

Article

A Cognitive Science View of Abhinavagupta's Understanding of Consciousness

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Abstract: This paper offers a comparative analysis of the nature of consciousness correlating the insights of the 11th century Śaiva philosopher Abhinavagupta with the work of some contemporary philosophers of consciousness. Ultimately these comparisons especially bring to light possibilities for constructing a materialist paradigm that might operate from a prioritization of subjectivity rather than objectivity. I propose that the Hindu, nondual Śaivite system that Abhinavagupta lays out offers a framework that may be useful for contemporary cognitive science and philosophy of mind precisely because Abhinavagupta offers a theory for connecting the material with the phenomenal.

Keywords: mind; cognitive science; Abhinavagupta; Tantra

“Consciousness is at the very center of our epistemic universe,
and our access to it is not perceptually mediated.”

—David Chalmers ([1], p. 169)

“The freedom of the uninterrupted delight
of I-consciousness is completely independent
of any reference to anything else”

—Abhinavagupta ([2], p. 212)¹

One need only a quick glance at the strident tones in a recent review of Thomas Nagel's new book, out in 2012, *Mind and Cosmos: Why the Materialist Neo-Darwinian Conception of Nature is Almost Certainly False* in the leftist weekly, *The Nation*, to get a sense of just how mired are the debates on

¹ sarvathā punar avicchinnacamatkāranirapekṣasvātantryāhaṃvimarśe.

the nature of consciousness [3]. What is consciousness? How does consciousness arise out of the grey matter that makes up our brains? How do we understand the experiences of subjective awareness, the complexity of elements that make up our very human encounters, say, the joy that comes from seeing a beautiful sunset? The big problem, what David Chalmers calls the “hard problem” [1], is the problem of the phenomenological experience of qualia, understanding the relationship our subjective experiences bear to scientifically driven analyses of brain and body functioning; how do we reconcile the experience of the rich hues of orange and pink in the sunset with a materialist perspective on the world which promises to unravel the links between neurons and emotions?

For this paper, I suggest a comparative analysis of the nature of consciousness offering the insights of the 11th century Śaiva philosopher Abhinavagupta to reflect upon the work of some contemporary philosophers of consciousness, particularly focusing on the work of the cognitive mind philosopher David Chalmers. Ultimately, I offer these comparisons especially to bring to light possibilities for constructing a materialist paradigm that might operate from a prioritization of subjectivity rather than objectivity. I propose that the Hindu, nondual Śaivite system that Abhinavagupta lays out offers a framework that may be useful for our contemporary cognitive science and philosophy of mind precisely because Abhinavagupta offers a theory for connecting the material with the phenomenal.

I propose this position, with caveats, of course. First, Abhinavagupta is certainly not a materialist. His ontological commitments are quite far from those of Chalmers and of Thomas Nagel. Chalmers, starting from a commitment to epiphenomenalism, reluctantly concedes we need a larger model for understanding the phenomenological component of consciousness. Abhinavagupta, a philosophical theologian, as a product of his time, is about as far from this metaphysical materialist position as one might imagine. Oddly, however, the naturalistic, atheist models of thinkers like Chalmers and Nagel drift towards a kind of panpsychism that offers points of contact with Abhinavagupta’s panentheism. At the same time, we should be mindful of some irreducible differences between Abhinavagupta and these thinkers. For instance, while Chalmers may be read, against the grain, at some points to be not entirely unsympathetic to the kinds of conceptions of consciousness we find in Hinduism and Buddhism, he, however, argues for the impossibility of downward causation ([1], p. 378n). Yet, this is precisely what the colorful history of *siddhis*, the magical powers of adepts in Buddhism and Hinduism presupposes and for which it argues and which it cultivates in no small measure. The medieval worlds of Hinduism and Buddhism take for granted all sorts of phenomena that appear impossible for our worldview, predominantly here, the idea of reincarnation, the idea of a subtle body, the idea of *siddhis*, or magical powers.² However, even with these seeming unbridgeable gaps between our notions of what is possible and impossible and theirs, Abhinavagupta’s philosophical system derives its strength from his overriding impetus to present a system that does not rely on extraneous elements or belief in unseen principles.

