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## BUDDHISM AND TECHNO-PHYSICALISM: IS THE EIGHTFOLD PATH A PROGRAM?

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Indian Buddhism is decidedly anti-physicalist in outlook. While the Buddha himself seems to have left open the nature of the relation between the bodily and mental constituents of persons (the *rūpa* and *nāma skandhas*), the Abhidharma schools clearly espouse a dualism<sup>1</sup> about the mental and the physical, and the idealist Yogācāra of course denies that there exists anything other than mental events. But recent developments in material culture seem to threaten the availability of any view about mentality other than the physicalist one that the mind is just a sophisticated program running on the wetware of the brain. These developments include advances in neuroscience and in the computer modeling of various cognitive activities. But perhaps more important than these is the proliferation throughout the culture of the metaphor of mind as computer. Several recent films, for instance, have featured the conceit that what we take for reality might in fact be virtual reality, with the role of deceiver played by some form of artificial intelligence.<sup>2</sup> In the philosophy classroom we may be tempted to rely on these devices when we teach the arguments found in such texts as Descartes' *Meditations* or Vasubandhu's *Vimśatikā*. But while they do help students see that reality might be quite different from what we ordinarily take it to be, they cannot convey the anti-physicalist force of these arguments. For if the reality behind the appearance of ordinary waking experience is not dream images (as in Vasubandhu's version) or illusions created by an evil genius (as in Descartes' version), but is instead the computer stimulation of neurons, then our inability to rule this out would give us no reason to deny (with Vasubandhu) the existence of physical objects, or to affirm (with Descartes) the existence of the mental as something distinct from the physical.

Spiritual traditions such as Buddhism have confronted the specter of physicalism in the past. Often the threat is seen as stemming from the development of new technologies that make physicalism seem more plausible. The premise of this essay, though, is that the current form of techno-physicalism may prove more difficult to resist than earlier episodes.<sup>3</sup> Of course, it might be that when intricate clockwork mechanisms first became widely available in the seventeenth century, people found the metaphor of mind as clockwork equally persuasive. But suppose that this is not so, and that the computer metaphor is especially powerful, so that any other view about persons besides the one that we are just our bodies and brains comes to seem implausible to most people. Would this prove especially damaging to the Indian Buddhist tradition?

In answering this question we should be careful to distinguish between physicalism and what is sometimes popularly called materialism. On the use of

“materialist” I have in mind, materialism is the view that the only worthwhile goal for persons is the attainment of material possessions and wealth. Physicalism makes no such claim, for it is not a theory about the good for humans. Physicalism is a strictly metaphysical view, namely that all that exists is physical in nature. Of course, it might be thought that if physicalism is true, then the only kinds of goods that there can be are material goods of the above-mentioned sort. And it is true that most spiritual traditions—Buddhism included—have stoutly opposed a “materialistic” ethic of this sort. But it does not at all follow from physicalism that these are the only sorts of goods on offer. There is nothing in physicalism per se to keep one from claiming, for instance, that helping those in need is of far greater value than acquiring wealth and material possessions. Of course, we shall want to know what evidence there is to support such a claim. But consistency requires that we ask this of the dualist as well. Why should it automatically be thought that a dualist view about our constitution is better positioned to defend a nonmaterialistic ethics than a physicalist view?

There are spiritual traditions for which a sort of body/spirit dualism does play an important role in supporting a view about the good for persons. The thought is usually that the person is made up of two quite different parts, the body and the spirit, each with its own distinctive ends. But, it is claimed, since the spirit is the true essence of the person, only through the pursuit of the ends appropriate to its nature can genuine human fulfillment be attained. To this it is sometimes added that most people are blind to the intrinsic superiority of such ends precisely because they falsely assume that there is no more to the person than just the body. So this sort of dualism might seem to offer advantages over physicalism when it comes to defending the sorts of values that are often associated with spiritual traditions.<sup>4</sup>

