Emergence or Abhivyakti in the Mahābhārata

Introduction

Both mechanism and dualism have failed to answer some of the most fundamental philosophical questions, particularly the issue of conscious experience. Monism has its own challenges. Comparatively speaking, whether the Western approaches to monism championed by Parmenides, Spinoza, or Bradley, or the classical Hindu approach, philosophical questions linger and their solutions mirror each other. In the classical days, philosophies were meant for human emancipation. Today, doing philosophy requires that we liberate philosophy itself from our tribalism. My objective in this chapter is therefore twofold: to examine some of the passages from the classical Hindu text, the Mahabharata, and other relevant passages to explain the issues addressed in these passages, and to engage a global perspective to consciousness studies. These, however, are not two independent tasks, as the second outlines the method while the first stands for the objective. I will argue that the monism addressed in these passages is compatible with property dualism, and aims to ground experience outside of the mechanical framework. In this regard, I am in agreement with Leibniz that “we are obliged to admit that *perception* and that which depends on it *cannot be explained mechanically,* that is, by means of shapes and motions. . . This must therefore be sought in the simple substance, and not in the compound or machine” (M. 17).

Before grounding monism by readdressing the classical texts, let me introduce some of the contemporary contesting metaphysical approaches. The current monism is mechanical monism, with a claim that consciousness can be explained by explaining the physical properties alone. There are two competing models of dualism. Interactionism maintains that mental and physical properties are completely different and they interact in both directions. Epiphenomenalism, on the other hand, maintains that while the mental and the physical properties are quite distinct, only the physical properties affect the mental. While in a recent decline, physicalism has been the most prominent voice for over a century. Central arguments of this trend are summed up in the identity theory, behaviorism, and functionalism. Following the identity theory, mental states are nothing but the brain states. Behaviorism, on the other hand, examines experience in terms of behavior. Accordingly, to be in pain would be in wincing or physically doing something in the public sphere. Basically, if one does not show any sign of pain, one is not in pain. The arguments of functionalism primarily ground on correspondence theory: mental states correspond to functional states. Emergentists argue that the mental is an emergent property of an underlying physical substrate. Thomas Nagel and David Chalmers have questioned the central thesis of these arguments by introducing the intrinsic property, what it is like, or the qualia. In this line of argument, consciousness is an intrinsic property and cannot be fully explained externally. Supervenence theory aims to respond to some of the challenges posed along these lines by arguing that a class of high-level properties supervenes on the low-level properties. This consequently grounds the argument that a system’s physical properties determine its mental properties.

Naturalistic approach stands alone in our times as the triumphant model, in spite of some alternative theories. The thrust of this approach lies in explaining consciousness as a natural phenomenon. Some naturalists tend to explain consciousness in causal and functional roles while the others incline to explain it in entirely representational terms. Believing in naturalism does not necessarily mean an affirmation to physicalism because not all the phenomena need to be spatio-temporal in order to be natural. The worry though is, if consciousness is explained in non-reductive sense in the physical terms but explained reductively in the naturalistic sense, it only poses a different version of dualism. This is just one example of the many ways we have invented the wheel in our attempt to address consciousness. Having noticed these challenges, Jerry Fodor once remarked that “there are, I think, three great metaphysical puzzles about the mind. How could anything material have conscious states? How could anything material have semantical properties? How could anything material be rational?” (Fodor 1991, reply to Devitt, p. 285). Among these, the first can be identified as what Chalmers says “hard problem,” with the rest being “easy.” The opacity of consciousness studies does not simply ground on explaining the phenomena but even in interpreting the term ‘consciousness’ itself. These problems are magnified when we borrow ‘consciousness’ and related terms to translate the Sanskrit terms such as samvid, cid, caitanya, prajnana, vijnana, or jnana. In this quagmire, the only philosophers who are on the safe side are those who do not write anything at all.

Reductive idealism or a form of spiritual monism can be another approach. Yet another can be panpsychism. Actually, with added nuances, panpsychism is gaining ground, particularly due to the failure of physicalist models in addressing consciousness. Central to their argument is that whatever is the existent, the primary element, comes with both the physical and mental properties. In this view, there is a micro-level mental property even in the basic cellular or particle level. It is neither the purview of the current project nor is it even possible to outline the many ways the issue of consciousness has been addressed. The objective here is to simply read some of the salient passages from the classical Hindu texts and explore the possibility of engaging some of the contemporary arguments.