For example, in a discussion where he introduces the scope of subjectivity and its forms of knowledge and capacities for action, he tells us, “what is intended here is the ordinary form of all knowing subjects in the world, comprising the specific activity of the hands and feet, *etc.* of the agent, because this idea

² Yet again, here we should note that these notions are not entirely banished from the 21st century West, as we see in books like *Irreducible Mind* [4] and in experiments like those documented by noted Cornell psychologist Daryl Bem in 2011 [5].

is generally accepted in the world” ([6], p. 258).³ That is, his discussion of subjectivity focuses on ordinary forms of consciousness which will be familiar to most readers. Moreover, he follows this with a justification for not entering into theological terrain, saying, “the highest Subject, defined as the *Śiva* Archetype, is impossible anyway to analyze from a worldly level because it is beyond the world” ([6], p. 258).⁴ With this, he embarks on a hermeneutic technique which might be considered one of his signature trademarks, namely a consistent attention to offering philosophical and psychological explanations that adhere to a use of logic and do not especially rely upon revelation to support his arguments. Thus, I suggest here that Abhinavagupta’s system may be particularly helpful in part because he proposes a kind of model that typically shies away from a reliance upon a theistic intervention to explain consciousness. In this, it may be seen to offer a structural compatibility with materialist models of our world, even if he necessarily falls short of anything like a bonafide naturalism or materialism. Thus, it would be a mistake to gloss over Abhinavagupta’s fundamentally theological perspective; on the other hand, in spite of this, his ingenious and novel synthesis of subjectivity may offer helpful insights into our own thinking about the nature of subjectivity and consciousness.

I suggest also that this 11th century thinker Abhinavagupta brings to discussions of consciousness a carefully constructed phenomenology that argues for a neutral monism; with this he is able to link the material, physical world with consciousness. Abhinavagupta accomplishes this through several mechanisms; however, I will only have space to discuss one of these here, namely that he links materiality with the notion of consciousness through a modal conception of subjectivity and objectivity.⁵

In what follows below, I will first address differences in conceptions of the idea of mind between an Indian context and contemporary science; with this I will also locate Abhinavagupta’s conception within an Indian context. After this I will examine Abhinavagupta’s method for addressing the link between what Chalmers understands as the “hard problem” of consciousness, phenomenal awareness, in its relationship with the materiality of the physical body. Here I will discuss one of Abhinavagupta’s methods, specifically involving a modal argument hinging upon ideas of subjectivity and objectivity.

1. What Is the Mind?

Comparative discussions of contemporary Western science and medieval Indian conceptions of mind and physicality are likely to get bogged down in terminological confusions over what counts as mentality. Since Descartes’ dualistic formulation of the *res extensa* and the *res cogitans* as matter and mind, two separate substances walled off from each other, and never the twain shall meet, Western

³ *Tathāpi laukika sarva pramāṭṛ sādharmaṇa rūpa sampādakakara caraṇādi vyāpāra viśeṣa paryantībhūtam eva abhipretam tathā laukikānām prasiddheḥ.*

⁴ *Tām eva ca samjñā śabdena darśayati śiva tattva lakṣaṇasya parapramātur alaukikatvena vyākartum aśakyatetyāśayena.*

⁵ He also links the phenomenal with the psychological and the physical through a reformulation of notions of knowledge and action and connected with this, he links the phenomenal with the psychological through an understanding of consciousness in terms of *prakāśa*, a kind of “shining forth” and *vimarśa*, a kind of “self-reflexive, active awareness.” And finally, he links the component of phenomenal consciousness with the physical through a formulation of the subtle body, which defines the subtle in terms of fundamental elements, especially in ([6], pp. 310–27).

science has systematically tried to close the gap with a reductive program. Along these lines current dominant conceptions of mind postulate the dependence of mentality upon the physical or else, further, postulate the irrelevance of the mental, the “epiphenomenalism” of consciousness.⁶

Hindu conceptions of the mind, however, differ dramatically from familiar Western notions in so far as we might say that the cut between mental and material occurs at a much higher-order level of mental operation in the schema for an Indian context. Classically, we find in Hindu thought, as in Descartes’ understanding, two separate categories, here termed “*Puruṣa*” and “*Prakṛti*”, spirit/consciousness on the one hand, and Nature/matter on the other. *Puruṣa* is aware, self-aware and sentient. *Prakṛti* is insentient, mere dead materiality. So far, no real incompatibilities with a Western context. However, the category of *Prakṛti* actually encompasses much of what we in our contemporary Western model would understand as “consciousness” or “mind”.