Of course it has yet to be shown that physicalism is incapable of offering any such support. The tacit argument for its inability seems to be that only states of sensual pleasure could count as intrinsically good if physicalism were true. But this seems patently false: why only pleasure, and not such things as contentment or flourishing? And why only pleasure derived from the gratification of sensual desires, and not pleasure derived in more indirect ways? More importantly for our purposes, however, a Buddhist could not employ the dualist justification of allegedly spiritual values described above. For it relies on the notion of a human essence, the notion that among the various parts making up a person there is one that is central to our existence. And the Buddhist doctrine of nonself (the doctrine of *anātman*) is the explicit rejection of this sort of essentialism about persons. So a Buddhist could not try to persuade us to pursue certain ends over others on the grounds that attaining those ends more fully realizes the essence of the person. While Buddhists could agree that the exclusive pursuit of sensual pleasure inevitably leads to suffering, they would not say that this is because the body is less central to our existence than mind or spirit.

Another attempt at linking dualism with a view about distinctively spiritual ends involves the claim that because mind or spirit endures after the body ceases to exist, ends that attach to it are also enduring and thus of greater worth than those transitory

states that attach to the body. But this argument is equally unavailable to the Buddhist, for whom all factors of human existence are equally impermanent. It is true that Buddhism's supreme end of Nirvāṇa is said to be unending. But Nirvāṇa is famously not a state that attaches to any bearer, so it cannot be said to be of greater value on the grounds that it will never be lost by its owner.<sup>5</sup>

So far we have been looking at arguments for the alleged incompatibility of physicalism and the values thought to be distinctive of spiritual traditions and seeing if they apply to the case of Buddhism. At this point, though, we might do better to seek some general characterization of the Buddhist project, and then see what, if anything, about that might prove to be incompatible with physicalism. According to the Buddhist analysis, suffering is inevitable for reflective persons because it is inevitable that our quest for meaning and significance in our lives will come to seem futile in the face of our impermanence. Suffering is overcome by abandoning the false assumption on which this quest is based: that there is an "I" for whom this life can have meaning. Systematic examination, using the twin tools of philosophy and meditation, reveals there to be no self or essence tying together the various psychophysical elements (the *skandhas*) that make up a life. Instead there is only a complex causal series of psychophysical elements, each element existing for just a while but giving rise to some replacement upon its going out of existence. Our belief in a self or essence stems from our having learned to use such convenient designators as "I" and "person" as useful ways of referring to such a series of elements. It is simply easier to say "I fly home tomorrow" than to say that these psychophysical elements will give rise to certain future elements, which in turn will cause yet later ones, which tomorrow will be located on board an airplane.

Having learned to speak in this shorthand way, we then forget the origins of this way of talking and take the "I" to name some real thing. And since it cannot be any of the empirically given psychophysical elements (as they can all be replaced while this "I" appears to endure), we end up taking it to be something existing over and above these elements, something that can be said to have the elements as its constituents, states, and possessions. Once we have come to realize the ownerlessness of the psychophysical elements, we can then see such convenient designators as "I" for the merely useful devices they are, and behave toward this and other series of elements accordingly. This insight is said to bring not only genuine release from existential suffering but also a sense of positive freedom and spontaneity, and a realization as well that others' sufferings are equally worthy of remediation.

This, roughly, is the path indicated by the Buddha and elaborated upon by the schools of Abhidharma. In Mahāyāna, not only is the *person* said to be devoid of essence, so as well are the psychophysical elements. But in the Madhyamaka school of Mahāyāna this is taken to mean that the very notion of how things ultimately are is incoherent. In this case, any dispute over whether physicalism or dualism is ultimately true would be seen as pointless. So in their hands the doctrine of the essencelessness of the elements could not give an additional reason to prefer dualism or idealism to physicalism. In the hands of the Yogācāra school of Mahāyāna, however, this doctrine of the essencelessness of the elements is taken to support

subjective idealism, the view that only mental entities exist. So after assessing the compatibility of physicalism with the basic Buddhist analysis sketched above, we shall need to come back to the case of Yogācāra.

