

Suturing the Body Corporate (Divine and Human) in the Brahmanic Traditions

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Abstract In this discussion, we ponder the discourse about the ‘body of the Divine’ in the Indian tradition. Beginning with the Vedas, we survey the major eras and thinkers of that tradition, considering various notions of the Supreme Divine Being it produced. For each, we ask: is the Divine embodied? If so, then in what way? What is the nature of the body of the Divine, and what is its relationship to human bodies? What is the value of the body of the Divine to the spiritual aspirant? We consider, where relevant, which views are pantheistic and which might be considered panentheistic. Panentheism is connected with discourse on the world as the body of God. It has origins in medieval Christian theology with anticipatory traces in Plato’s *Timeaus*. Under pantheism, were the world to end—were it to collapse or disappear irreversibly, perhaps, into a huge black hole—then God would disintegrate without a remainder as well; for in this view the Divine Spirit is the universe. The same is not true under panentheism which posits a more complex relationship between the Divine and the world. According to panentheism, God pervades the world—God is in the world—and at the same time, God sustains the world—the world is in God. This allows that God be greater than, transcendent of and independent of the world. In our conclusion we remark on how the views we have surveyed link to, resonate with, or dis-compare with the current—should one say revived—interest in intellectual quarters with panentheism.

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Preamble

In this discussion, we ponder the discourse about the ‘body of the Divine’ in the Indian tradition. Beginning with the Vedas, we survey the major eras and thinkers of that tradition, considering various notions of the Supreme Divine Being it produced. For each, we ask: is the Divine embodied? If so, then in what way? What is the nature of the body of the Divine, and what is its relationship to human bodies? What is the value of the body of the Divine to the spiritual aspirant? We consider, where relevant, which views are pantheistic and which might be considered panentheistic.

Pantheism is connected with discourse on the world as the body of God. It has origins in medieval Christian theology with anticipatory traces in Plato’s *Timeaus*. Under pantheism, were the world to end—were it to collapse or disappear irreversibly, perhaps, into a huge black hole—then God would disintegrate without a remainder as well; for in this view the Divine Spirit *is* the universe. The same is not true under panentheism which posits a more complex relationship between the Divine and the world. According to panentheism, God pervades the world—God is in the world—and at the same time, God sustains the world—the world is in God. This allows that God be greater than, transcendent of and independent of the world.

In our conclusion we remark on how the views we have surveyed link to, resonate with, or dis-compare with the current—should one say revived—interest in intellectual quarters with panentheism.

The question of the body of the Divine is of course tied to the problem of theodicy, that is, the rational justification of the existence and goodness (often, omnibenevolence) of God against the overwhelming evidence of evil, natural and moral, in the world. However, this problem does not present itself in the same way in the Indian tradition as it does in the Western Judeo-Christian tradition.¹ Much turns on what is understood by the concepts of ‘God’, ‘Evil’, ‘Reason’ and how they intersect in theological or analytical discourses. This problem will not concern us unduly for the purposes of this inquiry, although we will touch on it at one point in an argument against conceptualizing the Divine with a body.

We begin, in Part I, by surveying the early religious views for and against the inclusion of God among the furniture of the cosmos. We begin with a brief presentation of the *Puruṣa Sukta* (c. 12th century B.C.E.), a Vedic hymn describing the generation of the cosmos from the body of a Primordial Man. It is not often appreciated that the precursor to the Hindu philosophical and religious traditions, i.e., the Brahmanical tradition, owing its canonical origins to the Vedas and the Brāhmaṇas, had no particularly fixed space for a Supremely Divine Being as the one and only highest transcendent personal and personable being. Rather, a myriad of warring, often evanescent (i.e., supervenient upon their evocation in the recited mantras) gods are celebrated. The *Puruṣa Sukta* proves no exception.

The principal Upanishads (8th century B.C.E. to 1st century C.E.) introduce the notion of an absolute, called Brahman, that is omnipresent, eternal, all-knowing, and supremely blissful. Brahman is the world creator and the Self in all beings but is yet

¹ See Purushottama Bilimoria, ‘Karma’s Suffering,’ *Indian Ethics* vol. I, eds. Purushottama Bilimoria, Joseph Prabhu and Renuka Sharma, Hampshire: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2007; and B. K. Matilal, ‘A Note on Śaṅkara’s Theodicy,’ *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 20.4 (1992): 363–376.

not personal. It is not until the *Bhagavad Gītā* (6th–2nd centuries B.C.E.) that we find expression of full-fledged theism. In the *Gītā*, a Supreme Divine Being is described who has all the attendant perfections (omnipresence, omnipotence, omniscience, omnibenevolence) and is personal as well as personable. The text teaches that loving devotion is the appropriate attitude toward the Supreme Divine Being, Lord Krishna, the *puruṣottama* (supreme person).