The earliest formulations of this pan-Indian cosmology derive from Sāṃkhya theory, which dates to at least about the 6th century BCE and perhaps earlier. Sāṃkhya understands the world to contain twenty-five basic different categories. Of these twenty-five, twenty-four are the products of the evolution (*pravṛtti*) of materiality, *Prakṛti*. Only *Puruṣa*, sentient aware *Puruṣa* is actually capable of consciousness.⁷ What then is *Prakṛti*? *Prakṛti* evolves into the physicality of the world we see around us, here broken down into the five elements, water, earth, air, fire and space. Yet, *Prakṛti* also evolves into three categories that we would intuitively classify as mental. Known as the *antahkāraṇa*, the inward sense organs, these include the intellect (*mahat/buddhi*), the ego (*ahamkāra*), and the mind (*manas*). These three, as evolutes of *Prakṛti*, fundamentally lack sentience. Thus what a contemporary Western scientist might understand as “mind”, “awareness” or “consciousness”, is, to the contrary, from an Indian perspective relegated to the level of mere materiality.

At first blush, this classification might appear a bit inscrutable. How could something, like egoity, so clearly related to consciousness and awareness be considered a part of materiality? This classification, however, corresponds to a crucial distinction that David Chalmers insists upon in his characterization of the mental as comprised of two components. Chalmers suggests that the mental encompasses both, on the one hand, a structural and functional psychological component, and on the other, a phenomenological component ([1], pp. 24–26). He proposes this classification in order to clarify confusions about consciousness that conflate psychological components of mentality with phenomenological components. Noting that the psychological elements do supervene upon physicality, he argues that the phenomenological component, however, remains functionally separate and incapable of entailment by physical properties. That is, psychology and biology, which ultimately boil down to physics and notions of how electrons influence the structure of molecules, which influence the

⁶ There are a range of perspectives on this, many of which can be succinctly formulated through responses to Frank Johnson’s provocative 1982 article [7], on the knowledge argument. Chalmers summarizes a number of these in his 1996 discussion of Johnson’s article [1]. Alter also summarizes a variety of positions on this in [8]. On one extreme we find figures like Dennett, entirely denying the possibility of phenomenal knowledge and on the other Chalmers’ assertion of it, along with Nagel’s early presentation of the problem in “What is it like to be a Bat?” [9].

⁷ See Mikel Burley [15], for a discussion of the fundamental tension within Sāṃkhya over the problem of multiple *Puruṣas* as multiple loci for a contentless subjectivity and the problem of no real need for liberation of a *Puruṣa* endowed with the kind of transcendental and passive subjectivity that is definitionally separate from the psychophysical conception of self located within *Prakṛti*.

chemistry and biology of the human brain for Chalmers do not exhaust and cannot finally explain the phenomenal, for instance, the experience of a person enjoying the scent of red roses on a table.

In a similar manner, the Sāṃkhya classification of the “mind” (*manas*), “ego” (*ahaṃkāra*) and intellect (*mahat/buddhi*) as evolutes of *Prakṛti*, material nature, reflects this separation of the psychological and phenomenological components of consciousness. Linking these three as the inner sense organ (*antaḥkāraṇa*) to materiality recognizes their dependence on the physical. Sāṃkhya then, like Chalmers, however, reserves the notion of consciousness, *phenomenological* consciousness, as incapable of connection with physical materiality. The *Puruṣa* for Īśvarakṛṣṇa’s *Sāṃkhya Kārikā*, is simply a witness (*sākṣitvam*), isolated (*kaivalyam*) and inactive (*akartṛbhāva*) ([9], p. 265).⁸ To use Chalmers’ terms, the Sāṃkhyan *Puruṣa* as consciousness is not supervenient on the physical.

This Sāṃkhyan notion acts as template, the basic model for representing the relationship between the physical and the mental or for this schema, the non-material spirit. Much subsequent Indian, especially Hindu philosophy draws from and modifies this basic model to articulate differing understandings of the relationship between matter and spirit. For instance, later Vedantin notions of *ātman*, the self, draw from this early conception of mentality as at base material in nature and stress the fundamentally incommensurate nature of the self, *ātman*, with the material, including mental components.⁹ What these Hindu models share with Chalmers’ model, and where they differ from Buddhist models, is the assumption of an underlying acceptance of phenomenological consciousness as a “something there,” the “*sat*” or “existence” component we find in Śaṅkara’s notion of *ātman*, self as “*satcidānanda*”, “being”, “consciousness” and “bliss”. Buddhist models of *anātman*, “no-self” doctrine sound a lot more like patternist conceptions, like Daniel Dennett’s or Ray Kurzweil’s [13], or in some cases, informationalist conceptions ([1], pp. 276–87)¹⁰ of consciousness. Here we might also reference Jonardon Ganeri’s discussion of Vasubandhu’s notion of the self in relation to Strawson’s conception of the self as non-univocal. In Ganeri’s thoughtful presentation of Vasubandhu, the “no-self” doctrine of Vasubandhu hinges on a metaphysical prior commitment of Vasubandhu towards relinquishing a first-person perceptual stance. Thus for Vasubandhu, the referential notion of an “I” not connected to some sort of tangible psychophysical perception is fundamentally an erroneous and disingenuous referentiality [14]. Ganeri proposes that Vasubandhu offers a helpful articulation of a basic pre-attentive sense of ownership as self if we can stop short of his pre-emptive commitment to “no-self” ([14], pp. 73–74). One might perhaps, following this strand, situate Chalmers’ phenomenological component as this basic pre-attentive sense of ownership towards which Vasubandhu points, thus linking these notions of self to the framework of subjective and objective perspectives.