Is there anything in the preceding analysis of suffering and the release from suffering that would be threatened if physicalism were true? If there is, then I must confess that I am unable to see it. Certainly the claim that all is impermanent is not weakened. If anything, the truth of physicalism would seem to make the recognition of impermanence easier. This is so for the following reason. Such mental phenomena as memory are often taken as evidence for the existence of an enduring self: it seems as if that which is presently aware of the memory image must be the same thing as that which originally had the experience. But if we were convinced that the person is just a body and a brain, then since we know that all the constituents of the body and the brain are replaced a number of times over the course of a lifetime, we could no longer see such phenomena as requiring the positing of a permanent underlying substance. Here the computer metaphor gives us some assistance. We all know, at least roughly, how it is possible for a document written on one computer to appear on a separate computer. We even know how a document can be restored on the original machine after some of its parts—even such crucial parts as the hard drive and the CPU—have been replaced. The key notion here is that of an information-preserving causal process: the state of one system brings about some new state in a separate system that exhibits a relevantly similar pattern. Since we know how this works in the case of a physical system like the computer, we can understand how it might be carried out by a brain all the parts of which undergo periodic replacement. So there should no longer be the temptation to supply a permanent substance—a self—to account for phenomena like memory.

Similar things may be said about the claim of nonself. Indeed, it might be urged that techno-physicalism offers Buddhists a new opportunity for bringing home the difficult truth of nonself. The thought would be that the computer, like other machines, is often described as soulless, so that if we are to be thought of as importantly like computers then it would seem to follow that we also lack souls. But this argument is too quick, and some care must be taken here. The Buddhist claim that we are devoid of self is not the claim that we are unfeeling, or lacking in human understanding, or devoid of creativity—all characteristics that the word “soulless” is sometimes used to convey. If these are all true of computers as we now know them, then to that extent the computer metaphor is not apt. But it can still be asked whether we can envision computers that exhibit the kinds of behavior we characterize as displaying human understanding, creativity, and the like. This is too large a question to address here satisfactorily. Still, it is not clear why these sorts of capacities should prove impossible at least in principle for information-processing devices of a suitable degree of complexity.

Some might claim that even if we can envision computers with these kinds of capacities, this is a far cry from imagining computers as genuinely autonomous subjectivities. That is, it might be said that while a computer might be programmed to exhibit such things as human understanding, there could be no such thing as what

it is like for that computer empathetically to identify with the situation of another. This point is often put as the claim that a computer could never be truly conscious. But we must note that in Abhidharma psychology, consciousness is generally given a functionalist analysis: given sensory stimulation under appropriate conditions, consciousness is that which facilitates registration and retention as output. Completely absent is any notion of there being an elusive phenomenal feel to our intentionality. And, of course, a functionalist analysis is neutral with respect to the kinds of entities that realize the functionally specified state. While Ābhidharmikas seem to have had a nonphysical entity in mind, there is nothing in the analysis itself that precludes physical realizers. And here, too, the computer metaphor helps us see how what we think of as mental processes might have physical realizations.

So far there do not seem to be any insuperable obstacles to accommodating the basic Buddhist project within a physicalist framework. But there remains one major hurdle, namely the doctrine of karma and rebirth. It is widely believed that sense can only be made of this doctrine on the assumption that there is more to the person than just their body. And, it might be said, Buddhism without karma and rebirth is rather like Christianity without the Trinity, or Judaism without the Covenant. But suppose we accept the claim that the doctrine of karma and rebirth is indeed central to Buddhism. Why would this require an ontology containing nonmaterial elements? Is it because the rebirth process requires some entity that travels from an old to a new body bearing the karmic seeds, and nothing physical could play this role? But this picture of rebirth as transmigration is precisely what Buddhism rejects. And once again the computer metaphor helps us make sense of the Buddhist claim, helps us see how rebirth might be possible without a transmigrating self. For we can see how one computer might, in going out of existence, set in motion causal processes resulting in some new computer's having states importantly related to those of the original. Rebirth might be the organic equivalent of using a Zip drive just before the final crash of the old computer, then installing selected files on a new machine.