While the *Gītā* has had a profound impact on religious life in India, the earliest schools of systematic philosophic thought such as Mīmāṃsā (the Exegetes, founded 2nd century C.E.) and Sāṃkhya (the Enumerators, founded 4th century C.E.) did not posit an independent, transcendent divine being. Even Yoga, which is a much later development (2nd–4th centuries C.E., perhaps), only spoke of a Great Being, *Puruṣa-Īśvara*, as an exemplar of one abiding in the highest spiritual state as described in the canon. We discuss the schools in Part II.

Around the Middle Period, a number of hitherto non-theistic systems of thought, especially the atomist-logical school of Nyāya (founded 2nd century C.E.) gradually began to incorporate a Supremely Divine Being with all kinds of powers and properties a transcendental conception would appear to necessitate. But what sort of a body or embodiment would such a God possess and how would this be related to the human body? Would God be subjected to the laws of karma, which is a bodily *qualia*? While the Nyāya played around with basic atomistic ingredients of dyads, triads and relations, they did not develop this theo-metaphysics deeply enough. In the first part of this paper we sketch the debates that went on within the Nyāya school on the substantive nature, status, and purpose fulfilled by such a Divine Being and some of the problems that have haunted the Naiyāyikas ever since.

Of the proponents of the classical schools, it was the Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedāntin Rāmānuja (11th century C.E.) who finally formulated an integrated conception whereby One Body Corporate would be said to be shared by both individual human beings and the Supreme Being (Vishnu, *Īśvara*) alike since they both merged without difference in the unique identity of existence that is Brahman.

We then move to examine how this unitary conception provoked resistance and objections from followers of the Advaita Vedāntin Shankara (8th century C.E.) who believed corporeality of any kind to be nothing but *māyā* or mere illusory superimposition (*adhyāsa*) on the one reality of Brahman. Others objected that Brahman would then be capable of and responsible for all manner of evil to which human corporeal existence leads.

Finally, in Part III we discuss Tantric philosophy in its general features and in the work of one of its most notable exemplars, the Kashmiri Shaivite Abhinavagupta (11th century C.E.). Tantra returns to the notion of an embodied Supreme Divine Being, yet, as we will see, surpasses the early religious tradition in the soteriological value it sees in the human body.

Part I

The oldest text of the Indian tradition, the Rig Veda (RV) (12th–10th centuries B.C.E.), includes a conception of a Body Corporate in a hymn called the *Puruṣa*

Sukta (RV 10.90). The hymn tells of the *puruṣa*, or Primordial Man, and describes a cosmogony in which the Primordial Man gives birth to one Virāj who in turn gives birth to him. The Primordial Man, newly born, divides himself, presumably into the gods. Next, the gods perform a ritual in which the Primordial Man is the offering and Vedic hymns, items used in the performance of ritual, and certain animals are generated. The gods perform a second ritual in which the Primordial Man is again the offering and the four social classes; the three realms of earth, heaven, and intermediate space; and other constituents of the cosmos are born from his body.

From his mouth were made the *brāhmaṇas*, from his arms the *rājanya*-s.
 From his thighs were born the *vaiśya*-s, from his feet the *sūdra*-s.
 The moon was born from his mind, the sun from his eye.
 Indra and Agni emerged from his mouth. From his vital breath was born the air.
 From his navel came the intermediate space, from his head heaven.
 From his feet came the earth, from his ears the four quarters. Thus were the three realms created. (RV 10.90.13-14)

We see, in this portion of the hymn, that the Primordial Man has a body which is like in form to the human body. He has a mouth, eyes, ears, arms, navel, legs, and feet. From this body, all things are created.

Though his body is divided up and the world is created from the body parts, mind, and vital breath of the Primordial Man, he survives the process. Earlier in the hymn it is said that he has ‘thousands of bodies.’

The *puruṣa* has thousands of bodies, eyes, and feet.
 Enveloping the earth on all sides, he extends beyond it by ten finger-breadths.
 The *puruṣa*, verily, is all that is, all that has been, and all that will be. (RV 10.90.1-2a)

This describes his nature currently, after the ritual through which our world was created. The Primordial Man lives on in the multitude of bodies which roam the earth, in the earth itself, and indeed in all things. Creation involves the transformation, not the destruction, of the Primordial Man’s body.

Pantheism seems to be supported in this passage of the hymn, but a version of, or variation on, panentheism is curiously suggested as well by the statement that ‘he extends beyond [the world] by ten finger-breadths.’ The Primordial Man is greater than the world, but he is still limited and not infinite. Does he, then, transcend the world? Can he be independent of it? Or is he like the energy body of a human being which in some esoteric systems is thought to enliven the physical body and extend for a few inches around it, but which is dependent on the physical body as well and shrinks when the physical body is ill or nears death? There is just not enough in the hymn to answer these questions.