In any case, however, what both Hindu and Buddhist models offer with the inclusion of mental phenomena as materiality is a capacity to expand the very notions of matter to a wider sphere. Hence, Indian religious traditions, whether Hindu or Buddhist, have very little difficulty accepting phenomena

⁸ *Sāṃkhya Kārika* verse xix; error in Larson’s verse [10], should read *kaivalyam* not *kavivalyam*. See also Burley [11] for a discussion of the separation of *Puruṣa* as phenomenological component in contrast to the structural and psychological component. See also David Burke [12] for an explicit extension and embrace of this interpretation of *Puruṣa*.

⁹ I am thinking especially of Śaṅkara’s notions of *ātman* as *satcidānanda*, consciousness, being and bliss, and fundamentally not connected to matter or *Prakṛti*.

¹⁰ Chalmers also supposes an informationalist conception of knowledge; however, he maintains a supposition of some sort of existential being with his fundamentally panpsychist model.

like subtle bodies, capable of transmigration. Not conceptually loaded with airy notions of ineffable being, as ideas of a “soul” might be, the subtle body remains fundamentally on the side of matter.¹¹

2. The Phenomenal and the Psychological: The Subjective and the Objective

What a Tantric monistic thinker like the 11th century Hindu Śaivite Abhinavagupta adds to earlier understandings of consciousness is a sophisticated phenomenology that bridges the gap between the phenomenal on the one side and all that materiality on the other side, including both the psychological and the physical. Abhinavagupta accomplishes this primarily through linking these through four different registers, though due to space constraints I will only address the first here. First, he links the phenomenal with the psychological in terms of grammatical notions of subjectivity and objectivity. Secondly, he links the phenomenal with the psychological and the physical through a reformulation of notions of knowledge and action. He also links the phenomenal with the psychological through an understanding of consciousness in bimodal terms of *prakāśa*, a kind of “shining forth” and *vimarśa*, a kind of “self-reflexive, active awareness”. And he links the component of phenomenal consciousness with the physical through a formulation of the subtle body, which defines the subtle in terms of a notion of fundamental properties. Again, here I will look at Abhinavagupta’s use of subjectivity and objectivity as a way of thinking about the relationship between the phenomenal component of consciousness on the one hand, and on the other hand, psychological and material understandings of consciousness.

If we examine Chalmers’ notions of the differences between the phenomenal and the psychological modes of consciousness, his understanding of the psychological hinges upon those elements of consciousness that can be described objectively: the physical and emotional sensations that arise when one smells freshly baked bread, for instance. Accompanying those elements that can be tracked and articulated, but separate from them is the phenomenal component ([1], pp. 7–10). The phenomenal, in contrast, offers a subjective view. It corresponds to the function of consciousness that focuses on the “what it’s like” component, the experience of seeing the color red for the first time and the ineffability of such an experience, our inability to reduce that moment of experience to either psychological or physical components, to neurons firing and the like. Abhinavagupta shares with Chalmers an insistence that we not try to ignore or dispose of the phenomenal component, contrasting a thinker like Daniel Dennett [16],¹² yet Abhinavagupta takes a very different tack than Chalmers. Abhinava suggests that we read the relation between phenomenal awareness and psychological awareness in grammatical terms, in terms of first-person and third person accounts of awareness.¹³ This is something Chalmers also nods towards as he discusses his zombie twin in another universe who is incapable of a genuine first-person encounter. For Chalmers, his zombie twin might look and respond exactly as he does from the outside, yet only the real David Chalmers, not his zombie twin, actually undergoes a first-person phenomenological experience ([1], pp. 198–99).

¹¹ I discuss this elsewhere, forthcoming [15].

¹² For instance. Much else might be cited.

¹³ See also Kuznetsova ([17], p. 85) for a discussion of the importance of subjective and objective perspectives in the Vaiśeṣika philosopher Praśastapāda.