Just as addressing consciousness theory in contemporary philosophy is problematic, with us being able to only engage a few arguments, reading classical literature poses the same problems. Classical Hindu literature provide dozens of different models for addressing the issue of conscious experience and the relationship between mind and the body. These, however, were not the only players in the field. The Carvaka materialists maintained in a form of emergentism, Buddhist philosophers primarily rejected the theory of causality, so the efforts to explain consciousness based on cause and effect rendering inefficient, and the Jains maintained a variation of dualism, with epistemic indeterminism. Even to consider that a single text, take it an Upanisad or the Mahabharata has a single philosophical model would be problematic. The only thing we can be certain about, if at all possible, is about the select passages that we focus on reading at a time. I am therefore not interested in making any historical or holistic claim.

Abhivyakti in the Mahābhārata:

Before engaging contrasting models of emergence theories, I would like to cite some passages from the Mahābhārata itself. One of the key passages from the Mahābhārata that relies on *abhivyakti* model of causality:

Just as a lamp, shining in front, illumines others while shining, the five sensory faculties comparable to the lamps in a tree are endowed with others [as their objects of illumination] while being themselves illuminated with consciousness (jnana). Just as multiple ministers of a king provide different testimonies with reason, the five in the bodies are just the same. A part of consciousness (*jnanaikadesa*) is transcendental to them. Just as the sparks of a fire, or the currents of the air, or the rays of the sun, or the tides of the rivers keep coming and passing away, the bodies of those endowed with the bodies do the same when being extended. Just as one cannot see smoke or fire by picking an axe, [people] cannot see something external to them by cutting the body with belly, arms or legs the same way. By rubbing the same logs, one can see smoke and fire caused by association. Accordingly, a wise man sees his transcendental nature with equanimity of his sensory faculties. (Mahabharata. Moksadharma (XII).195.9-13).

Another passage from the Mahābhārata confirms the same model of causality:

Earth, air, sky, water, with light being the fifth one, the great-becomings (maha-bhuta), are the coming into existence (prabhava) and returning back (apyaya) of those who come into being (bhuta). Just like the waves of an ocean, the great-becomings [or the five substances] are originated from and return back to those [living entities] who have come into being. Just as a turtle spreads its limbs and retrieves them back, the self that comes into being (bhutatma) creates and retrieves the same way. Mahābhārara (XII.187.4-6).

The same argument continues in the following passage from the Mahābhārata:

Just as the fire within wood is not visible by splitting the wood, the self within the body is likewise. This is realized within body (atra) only by means of yoga. Just as [the drops of] water or the rays in the sun are assembled, the bodies, accordingly, [assemble] in the self. Mahābhārata (XII.203.39-40).

Mahābhārata broadly reads this emergence as an extension of the body of God:

The best among the wise (vipra)! From the very source of the world, from the Master, there emerges forbearance of those who are forgiving, of which the earth is made possible. From that very divinity, there emerges the juices that supports all the living beings and of which the water and its fluidity is made. The light having the character of form emerges (samudbhūta) from this very entity, of which the sun is made possible that illumines the realms. Touch manifests (samudbhūta) from this very supreme being, of which is the air is made possible and it blows throughout the realms. Of this all-powerful Lord of all the realms emerges sound of which the sky is made possible that remains uncovered [from all]. From this very divine entity emerges the mind that is within all the living beings, of which the moon is made possible that holds the quality of illumination. Mahābhātata, XII. 332.6-11.

The argument here is not to say, based on the above citations, that abhivyakti or emergence model properly explains the model of causality in the Mahābhārata, a text with hundred thousand verses, the text that prides on claiming that what you find elsewhere is within this text and if it is not here, it is nowhere.

Evaluating the Objections against Abhivyakti:

Let us initiate this section with a passage from Spinoza:

“We are accustomed to refer all individuals in nature to one genus which is called the most general, that is, to the notion of Being, which embraces absolutely all the individuals in nature.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

We can read Spinoza’s arguments in light of substance monism, for he sees nature or God having all the possible attributes with concreta sharing no unique attributes that the primordial substance does not. If the properties of the fuel and fire are identified (as does Vasubandhu in enlisting eight dharmas for both fire and fuel), the monism with this example is not grounded on type-token distinction between cause and effect. The examples of turtle and ocean illustrate the modes: the turtle is the same whether it has spread its limbs or has retracted them. Shamkara’s existence monism maintains that there exists only one concrete object, the Brahman, that is devoid of parts, as the parts we see are due to illusion. Shamkara rejects the interpretation of existence monism along the line that the absolute object is complex, as complexity entails divisibility and only the concrete object with parts can be complex. Mahabharata presents the example of fire and the fire log according to existence monism with fire and log having different properties but ultimately being a single concrete object.