We do notice, however, that the form of the Primordial Man is preserved through this process of transformation. For, human beings’ bodies and the pre-creation body of the Primordial Man are homomorphic. The hymn thereby confers a special status on human beings while asserting that we share with the sun, moon, and all that exists a common ancestor in the Primordial Man.

Brahmanism did not make much of the Primordial Man as an object of worship. He did not hold a privileged position among the Vedic gods. While he is omnipresent, it is not clear that he is omnipotent, omniscient, or omnibenevolent. The relationship after creation between human individuals and the Primordial Man is not emphasized. Thus we cannot consider the Primordial Man a Supreme Divine Being.

It is in the Upanishads that we find the tradition's earliest conceptions of a Supreme Divine Being called Brahman. The Upanishads are not systematic. Rather, they present a diversity of teachings in which Brahman is variously conceived.

We can identify certain essential features that are common to, or at least consistent with, the various views presented. Brahman is the creator, world ground, and inner self of all beings. Further, it is 'truth (or the real), knowledge, and infinity' (*Taittirīya Upaniṣad* 2.1). Brahman is omnipresent, omnipotent, and omniscient. Rather than omnibenevolence, the Upanishads emphasize *ānanda* (bliss) as a further supreme quality of Brahman. Since Brahman is the inner self of all beings, the promise represented by the notion of Brahman is that unconditional, unending bliss lies within as an inherent quality of one's true self.

Upanishadic conceptions of Brahman diverge on the matter of secondary qualities such as form, color, and, notably, Brahman's relationship to individual selves.

The view that Brahman is *nirguṇa* or without non-essential qualities, and therefore not embodied, is well known due to the great influence of the Advaita Vedāntin Shankara whose interpretation of the texts defends such a view. In his *Brahma-Sūtra-Bhāṣya* (*BSB*), Shankara argues that Brahman is 'consciousness alone, devoid of other aspects contrary to this, and without any distinguishing features' (*BSB* 3.2.16).² This view, he argues, is declared in the Upanishadic passages such as *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* (*BU*) 4.5.13, which states:

As a lump of salt is without interior or exterior, entire, and purely saline in taste, even so is the Self [or Brahman] without interior or exterior, entire, and pure intelligence alone.³

According to Shankara, Brahman is, essentially, awareness. As such, it is undifferentiated and has no attributes such as color, form, or texture (*BSB* 3.2.14).⁴ He further cites Upanishadic passages such as *KU* 1.3.15 which calls Brahman 'soundless, touchless, colorless, undiminishing.'⁵

Still, Brahman is described as embodied in a number of Upanishadic passages.⁶ *BU* 2.3.1-6 states that Brahman has two forms, one of fixed shape or embodied (*mūrta*) and one without fixed shape or disembodied (*amūrta*). The former is

² Śrī Śaṅkarācārya, *Brahma-Sūtra-Bhāṣya*, Swāmī Gambhīrānanda trans., Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 2000, p. 613.

³ Swami Madhavananda trans., *The Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad with the Commentary of Śaṅkarācārya*, Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1997, p. 542.

⁴ Śaṅkarācārya, *Brahma-Sūtra-Bhāṣya* p. 612.

⁵ Gambhīrānanda, Swāmī trans. *Eight Upaniṣads with the Commentary of Śaṅkarācārya*. Vol. I. Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 2001, p. 176.

⁶ Shankara holds that Brahman is only described as embodied 'for the sake of meditation' (*BSB* 3.2.12). Meditation commonly involves an object on which the practitioner focuses awareness. Though Brahman is not really embodied, Shankara would explain this illusory notion is nonetheless useful to the practitioner as certain stages of his or her practice.

identified as the sun and the latter as the person (*puruṣa*) in the sun. Next in this passage, the human being is said to have two forms, one of fixed shape and one without fixed shape. The former is the physical body and the latter is the inner self. Hence, a homology is asserted between the sun as Brahman's body and the human body: Brahman is embodied in the sun as a human self is embodied in a body of flesh and bones.

Further, the body of Brahman seems to be seen, in this passage, as no less real, no less a locus of identity, than the disembodied form of Brahman. The body is not a mere vehicle or sheath but a form of Brahman presented as equivalent in ontological status to the disembodied form of Brahman. This seems, at least in this passage, to be true of the human body as well.