Abhinavagupta goes a step further, however, in understanding the subjective and the objective as convertible into each other. The subjective and the objective are two modes of awareness linking the same experience, depending upon the grammatical relation one takes in relation to the experience. As Abhinavagupta tells us,

“As the adage goes, ‘Everything has the nature of everything else.’ Even those things which are by nature mere object, insentient, if they abandon that form as object, they become capable of participating in the forms of subjective awareness and of address, the first and second persons. For example, “listen O Mountains” and “of mountain peaks, I am Mount Meru” ([2], p. 212).¹⁴

Beyond the theological appeal to a scriptural text, the Bhagavad Gītā, Abhinavagupta also makes a specific point. Namely, he suggests that the status of subject and object should not be derived from a classification of essence. Here we might see Buddhist influence of the sort that Ganeri points to in Vasubandhu, as I note above, even if Vasubandhu rejects the referentiality leading to a self. It is not the case that only some forms, whether entities or objects, have an essence capable of experiencing phenomenal awareness; nor is there a kind of underlying structure that determines whether some entity is classified as conscious or not conscious. Rather both subject and object designate types of phenomenal awareness.¹⁵ And, moreover, the phenomenal awareness of being an insentient chunk of rock is one that can shift to a different phenomenal awareness, to that of the kinds of subjective awareness that Chalmers subsumes under the category of phenomenal component of consciousness *in toto*, even for that chunk of rock that is the mountain. Here this normally mere insentient rock can be transformed by a participation in the subjectivity of address and by the participation in a first-person articulation of identity. Abhinavagupta quotes from well-known classical Indian texts, including the *Bhagavad Gītā* here and relies upon his audience’s presuppositions of what it means, for instance, when the classical figure Kṛṣṇa says, “I am Mount Meru” to signal the kind of shift to subjectivity that he indicates. What precisely then allows for a shift from the non-conscious matter of *prakṛti*, in the form of an insentient rock, is Abhinavagupta’s recognition of its always latent potentiality for subjectivity. That is, in this system, there is no hard and fast demarcation between consciousness and matter. The shift from one to the other hinges on remembering and evoking this always latent potential.

In terms of our own 21st century context, Abhinavagupta’s perspective suggests that Chalmers’ zombie twin is not innately incapable of phenomenal awareness; all he really needs is to spend some time with the non-zombie David Chalmers who *is* capable of a genuine first-person encounter and through a kind of assimilation, a contagion of affect, the zombie has hopes for the same kinds of experiences of the color red that our universe’s familiar David Chalmers has.¹⁶ As Abhinavagupta tells

¹⁴ *sarvaṃ hi sarvātmakam iti narātmāno jaḍā api tyaktatātṭpūrvarūpāḥ śāktaśaivarūpabhājo bhavanti, śṛṇveta grāvāṇaḥ* [cf *Mahābhāṣya* 3.1.1; cf *Vākyapadīya* 3 *Puruṣasamuddeśa* 2], *meruḥ śikhariṇām ahaṃ bhavāmi* [*Bhagavadgītā* 10.23].

¹⁵ Chalmers’ speculation on strong artificial intelligence may be read as approximating an understanding of the possibility of phenomenal experience for rocks, computers and other insentient things.

¹⁶ Arindam Chakrabharti offers a similar perspective when he elegantly examines the problem of memory, noting for Abhinavagupta “[we] must reject the suggestion that our knowledge of other minds is merely an analogical

us repeatedly, quoting from the *Spanda Kārikās*, “Even [the limited Subject gains lordship] from contact with the strength of the Self (*ātman*)” ([6], pp. 286, 308, 346).¹⁷ That is, consciousness, and with it, a capacity for phenomenal experience, is present in greater or lesser degrees across a spectrum in various entities and objects. By contact with the Self, *ātman* (and for the moment, we will gloss the notion of *ātman* as Abhinavagupta repeatedly glosses it, as *cidānandaghana*, a somewhat indeterminate mass of bliss and consciousness) by contact with the *ātman*, those beings or things which display only limited or an absent capacity for phenomenal experience, like a rock, or Chalmers’ zombie twin, increase their capacity.