Existential realists argue that monism defies common sense experience of diversity in the world. Shamkara adopts one approach, that there is no diversity even in the phenomenal world, as diversity is an erroneous projection. The monistic approach of Purusavada is different: the waves of an ocean is not a mirage. Fire displays some genuine properties that the log does not. A turtle does have its limbs whether it spreads them or not. A good example for explaining Purusavada monism is given by Bhartrhari: mayurandarasa, the yolk of a peacock egg. Although all the colors of the peacock feathers are there in latency in the egg itself, it is not manifest till it gets maturity. Some of the crucial arguments charged against this model follow:

1. It fails to explain diversity. After all, if there is just a single entity as it is, why is it contrary to commonsense experience.
2. It fails to explain causality: Nagarjunian objections to causality, that cause and effect cannot be identical or be completely distinct, applies to all models of monism. Origination cannot be explained either by relying that something inherently (svatah) becomes distinct, or that something external makes an entity to manifest as distinct (as this model contradicts monism).
3. It fails to explain teleology: If there is just one entity, why does this assume diversity?
4. It conflates property substance relation. By reading dharma as property, Vaibhasika understanding of substance can be explained in terms of the consolidation of properties. Patanjali in his Mahabhasya explains substance (dravya) following its etymology (gunasandravo dravyam, or gunasamudayo dravyam) following which a substance is nothing but its properties.[[2]](#footnote-2) Wezler argues that this is a Samkhya argument. In this account, having multiple and sometimes contradictory properties does not make the substance as one, as there is nothing additional to properties that stands for substance. If the relation of substance and property is read along these lines, this contradicts the substance monism of Purusavada.

Shamkara’s arguments particularly aims the second objection. By rejecting real causality, Shamkara assumes that Nagarjunian objections do not apply to his monism. His Brahman is free from attributes, and so it cannot have multiple aspects or attributes inherent in it and to be manifest in its own time within its own design. Neither is there any design nor are there inherent attributes. The monism of Shamkara is that of the whole lacking parts, while that of Purusavada is the whole is prior to its parts. When we perceive a book, for example, we miss its pages from seeing. So our knowledge of the whole, the book as a book, comes prior to our acquaintance of its parts, always down to our limits.

There are further objections for the basic principle being embodied with attributes and parts:

1. An aggregate, sanghata, lacks its own teleology and it is an object for other’s enjoyment.[[3]](#footnote-3)
2. Anything that has parts can be annihilated. This would make the fundamental principle momentary.
3. If creation is the manifestation of the inherent properties, it would make samsara essential to primordial entity and its elimination would not be possible, making liberation impermanent.
4. There are objections to each of the examples given in defense of Purusavada. Logs do not combust on their own, there is something external to logs that cause it to alter its mode. King is not a part of the ministers, and so enjoys his independent subjectivity. Tides are caused by the external factors, earthquake, hurricanes, gravitational forces, etc. Turtles spread and retract their limbs in response to the environmental stimuli. In defense of Purusavada, there is nothing external to Purusa itself to alter its mode.

The first objection, raised by Isvarakrsna, to object nature having its own teleology, assumes the dichotomy of for oneself and for others. The purpose of things is relational, and applies only to the aggregates. If the self, devoid of parts, is considered the absolute enjoyer, this absolute enjoyer turns out to be disengaged transcendental witnessing consciousness with no capacity to enjoy. The Samkhya example of a performer dancing for the enjoyment of the audience lacks the same teleology: a dancer can please herself with her act, or can please herself by pleasing others, and thus the purpose of dance is not necessarily directed towards pleasing others. The second objection assumes that there are things that can be created out of nothing and can be wiped out of existence. On the contrary, entities can only be modified, altered in mode, but not entirely annihilated. Therefore this objection does not stand against Purusavada. Purusavada does not need to take the third objection seriously. If the world were to be conceived of as a problem, a release from it would be the ultimate achievement. The world, as Purusavada maintains, is a mere expression of the self. Actually bondage and liberation are a mere mental constructs, a verbal expression, the distinction that is caused due merely to language, just as different names given to gold ornaments in spite of all being gold and essentially retaining their quality.

To conclude, the arguments in the Mahābhārata to explain creation deserves a closer analysis. For, the old model of reduction suffers in many fronts. Most importantly, it cannot explain the self-aware character of consciousness that it posits to be diametrically opposite to materiality. The model of causality given in the cited passages do not rest on any form of dualism. Even the reductionistic model is dualistic in essence, as it maintains the existence of two sorts of entities that are diametrically opposite in character. Above all, the materialist contention that something non-existent, that is consciousness, emerges out of something that is completely different in nature underscores the fundamental theory of creation: creation ex nihilo. Mahābhārata provides an alternative to this.

1. Spinoza. *Ethics* IV pref., II: 207. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. # For discussion on *dravya*, see also Gornall in Mirnig, Szanto, and Williams. XXX, pages 203-223.

   [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Samghatapararthatvat . . . Samkhyakarika 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)