BU 5.5.1-4 also describes Brahman as the person in the sun. He is said, further, to be embodied by sacred syllables: *bhūr* (earth) as his head, *bhuvas* (intermediate region) as his two arms, and *sva* (sky/heaven) as his feet. The human body is then described in same way. *Bhūr* is said to be the head, and so on. Here the body of Brahman and the human body are described as homomorphic and homologous. Both have a head, two arms, and feet. Both consist of the same sacred syllables. This reflects the Upanishadic notion that Brahman created, in part, through speech.

In *Cāndogya Upaniṣad* (*CU*) 1.7.1-9, hymns (*mantra*) of the Rig and Sama Vedas are said to constitute the human body. Specifically, Rig hymns are identified with speech, sight, hearing, and the luster of the eyes. Sama hymns are identified with the breath, body, mind, and pupils. The self is Rig, Sama and Yajur Vedas, and Brahman. Next, the 'person in the sun,' or Brahman, is identified with the Rig, Sama and Yajur Vedas. Thus, in this passage, the human body and Divine Body are described as homologous but not homomorphic.

Finally, there are passages like *BU* 2.5.1-14 which suggest that the entire cosmos is the body of Brahman. In *BU* 2.5.1, Brahman is identified with both the 'radiant, immortal person' in the earth and the 'radiant, immortal person' in the human body. In the next twelve verses, it is further identified with the indwelling being in each of several paired principles: water and semen, air and vital breath, the four quarters and the ear and hearing, the moon and the mind, lightning and light, clouds and voice, ether and the ether in the heart, *dharma* (moral law) and righteousness, absolute truth and truth possessed by a human person, and humanity and the individual human being. The first member of each pair pertains to the cosmic and the second to the human. A cosmic-human homology is implied with Brahman as the inner self of all the correlated principles. Finally, in *BU* 2.5.14, Brahman is identified with the indwelling self of 'this body' and 'this body.' In keeping with the pattern established in the previous verses, we may take the first body mentioned to be the cosmic body, or all of existence, and the second to refer to the human body. The passages establish a correlation between the entire cosmos, which includes the human species, and the individual human being. Both of these, equally, are bodies of Brahman. Each verse in this passage concludes *idaṃ sarvaṃ*, 'This [Brahman] is all.'

The views in the Upanishadic passages we have presented are pantheistic. Emphasis on human-divine homologies, together with the absence of any positive indications of pantheism in these passages, rules out pantheistic readings of these portions of the texts.

A constant in Upanishadic thought is the conviction that liberation (*mokṣa*), the *summum bonum*, is achieved by realizing that the ‘*ātman* [inner self] is Brahman.’ The nature of the relationship between *ātman* and Brahman is contested. Shankara, for example, holds that it is a one-to-one identity relation, while Rāmānuja, for example, argues that it is a relationship of qualifier to qualified.

Commentators will agree that the realization of the relationship between *ātman* and Brahman is of the highest soteriological value, and that that realization is to be achieved through contemplation of the nature of one’s inner self and contemplation of the nature of Brahman.

If Brahman is embodied, it would seem that the body of Brahman should play an important role in such contemplation. Consider the paean to the sun in the *Īśā Upaniṣad* (*IU*), for example.

The face of Truth is covered by a golden dish.

O Pūṣan, uncover it so it may be seen by [me], one devoted to truth and goodness. (*IU* 15)

Here the visible sun (which in *BU* 2.3.1-6, recall, is said to be the embodied form of Brahman) is taken to conceal the true nature of Brahman. Brahman is embodied, in the sense of being sheathed, by the sun. The sun, then, is not identical to Brahman itself, but concentration on the sun is still a means to realizing Brahman. The hymn makes appeal to Pūṣan, a Vedic deity associated with the sun, to reveal the Truth. In contemplating the sun, the aspirant anticipates the revelation of a deeper truth hidden therein.

Other Upanishadic passages suggest that even if Brahman is embodied, its body may have little soteriological value. *CU* 8.9.1-3 indicates, for example, that it is a mistake to identify the human self with the human body. The passage notes that when the body is attired in fine clothing we tend to think of the self as ‘dressed up’ as well. However, the passage maintains that there is no such correlation, arguing that when the body dies the self does not die, for the self is immortal. Though the self resides in the body, it concludes, the self is not the body. The message here seems to be that the practitioner seeking liberation need pay little attention to the body. Given the numerous analogies drawn between human and divine nature, *CU* 8.9.1-3 further suggests that while Brahman may be embodied, it is not to be identified with its body and its body is of no practical value to the aspirant.

We do not draw the latter conclusion with any certainty. The Upaniṣads are not systematic and there are limits to what we can straightforwardly attribute to the texts. The questions of the existential status and soteriological value of the body of Brahman can only be answered through interpretation of the texts.

We find a more systematic development of a conception of a Supreme Divine Being in the *Bhagavad Gītā*. Lord Krishna, the teacher in the *Gītā* and a human incarnation of the Supreme Divine Being, teaches the warrior Arjuna about his (Krishna’s, that is) divine nature and his relationship to individuals selves and the material world.