Perhaps the thought is that there is no causal process known to the natural sciences that could do all the things that karma is supposed to do. For karma is said to ensure that at the end of this life there takes place the birth of the right sort of being in the right sorts of life circumstances with the right sorts of innate dispositions and the ability to recover just the right kinds of memories—where “right” is determined by the moral character of actions performed during this and preceding lives. And it is true that current science does not describe any causal processes that might be thought to link successive lives in accordance with ethical properties. But there are two responses that may be given here. First, there is no reason to suppose that the natural sciences are currently complete; it is possible that causal processes of this sort might be discovered by some future natural science. To this response it might be objected that it is also possible, for all we now know, that completed science may fail to discover such causal processes. But this invites the second response, that the doctrine of karma and rebirth should be considered an empirical hypothesis, and not as something known a priori. A Buddhist should be wary of claims to a priori knowledge, for these often reflect a subtle form of clinging, and clinging is said to be

a primary impediment to our attaining a state free from suffering. There has always been some evidence in support of the hypothesis of karma and rebirth, namely the apparent recollections attained in certain meditational states (including those of the Buddha), plus a small number of seemingly spontaneously recovered memories and skills. But this evidence is equivocal. If we were convinced that physicalism is true, then it might be best to await the outcome of further empirical investigation before deciding whether to accept or reject the hypothesis.

If embracing physicalism means leaving open for the present whether or not to accept the doctrine of karma and rebirth, then we must ask how crucial this doctrine really is to Buddhism. What I would suggest is that while it has played an important role in many Buddhist cultures, it is not crucial to the central project of Buddhism. Indeed, if I take myself to live only one life instead of the indefinitely many lives promised by rebirth, then the fact of my own mortality takes on even greater significance, for I cannot then defer seeking a solution to the problem of suffering to some future life. Now within many Buddhist cultures it has been thought that some persons are unable to seek and attain Nirvāṇa in this life. The doctrine of karma and rebirth holds out the promise to such people that if they perform karmically meritorious acts in this life, they will be reborn in more auspicious circumstances in which the attainment of Nirvāṇa will be easier. So if karma and rebirth were rejected, then since Nirvāṇa would not be open to all, this might make the Buddhist path seem less appealing. (Of course this would not show that the Buddhist analysis is itself false.) But we must ask why Nirvāṇa is thought to be unattainable for some individuals in this lifetime. If this is simply because they find the path too difficult compared to the attractions of mundane life, then perhaps Buddhists need to redouble their efforts to convince these people of the truth of suffering. If, on the other hand, Nirvāṇa is unattainable for some due to such life circumstances as extreme poverty and degradation, then it would seem incumbent on Buddhists to work to eliminate such social evils and thus make Nirvāṇa genuinely available to all.

One sometimes hears it said that in the absence of the doctrine of karma and rebirth (or some other doctrine promising ultimate retribution for immorality), people would have no reason to obey the dictates of conventional morality. But even if this were true, it is not clear why this would constitute a reason for Buddhists to espouse the doctrine. And in fact, Buddhists have good reason to reject this claim. On the basis of the doctrine of nonself it is possible to construct an argument for a general obligation to seek to prevent pain regardless of where it occurs.<sup>6</sup> That is, the doctrine that is central to the Buddhist project may itself be used to support a basic duty of beneficence, arguably the core of all forms of conventional morality. So if it is essential for a spiritual path to provide some support to conventional morality, Buddhism can do so without reliance on the doctrine of karma and rebirth.