Here, to emphasize how Abhinavagupta’s position differs from other Indian perspectives, we can contrast this with what Jonathan Edelmann, discussing the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* says about the relation between consciousness and the materiality of the mind, where Edelmann notes that consciousness as self is the *sākṣin*, the witness, always different, immortal and separate from the body-mind complex in relation to consciousness ([20], pp. 67–68), evincing a substance dualism. In contrast, for Abhinavagupta, the consciousness of self is not irreparably, ontologically separate from matter, but instead always already infuses it, merely needing the contagion of contact with the self to wake it up. We might also compare this with Chakravarthi Ram-Prasad’s discussion of the “thin” conception of self-adopted by Nyāya ([21], pp. 133–35). Ram-Prasad points out that Udayana’s Nyāya conception of self does not equate to a notion of unique personhood, emphasizing instead its function as a kind of “transcendental consciousness”, a formal and minimalist conception of self.¹⁸ Of course, Abhinavagupta’s conception does leave open the kind of problematic situation that Ram-Prasad discusses of transplanted memories ([21], p. 138), where the fundamental fluidity of consciousness opens the door to the possibility of our memories really belonging to another person. This is addressed in practical terms via the interventions of the subtle body but certainly not ontologically dismissed. Indeed, its possibility is precisely the claim of certain siddhis of yoga and Tantra.

We might say with this that Abhinavagupta’s monism presupposes a kind of fluidity of affect. Consciousness is contagious; and this within a context of consciousness as something always more than the mere formality of a minimalist self. By contact with the phenomenal component of consciousness, that which we might consider mere objects are capable of taking on consciousness and transforming into entities capable of subjectivity. Thus, what Chalmers understands as the phenomenal component of consciousness, for Abhinavagupta is a basal state that can be accessed by a shift from the mode of object to subject. Does Abhinavagupta’s understanding incorporate something

inference” ([18], p. 212). Chakrabarti notes Abhinavagupta’s comment, reading “*ūhyate*” as precisely not indicating inference (*anumāna*) as a means of knowing other minds. The ambiguity of *ūhyate* as a kind of sensing or guess of the internal subjective state of another is at stake. In this context, see also Isabelle Ratie especially ([19], p. 359) where she notes that the element of “direct perception” (*sākṣatkāra*) involved in this guessing or sensing derives ultimately from the connection of the other person’s external actions as a unified extension of his or her internal feelings. That is, the internal subjective state is seamlessly connected to the external objective expression, avoiding the polarizing chasm between the two, which we see in, for instance, Descartes and Sāṃkhya.

¹⁷ *api tvātmabalasparśāt ...*.

¹⁸ In particular, Ram-Prasad uses this feature of Nyāya to argue against a Parfitian “transplanted memory” theory, where the distinction between person and self mitigates against the dismissal of self in the case of the minimalist self of Nyāya.

like Chalmers' notion of protophenomenal particles? ([1], pp. 126–27; 135–36). Insofar as Abhinavagupta understands *cit*, consciousness, to be ubiquitous, we might draw some comparisons to Chalmers' panpsychism, though, as I mentioned earlier, Abhinavagupta is probably best classed as a panentheist ([1], pp. 293–301).¹⁹ In any case, for Abhinavagupta, consciousness itself is fundamentally more determined by affect than by structural essence. Moreover, we can see that the flavor of Abhinavagupta's monism is one that incorporates materiality in its basic framework; materiality is not fundamentally a bar to consciousness.

We might frame this another way, elucidating Abhinavagupta's conception by tapping into our own culture's deeply entrenched and fearful anthropomorphism of the computer. Abhinavagupta's monism certainly allows for a Terminator-style computer take-over of the world, as it is not at all impossible for the kind of shift in awareness, a subjective assimilation of will or desire through a recognition (*pratyabhijñā*) of subjectivity to occur through a variety of material media. After all, most of what we think of as mere matter for Abhinavagupta is a kind of slumbering consciousness.

Thus here, if we flesh out Abhinavagupta's and Chalmers' comparative positions through following their perspectives on Frank Jackson's formulation of the knowledge argument [7], it is probably fair to say that Chalmers' position on whether Mary gains new knowledge when she leaves her black and white room and for the first time sees a red rose best assimilates to a Sāṃkhyan position, which tells us that Mary does gain new knowledge. As Īśvarakṛṣṇa tells us in the *Sāṃkhya Kārikā*, "This creation, brought about by *Prakṛti*, from the intellect down to the specific gross elements, (functions) for the sake of the release of the *Puruṣa*" ([12], p. 277). *Prakṛti* unfolds the materiality of the world in order to afford experiences for the *Puruṣa*. Material nature (*Prakṛti*, *pradhāna*), then, operates simply to give the *Puruṣa* new experience which brings knowledge²⁰ ([12], pp. 277–78).