In Chapter 11, Arjuna is granted a vision of Krishna’s Divine Form.

Wearing magnificent garlands and garments, anointed with celestial perfume, consisting entirely of wonders, with faces on all sides. (*Gītā* 11.11)

If a thousand suns rose all at once in the sky,
the collective brilliance of those luminaries might be like the splendor of the
Supreme Self. (*Gītā* 11.12)

[Arjuna] the son of Pāṇḍu saw the whole world, with its various divisions,
together there in the body of the god of gods. (*Gītā* 11.13)

The *Gītā* identifies the whole world, including all the gods and all living creatures (*Gītā* 11.15), as the Divine Form or body of the Divine. It retains the Upanishadic notion that the Divine has the cosmos for its body. At the same time, Arjuna sees the body of the Divine as human-like. In the passage above it is described as having faces and Arjuna goes on to describe it as having arms, bellies, mouths, and eyes infinite in number (*Gītā* 11.16). He reports later that it has thighs and feet (*Gītā* 11.23). Thus, his vision is in keeping with the Upanishadic view that the body of the Divine and the human body are homomorphic.

It is suggested in the *Gītā* that the Divine possesses faces, arms, and so on beyond those of the gods, humans, and animals which partly constitute his body. For, Arjuna sees warriors meeting their deaths in battle by rushing into Krishna's mouths and being crushed in his teeth (*Gītā* 11.26-28). He sees whole worlds being swallowed up in Krishna's mouths (*Gītā* 11.29-30). These mouths belong to Krishna and not to any being which is a part of his great body. Further, while in the world there are a wide variety of scents, the Divine Form is fragrant; it wears perfume (*Gītā* 11.11). While both darkness and light of varying shades are present in the world at any given time, the Divine Form is brilliant (*Gītā* 11.12). The *Gītā* depicts the Divine as having its own body, one which may not also be attributed to any other self, suggesting pantheism.

This is never the case in the Upanishads where the body of the Divine, when acknowledged, is identified as the cosmos or some element thereof like the sun. The Divine Being of the *Gītā* has his own body which contains the whole world but is more than that. The same is asserted of the Primordial Man in the *Puruṣa Sūkta*—he too has his own body, but only prior to the ritual through which creation is achieved. However, according to the latter hymn, creation is the transformation of that body into the cosmos. Upon creation, the Primordial Man is said to have bodies, not a body; those bodies which belong to him can also be attributed to other selves. He no longer has a body this is exclusively his own.

The *Gītā* would seem to be the earliest text of the Indian tradition to depict a Supreme Divine Being that has its own body. Correspondingly, the *Gītā* is also said to be the tradition's earliest exposition of theism as the view that there is a personal Divine Being responsible for creation and rulership of the world, which further suggests pantheism. While having a body is certainly not a requirement of a personal Divine Being, the notion that the Divine has his own body supports the idea that the Divine is in himself a fit object of worship. The Divine is not reducible to the cosmos, any aggregate of items therein, or any single item therein. The *Gītā* is inclusivist and allows the worship of the Divine in the world, the sun, the living creatures, one's own self, and so on. Yet, while Krishna acknowledges these paths as valid, he seems to imply that they are meant for others. According to the teaching he gives Arjuna, the Divine must be countenanced as one with a name, a face (in his

human incarnation) or faces (in his Divine Form), and his own character traits (like pleasant fragrance, brilliance, and so on).

We find further positive reasons to consider this view a form of pantheism in such verses as the following.

Earth, water, fire, air, ether,
manas, *buddhi*, and, verily, *ahaṃkāra*:
 so is my *prakṛti* (nature)
 divided into eight parts. (*Gītā* 7.4)

This [*prakṛti*] is lower, but know my other, higher *prakṛti*
 consisting of the life principle,
 O mighty-armed one.

Living beings are maintained by that. (*Gītā* 7.5)

Know that those states which are
 sattvic, rajasic, and tamasic
 come, verily, from me.

But I am not in them; they are in me. (*Gītā* 7.12)

Unlike in the Upanishads where the soteriological value of the body of the Divine is questionable, in the *Gītā* it is clearly very great. Krishna emphasizes the importance of knowing the Divine, describing his nature at length in Chapters 7, 9, and 10. Yet hearing about the Divine does not sufficiently affect Arjuna. It is not until he *sees* the Divine Form that Arjuna *knows* the Divine. His knowledge is evidenced in two ways. For one, he claims to know and exclaims that he did not know Krishna's greatness until he was granted a glimpse of the Divine Form (*Gītā* 11.41). More than that, Arjuna does not make a clear and confident statement of the nature of the Divine until *Gītā* 11.37-43, after his vision. Prior to this, Krishna was the one offering testimony while Arjuna, for the most part, asked questions. Seeing the Divine Form seems to solidify Arjuna's resolve to fight the war and to do so as a form of spiritual practice. It is the key epistemic and motivational turning point for Arjuna. We are led to conclude that the body of the Divine plays an important role in the aspirant's spiritual path.

