciousness; certainly we transcend our individual consciousness, that is we are released, progressively, from a narrow subjective view of what we are and from a self-centred view of how we relate to other beings and things. Thus part of Shankara's stress on the importance of consciousness is retained in physical monism. The self-luminous core of the human personality, consciousness, is the key to a transformative experience: used properly in combined study/meditation on its own nature and on the nature of all things, it can throw off (at least some of) its limitations, can expand itself and realize its unity with the greater whole. Moreover this vision of unity is not something *imposed* from outside (though one hopes it bears some relation to what is outside); it is created and/or appropriated by our consciousness. However, an important part of Shankara's view is not retained; what we create and/or appropriate is the belief that human consciousness is just one of the enormous variety of manifestations of the basic energy. Shankara believes it is the basic energy.

4. What of wonder and awe and mystery? Have the sciences made them obsolete? Though at one time in the West it was thought they might, they have surely deepened our sense of mystery. Mysteries are not as yet unanswered questions which the mind might one day answer, such as questions about the details of inter-relationships between quarks and bosons, atoms, molecules or stars. 'Mystery' refers to a sense of wonder at the complexity of such inter-relationships, which is increased not decreased by increased knowledge of them; and to our inability to give other than inter-relationship

explanations, to give any 'ultimate' explanation of the universal process as a whole. This inability has, on occasions, been used as a reason for introducing an ultimate metaphysical explanation - Brahman, or Tao, or God. But these do not in any way dissolve the mystery, as even believers in them admit - they are mystery supreme. They simply give a name for the totality of things and some theory about or analogy for the nature of the inter-relationships (e.g. Brahman - the inter-relationship is of the nature of consciousness); or add an entity to be inter-related with the rest (God with the world).

In physical monism, then, there is necessarily an element which corresponds to the 'mystery impenetrable', 'mind-bogling' element of Shankara's Brahman. Let me give the two basic examples, the big and the small.

Firstly, there is the 'boundaries of the universe' mystery. We have enormously expanded our notion of the size of the universe, and enormously extended our knowledge of how areas remote from our own relate to other parts and to our solar system. We can speculate about a universe expanding out from a theoretical centre, and even - shades of Hindu mythology - of an alternatively expanding and contracting universe. But if we ask, expanding into what? - what lies beyond the boundaries of the universe, or outside the contracted explosive ball of the concentrated universe - we simply do not know how to answer. Nor are we in any better shape if we say there are no boundaries, for we cannot really conceive of it going on for ever without end. (A primary meditation for physical monists is to lie prone on a mountain meadow on a clear night gazing at the stars and bogling the mind with the impossibility of imagining either an end or a forever for space). All our explanations are relative to a limited sphere and to a particular viewpoint. I can say what is outside New Zealand, but only because I place it in the limited shape of the planet earth. I can say what is outside the earth, but only because I have a wide but comprehensible sphere of reference, the solar system. And I can place the solar system in a galaxy, and relate our galaxy to others. But I cannot say what is outside the universe, for there is no wider sphere; 'universe' is simply a name for the totality, so there can be no wider sphere. So whether space has an end or not is not a problem which the mind might solve, but - a mystery, a mind-bogler, a producer of wonder and humility. As the physical monist's name for the totality, 'universe' is a mystery as much as is Brahman for Shankara, and for the same reasons. And, as with Brahman, we can take up an attitude to the universe, puny heroic specks that we are, and we can, if we are sensible, base this attitude as much as possible on what we know about the nature of inter-relationships within this totality. But we cannot explain the universe, dissolve the mystery - there is no wider sphere to place, and hence explain, it in.

At the other end of the scale, where the smallest sub-atomic particle dissolve into waves of energy or fields of force so that we do not even know how to speak of or imagine them, there is mystery for a similar though inverted reason. Explanation is simply the relating of one thing or process to another. In this sphere, it involves relating a particular thing or type to a more general thing or type. Thus we 'explain' the characteristics of the water molecule by relating it to hydrogen and oxygen atoms which are more general, that is occur in combinations other than H₂O. We 'explain' the difference between a hydrogen and an oxygen atom by relating them both to the general structure of the atom, differing combinations of more general particles. And so we

go on down the fascinating trail of the physicist, hunting the elusive basic particle or force. Now wherever we stop, whether with the atom, like some ancient Indians and Greeks, or with highly sophisticated understandings of energy, we have only 'explained' in terms of inter-relationships. We can say why a hydrogen atom behaves and combines differently from an oxygen atom (because the structure, in terms of the relationships of sub-atomic particles, is different). But we cannot say, of our basic particles, why they inter-act as they do, why they combine in so great a variety of ways. We can only say they do. Of course we can dig deeper and deeper and replace our basic 'ultimate' level with another: physics has been doing this with great excitement since Rutherford. But we do not remove, we only shift, the mystery. Here we have again no problem which the human mind might solve, but simply the necessity that explanations in terms of inter-relationships cannot in turn 'explain' the whole. Before we can start explanation we have to accept the whole, or, rather, some basic level of describing the whole.

Much more could be said about ways in which physical monism can fulfil the functions fulfilled in the past by traditional religious systems of belief such as Shankara's spiritual monism. Much needs to be said also about areas of adjustment of life, such as coping with impermanence and death, where physical monism would have to give bleaker answers, weaker, but more realistic, comforts, than those offered by some belief systems. But I hope enough has been said to convince that this sort of exercise is as exciting and worthwhile as it is necessary. And at least so far as four basic areas crucial to adjustment are concerned - a sense of unity, a basis for moral feeling and action, a key role for human consciousness, and a sense of wonder and mystery - physical monism can function as effectively, or ineffectively, as can Shankara's spiritual monism. If, as I believe, it is also a more coherent and accurate picture of the universe we are trying to adjust to, its superiority as a basis for adjustment is obvious.

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NOTES

1. Ramanuja, *Brahmasutrabhasya* 1.1.1. (trs. Thibaut, *SBE* vol. XLVIII, p.70).
2. See Wilson, J., Text and Context in Fijian Hinduism, *Religion* 5, p.106.
3. e.g. *Brhadaranyaka Upanishad* IV.iv.22; *Taittiriya Upanishad* II.iv.1.
4. Shankara, *Brahmasutrabhasya*, 3.2.21 (trs. Thibaut, *SBE* vol XXXVIII, p.165).
5. Tagore, R., *Gitanjali* LXIX.
6. Nietzsche, F., *The Will to Power*, Bk. One, 1.5 (Kaufmann/Hollingdale trs., London, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1968, p.8).
7. Weinberg, S., *The First Three Minutes*, N.Y., Basic Books, 1977, pp. 154-5.
8. Young, J. Z., *Introduction to the Study of Man*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1971, pp.vi & vii.
9. *Ibid.*, p.15.
10. See Wilson J., *op. cit.* pp.103-4.