So far we have been discussing the central project of Buddhism as taught in early Buddhism and Abhidharma. I said earlier that the Mahāyāna teaching of the essencelessness of the elements might complicate matters. In Madhyamaka this doctrine is taken to mean that the very notion of how things ultimately are is empty. So there is no ultimate fact of the matter as to whether reality is wholly physical, both

physical and mental, or only mental in nature. According to Madhyamaka we should, however, embrace at the conventional level whatever account of the world best accords with successful practice. So if physicalism should turn out to cohere better with our going theories, then Madhyamaka would grant it the status of conventional truth.<sup>7</sup>

It is with Yogācāra that real difficulties arise. For this school the doctrine of the essencelessness of elements is taken to indicate their ultimate nature, specifically their ineffability. And while it would of course be a mistake to say that ineffable elements are mental in nature, Yogācāra does claim that it would be nearer the truth to say that they are mental than that they are physical in nature.<sup>8</sup> So this school's views are incompatible with physicalism. And Yogācārins claim that their idealist teaching of impressions-only represents the most effective way of realizing the truth of nonself. If this is correct, then the Buddhist project is indeed incompatible with physicalism. But Ābhidharmikas and Mādhyamikas deny that embracing an idealist metaphysics is required in order to attain the fruit of the Buddha's teachings. And there are interesting and complex arguments developed on all sides in this dispute. So this is clearly a large question, and I shall not seek to evaluate the Yogācāra claim here. Instead, I close with the conclusion that, Yogācāra aside, physicalism poses no genuine threat to Indian Buddhism, and might even be said to bring with it new opportunities. Of course, none of this is meant to settle the question of whether physicalism is true. That, too, is a large question. All we have been exploring is whether Buddhism could flourish in a culture that took physicalism as common sense. I suggest that the answer to that question, Yogācāra aside, is Yes.

## Notes

- 1 – Not, of course, a Cartesian-style dualism, according to which there are two kinds of enduring entities that underlie change, namely bodies and minds. Bodies and minds are, for Abhidharma, mere conceptual fictions that are decomposable into more particular and more ephemeral entities and events. But their “atomic” entities and events come in two distinct varieties, only one of which is properly thought of as corporeal.
- 2 – Two examples are *The Matrix* and *eXistenZ*, directed by David Cronenberg.
- 3 – By “techno-physicalism” I mean the phenomenon wherein a physicalist ontology comes to be widely accepted in a culture due to the introduction and spread of some new material technology. In the present case, it is information-processing technologies that would be seen as responsible for the spread of a physicalist worldview.
- 4 – In the Indian tradition this strategy is most clearly associated with the Sāṅkhya school, but it also plays a prominent role in the *Bhagavad Gītā*. In the Western tradition it is widely believed that such an approach is definitive of Christianity, but it is actually representative only of those strains of Christian thought that bear



the stamp of Augustinian theology; Thomistic thought is less clearly grounded in this sort of dualism. There are also important differences between Sāṅkhya dualism and the dualism found in some strains of Christian thought. The former places on the side of “non-spirit” many mental functions that the latter would see as belonging to the spirit. For Sāṅkhya the true self is just pure, objectless consciousness; cognition and affect belong on the side of what in their system is equivalent to the strictly physical.

- 5 – See the famous line, quoted by Buddhaghosha in chapter 16 of *The Path of Purification (Visuddhimagga)*: “Nirvāṇa is, but not the person who seeks it.”
- 6 – The argument is most clearly formulated in chapter 8 of the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* by Śāntideva. For a discussion of the soundness of the argument see the exchange between Paul Williams and myself following my feature review, “The Reality of Altruism: Reconstructing Śāntideva,” of his *Altruism and Reality: Studies in the Philosophy of the Bodhicaryāvatāra*, in *Philosophy East and West* 50 (3) (July 2000): 412–459.
- 7 – The Mādhyamikas Bhāvaviveka and Śāntarakṣita endorse two distinct ontologies as the “correct conventional truth”: for the former a kind of *nāma-rūpa* dualism like that found in the Abhidharma, for the latter the subjective idealism of Yogācāra. My point is just that changes in material culture might make physicalism a better candidate than either of these views. Here, incidentally, I am in agreement with Jay Garfield.
- 8 – This is because for Yogācāra the path to the realization of the ineffability of the real goes through the doctrine of impressions-only as a key stage: one first realizes that there could only be inner impressions and not external objects, then sees that the notion of the mental relies crucially on the distinction between “inner” and “outer,” and thus one abandons any attempt at characterizing the reals. See Vasubandhu’s comments on *Vijñaptimātratāsiddhi* 10.