As we have seen, the early religious tradition produced various conceptions of the body of the Divine. It is worth noting that over time, more and more soteriological value was attributed to the body of the Divine. In the Rig Veda, the human-like body of the Primordial Man provides the stuff of the universe but is lost, *qua* individual body, in the process of transformation in which the universe as we know it is created. The body of the Primordial Man has little relevance to the Vedic goal of ascent into heaven. Where the Upanishads depict Brahman as embodied, we can take it to be eternally so. Yet, the soteriological value of Brahman's body is not clear. Some passages suggest its value is great, while others suggest it may have no value to the spiritual seeker. The *Gītā* retains, from the Upanishads, the idea that the Divine has the cosmos for its body and the conviction that the Divine Body is human-like. We find both of these notions represented in Arjuna's vision of the Divine Form. The *Gītā*, however, leaves behind the Upanishadic ambivalence about the value of the body of the Divine to the aspirant, making Arjuna's vision of the body of the Divine a moment of profound significance in Arjuna's path to realization.

Part II

With the *darśana*-s, or schools of classical philosophy, the tradition takes a turn. They are not, with few exceptions, as favorable toward the notion of an embodied Divine as was the earlier religious tradition.

We begin our discussion of classical philosophy with Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika. Early Nyāya (2nd–7th centuries C.E.) developed a substance ontology toward a narrowly conceived epistemic taxonomy of sixteen *padārtha*-s (categories) only one of which is ontological, *prameya* (restricted object of knowledge). Things that fall under the *prameya* set and its subsets are alone truthfully cognizable (*prameyatva*). In his *Nyāya-sūtra*, Gautama (2nd–3rd centuries C.E.), the early founder, reduces these to twelve: self (*ātman*), body (*śarīra*), sense organs (*indriya*), mind (*manas*), cognition (*buddhi*), sensoria (*artha*, like smelling), activity (*pravṛtti*), its outcome (*phala*), impurity (*doṣa*), pain (*duḥkha*), transmigration (*pretyabhāva*), and finally release through *theoria* (*apavarga*) of the self from all these insufferable tropes. There is talk of release from the pleasure and pain in a state of perfection or *summum bonum* (*niḥśreyasa*) which results from reaching a state of *theoria*, which in Nyāya amounts to attaining comprehensive knowledge (*tattvajñāna*) of the *padārtha*-s *in toto*—what and all there is to know. This will presumably inform the inquirer’s ethico-religious practices as well. But this commitment to *niḥśreyasa* is in no way connected with belief in God, much less merger with the Ultimate Being, and so on.

What in some ways is even more disarming is the fact that there is no *Īśvara*, God, or transcendental Supreme Being mentioned under any of the categories (*prameya*). Gautama mentions *Īśvara* only once in the *Nyāya-sūtra*. The term appears in 4.1.19 in reference to a view held by some opponents in respect of the sole, efficient cause responsible for creation and for dispensatory awards. Gautama rejects this view, arguing that it would make for a causeless causality.⁷ Most scholars consider the text atheistic.

Kaṇāda (2nd century C.E.), founder of the allied school of Vaiśeṣika, does not mention *Īśvara* in the *Vaiśeṣika-sūtra* at all, even though one would think a substance ontology would concern itself with the nature of the ultimate possible being.

Vātsyāyana (5th century C.E.), an early proponent of Nyāya, is also considered to be an atheist. He airs aloud some imagined adversary’s question of whether ‘creatorship’ in God is absent altogether. (He seems to echo the Vedic doubt, expressed in the Rig Veda’s *Hymn of Creation*, as to whether the world came about from being, non-being, or neither (RV 10.129).) He provides the terse answer that this speculation is meaningless until a proof of God’s existence is forthcoming.⁸

⁷ Umesh Mishra, *Conception of Matter According to Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika*, Allahabad, 1936; see also Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika, *Encyclopedia of Indian Philosophies* vol. II, ed. Karl H. Potter, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2003, pp. 100–02.

⁸ Phanibhūsana discusses this in his elucidation to Vātsyāyana. See Debiprasad Chattopadhyaya and Mrinalkanti Gangopadhyaya trans., *Gautama’s Nyāya-sūtra and Vātsyāyana’s Bhāṣya with Phanibhūsana’s Tarkavāgīśa*, Calcutta: Indian Studies Past & Present, 1975, p. 18. Daya Krishna raises the question of why *Īśvara* was thought to be included under *ātman* in the *Nyāya-sūtra*. Daya Krishna, *Indian Philosophy: New Approach*, Delhi: Satguru Publications, 1997, p. 129.