What Abhinava suggests, on the other hand, sounds much more like the old fact/new guise arguments of a thinker like Brian Loar [22]. This is so, despite, or rather perhaps precisely because of Abhinavagupta's monism. Since consciousness is ubiquitous, Mary gains no real new knowledge; she does experience insight, a recognition, *pratyabhijñā*, of an experience she already knows, even if this knowing is not fundamentally on the level of verbal knowledge that can be articulated (*bauddha jñāna*)²¹.

Furthermore, like a Mobius strip, where opposites converge, Abhinavagupta postulates a fundamental transmutability of the physical and the phenomenal. He suggests that phenomenal experience is a matter of a modal shift. He tells us,

To this extent, that which is "conscious" contains both perceiver and object and doesn't have this distinction made between itself and the other, the object perceived. Yet that which is conscious gives rise to both of these, limited subject and object. And even while consciousness exists in that way, as undifferentiated, at the same time out of its own nature, that is out of its own form, which shines as only pure consciousness alone; it gives birth to

¹⁹ Chalmers here embraces of the feasibility of a panpsychist model.

²⁰ However, we should keep in mind that for Sāṃkhya soteriological values, this new knowledge, coming as it does with the price of the disruption of the balance of the three *guṇas* tends to work against its fundamental significance.

²¹ Abhinavagupta makes a distinction between intellectual verbal knowledge called *bauddha jñāna* and a deeper ontological or existential knowledge called *pauruṣeya jñāna*.

things that, like blue, *etc.* are said to be insentient, things that lack consciousness. So it does not abandon its own form as pure consciousness alone shining ([6], p. 292).²²

That is, the object as well the subject perceiving the object both derive from consciousness. With this however, we do need to keep in mind that Abhinavagupta ultimately prioritizes the subjective and phenomenal pole of experience rather than the material or objective side. Moreover, Abhinavagupta argues for a substratum, a locus for the experience of phenomenal subjectivity. In arguing that the subtle body is not the same as the locus of subjectivity, he tells us,

Of course it is possible to declare the subtle body as that state of shining forth since the subtle body has the capacity to remain unseen, unlike a pot. But why is there the unnecessary addition of the “I” following from this [imposed onto the subtle body]? He expresses this idea saying, “in the belief, the concept of “I”... To this objection he replies that the [I which appears] to be an extraneous addition should be accepted as necessary to [the subtle body]. In the absence of the perception of the “I” in fact, these attributes are accompanied by pure unadulterated ignorance. If the host of entities and things, blue *etc.* are not seen as belonging to the condition of the self (*ātmatayā*) then they would not [have the capacity to manifest], but they do appear. When someone says, “this is blue”, the person speaking is not devoid of consciousness, *i.e.*, this blue thing is not seen by a fainted person, someone blind or in darkness. Here, seeing blue is necessarily an attribute, something extra added to I-consciousness. Then, having made the two [I-consciousness and the capacity and moment of seeing blue] into a unity, then [we say] a person sees something blue, and there, no pure ignorance, which is complete lack of perception, exists ([6], p. 281).²³

Here we see Abhinavagupta make the same kind of move that Chalmers makes when he separates out what he calls the phenomenal and the psychological components of consciousness from each other ([1], pp. 11–16). Abhinavagupta notes that “seeing blue is necessarily an attribute, something extra added to I-consciousness”, dividing the sensory experience of seeing into two components, a phenomenal component and another component related to the particular objective element in the experience—the color blue here.²⁴

²² “*Cit*” ity ādi grāhakāt bhinnam iti yāvat. Arthāntarāt grahyāntarāt vila.kṣaṇam; tata eva avibhaktam api grāhakagrahyābhyām vibhāgamāpāditam, tathābhāve >pi “svayam” iti svena rūpeṇa saṁvinmātramayatām prakāśamānatvena anujjhad api nīlādi jaḍam ucyate.

²³ Nanu adarśanayogyam puryaṣṭakādi prakāśamānatayā nāma saṁbhāvyatām ghaṭādivadeva, tasya tu kim aham pratītyā adhikayā yena uktam “pratītau” iti. Āha “tasyaiva” iti. “Kevalam” iti iyadadhikamavaśyam aṅgikāryam. Aham pratītyabhāve hi sa eva “śuddhājñatvasahita” iti ātmatayāyo na drśyate bhāvavargo nīlādih, sa naiva prakāśeta, prakāśate ca asau. Nīlam idam iti hi na mūrccchān dhatamasapadamadaḥ. tad avaśyam aham bhāvena adhikena atra bhavitavyam yena kevalam kṛtvā śuddhā tatra ajñatā na bhavati.