The notion of God was first introduced into Vaiśeṣika by Praśastapāda (6th century C.E.) to buttress his support of realism against Buddhist opponents who argued that the Vaiśeṣika notion of the combination of partless indivisibles is incoherent, and so it must be admitted that the world is unreal.

Later Nyāya commentators tried to find room for a notion of God in the Nyāya system by arguing that *Īśvara* was included under *ātman* which is a *prameya* under the category of substance (or ‘being’) in the *Nyāya-sūtra*. But *ātman* is a matter of inference from various attendant dispositions of the mind and inner life. Does *Īśvara* become merely an object of inference on par with the *ātman*? If so, it is difficult to see the sense in which this leading paragon of early Brahmanic thought is true to what popularly passes as Hindu-dharma or Indian soteriology. Perhaps Gautama was beholden to Vedic or Upanishadic agnosticism or non-theism as early Mīmāṃsākas indeed were. But what of the pantheon of gods (*deva*), goddesses (*devī*) and divinities (*devatā*) of the Vedas and *smṛti* (traditional teachings of human origin)? They are also notably absent from Nyāya metaphysics. Perhaps Gautama, anticipating Heidegger, had thought human beings too late for the gods and too early for God. We are suggesting that these *absences* are conspicuous as even the category of absence (*abhāva*) is not among the catalogue of elusive substances to be known; not to speak of language (*bhāṣa*, other than implied in *śabda*), intentionality⁹, *adr̥ṣṭa* (the unseen effectness), eternal time (*nityakāla*), and *yogaja-pratyakṣa* (mystic empiricism) among other enigmas, which become the cornerstones of Middle Nyāya’s metaphysical realism that surpasses the economy of Gautama’s episteme of legitimate *prameya*-s.

Later commentators also begin to talk of *sādhana*, or spiritual practice, as a means of increasing merit (*puṇya*), minimizing *pātaka* or ‘sin,’ cashing in on past-life merits for the ‘high’ of *samādhi*, or as visualization techniques that enable total recall with total *destruktion* of entire chains of past lives and all impending lives. They take an interest in *sādhana* as the continual practices of ethical restraints as described in the *Yoga-sūtra* and other esoteric manuals, extending even to the way philosophic debate is carried out (*NBh* IV:2, 46, 51). But ultimately, for the commentators, these techniques accomplish nothing more than philosophic truth-making. They simply load more pure universals onto the paradigmatic metaphysics (*anvīkṣikī*) of concern to the philosophical project (*tattvajñāna*). *Īśvara* plays a role in these commentaries, but a strange one. He ‘sneaks in through the back door,’ as it were, as an exemplary model of the desirable all-knowing state.

It is in this context that Bhāsarvajña (9th–10th centuries C.E.) urges that salvation need no longer be dragged over the life-long arduous process of dispelling every bit of misapprehension. Rather, he asserts, God-knowledge can be instantaneously efficacious on the model of self-knowledge of the nondualist Advaitins in respect of Brahman. God is the most reliable *āpta* (trustworthy person) and so his every word should be heard and understood with all our conventional-linguistic powers (*śakti*).

This assertion is awkward given that God in this era, as elaborated by Udayana (10th–11th centuries C.E.), is little more than a *deus ex machina*. Omniscient,

⁹ Mohanty’s attempt to collapse Nyāya epistemology of wholes which cannot be separated from their parts with the phenomenology of intentionality has been rebuked by recent writers on the Nyāya. See Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika, *Encyclopedia of Indian Philosophies* vol. II, p 79.

omnipotent, and one, he is yet merely the efficient cause of the creation, maintenance, and destruction of the universe. He is not a material cause, for eternal atoms provide the material cause. God creates merely by joining atoms together; thus God is limited by the atoms. Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika posits eternal souls which also limit God in that they are ever-distinct from him and subject to the laws of karma over which he is powerless.

As a further limitation, God, in this view, is no great promulgator of moral order; he improves not at all upon the *Dharmaśāstra*-s' prescriptivism of *āśrama* (stage of life), *varṇa* (caste), *status quo*, patriarchal privileges, and other forms of blind obligatoriness.