²⁴ In one sense, Edelmann’s discussion of Chalmers and Nagel ([20], p. 82) here mirrors this perspective, however, Edelmann maintains for the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* the substance dualism of consciousness and body, unlike Abhinavagupta. However, Abhinavagupta’s view shares with Edelmann’s view from the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* the sense that consciousness does not originate from the base material substrate of neurons in the brain. Even if Abhinavagupta connects consciousness ultimately to body and brain and Edelman does not, Abhinavagupta does argue for the connection via the first person perspective of qualia.

Moreover, for Abhinavagupta, the sense of “I” functions as a unifying principle for the subtle body, and Abhinavagupta argues that this I-consciousness, the phenomenal component of experience encompasses the materiality that is the object. A kind of relativistic relationality, where the lines drawn between subject and object are moveable, comprises any given experience, seeing the color blue, for instance; however, the subjective component is given priority. We should note also that despite the use of the term *ātman*, Abhinavagupta carefully avoids reifying consciousness into a soul or self, no doubt, influenced by earlier Buddhist thinkers, preferring instead verbal nouns, like “*prakāśamānatayā*”, indicating a state or process of shining, and “*ahambhāva*”, “the feeling of I” rather than a substantive entity. Even with *ātman*, which already occurs in the *Spanda Kārikā* that he quotes, he himself prefers the abstractive form, *ātmatā*, indicating a state or condition of self, rather than an entity. Moreover, he tells us particularly that the use of the term *ātman* points directly to the notion of the subject, specifically in the subject’s ability to know (here, read as the capacity for phenomenal awareness) and with this also the subject’s capacity to act:

Hence, the particular term “*ātman*,” or “self” has been used to point to the subject, the subject with its capacity to know, as it has this capacity of swinging between both the object of action and the doer of action ([6], p. 258).²⁵

The *ātman*, then, references the subject as implicated both as that which experiences phenomenal awareness and as that which is object and agent. In any case, in this capacity, the sense of subjectivity itself, Chalmers’ notion of the phenomenal component of consciousness, operates for Abhinavagupta as a placeholder that cannot be reduced simply to the subtle body or to materiality.²⁶ It functions rather as a dynamic, outflowing of consciousness-capacity that takes on the mode of object and subject, moving between back and forth between these two perspectives as the unfolding of the process of mind and matter. In any case, ultimately, Abhinavagupta understands the subtle body as a transformation of consciousness, or specifically a condensation of consciousness into a more material, *i.e.*, object-oriented form.²⁷ He also understands this same process to be involved in the condensation of consciousness into the even more dense forms of matter that make up objects here, the physical body, the rock, a table and so on.

To conclude then, it is probably fair to acknowledge that Abhinavagupta’s conception of the mind-body split derives initially from a position that favors the phenomenological pole, the “subject” formulation of consciousness and matter. This perspective is one he inherits from the wider landscape of Indian philosophy, which, unlike our contemporary Western models of materialism, tended historically to minimize a materialist position, even as the legacy of Sāṃkhya, like Descartes legacy,

²⁵ *tata ātmānam eva pramāṭṛ saṃjñam karmabhāvena kartṛbhāvena ca avalambamānā kriyā karmasthatvena kartṛsthatveva vā vivicyamānā ekāśrayaiva bhavanti vastuta ekaiva.*

²⁶ Abhinavagupta follows Sāṃkhya in understanding the subtle body as on the side of materiality, however, his monism entails that consciousness is ubiquitous; that is materiality is ultimately simply consciousness, *cit*.

²⁷ Abhinavagupta, Īśvara Pratyabhijñā Vivṛti Vimarśinī ([6], p. 287): “Consciousness, which here possesses latent traces, herself creates limitation. Consciousness is one alone, [yet] has a specific form where it consists of sound [form, taste] *etc.* which flow down and are absorbed [in consciousness in the form of residual traces] and because of this the subtle body appears separated from [full consciousness.]”: “*Svakṛtasamkocasaṃskāravatī yā cit, tanmayatayā pralīnam apasārītaśabdādirūpa viśeṣam ekam iti puryaṣṭakāntarāder bhinnam.*”

initially proposed a mind-body dualism. However, Abhinavagupta adds a great deal to possible ways of thinking about the mind-body split. His monist position of a spectrum of a subject-object continuum offers a way of incorporating an idea of what Chalmers calls the phenomenological, and what Abhinavagupta points to as the subjective, while managing to avoid an essentialist dualism between the phenomenological on the one hand and the psychological, the neurons firing in that mass of matter called the brain.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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