In early Nyāya, liberation frees one from psychosomatic suffering but also educes one to the state of atrophied, amoral emotionlessness in total detachment from the harried challenges of the third world, a world which is at least illumined by awareness of moral order and thus set apart from the moral nescience of the first and second worlds. The school takes all universals, as with Plato's *eidos*, as eternal and indestructible. It seems that the universals of pain, suffering, birth and death cannot be destroyed. The answer seems to be: detach yourself, be an indifferent witness behind yogic spectacles, and the complex of *kāma-krodha-rāga-dveṣa* (desire, anger, passion, and hatred) will not touch you. Touch was the basis of all *prameya*-s and now even that is discarded. And if these distractions persist, then Gautama and Uddyotakara too had prescribed doing it away from the road: *samādhi* in the forest, or Plato's cave (*Nyāya-sūtra-varttika* IV, 2.42).

While early Nyāya had underscored *niḥśreyasa* alone as the *summum bonum*, with Bhāsarvajña and Udayana a powerful cosmo-teleological argument for God's existence is formulated, promising *mokṣa* (liberation) and *sarvajña* (omniscience) in God's unitary knowledge. Spiritual materialism and divine realism come together to yield a unique transcendental universalism which is located at the furthest possible extreme from its more humble roots in exegetical Brahmanic scholasticism (*Mīmāṃsā*).

More significantly, the collapsing of time and space with God abets Navya-Nyāya's defense of *adr̥ṣṭa* (remote trace-effect), *śakti* (potency), *nitya*-perceptions (which *Īśvara* alone seems capable of), and *śabdapramāṇa* (testimony, which increasingly includes Scripture).

What is the nature or body of God like? We do not get much of a clue. But it must have substance since all the universals reside in God, and real universals cannot be sublimely free-floating. This consideration actually comes from the Vaiśeṣika school. The argument basically is that the world emerges from ordered combination (in dyads and triads) in a process of contraction and expansion of minute atomic substances. The first movement thus resides in the atoms, not in God as such, and it is in virtue of this cause that the universe is in a constant state of motion, change, growth, and decay. Beyond this there is no other cause of the origin of the world. Equipped with *adr̥ṣṭa* and the pre-existent atomic constellation, God in his own eternal playtime (*akālalīla*), somewhat like the Demiurge of Plato's *Timaeus*, promulgates the universe afresh after its *pralaya* (prior temporal lapse).

But how deep does such a God cut into the question of Being, and what is the nature of such a God? Is it *sat-cit-ānanda* (Being-consciousness-bliss) unconditionally as in the Advaita conception of Brahman? Or is this a patriarchal super-being

whose sole task is to be a superintendent and cosmic architect? It would appear that God here is nothing like the Advaitic Brahman, but more like Kant's moral and Aquinas' ontological postulate. Hence, it is to be noted that the arrival of God in Nyāya cosmology is important for a quite different reason. Unlike Vedāntins after Rāmānuja, Naiyāyikas do not prescribe nor appear to pursue any kind of elaborate rituals, practices, or *sādhana* beyond *prayatna* (motivated anxiety) over the strife of the empirical ego and the supplemental *theoria* as worship that Udayana almost in a neo-Vedāntin mood suggests. They all mention yoga and so on, but it is an instrumentalist strategy towards knowledge with certitude (*tattvajñāna*) akin to Descartes' *Meditations* or Husserl's *Cartesian Meditations*.

The philosopher's reason appears to have its own heart. Thus there is no real linking of *praxis* to the *text* or to the quasi-theological proclamations; rather the Naiyāyikas set about consolidating their metaphysical storehouse and down-scaling some of the overgrown hitherto empirical *padārthas*. Hence Raghunātha Śīromaṇi, the 16th century C.E. Nyāya writer, collapses the already ubiquitous time, space, and *ākāśa* (ether) with one super-substance, the being of God (time-in-supreme being), which both simplifies the catalogue of substances (*dravya*) but also makes for eternal time (*nityakāla*), a category which hitherto had not appeared in the Nyāya taxonomy. However, even at this late stage of Nyāya's theology, there is no indication of a meaningful search for God as the Being of *being*, or the Ground of all *be-ing*, or a Being whose own self-erasure shines infinitely in the face of the other as would be true of much of Western theology after Spinoza, Fichte, and Hegel (culminating in Heidegger and Levinas). God is just another self, albeit one writ large or suspended over the cosmos (*paramātmān*), which is not a very sophisticated theistic conception and would scarcely rival even Rāmānuja's more involved and implicative idea of the identity-in-difference of Brahman and the world as the Body of God—which we discuss below.

Equally importantly, the notion of *sarvajñā* (omniscience) is introduced which enables the elevation of the powers of mortal or ordinary perception to the most extraordinary capabilities. No human being is capable of omniscience; and since all reals are objects of God's knowledge, for human beings to know all the reals they must possess God's knowledge. But this begs the question. So Naiyāyikas devise an highway epistemology by which real universals can be isolated and snatched up; the more universals the adept is in contact with the more he knows; once he has conquered all the universals that God indeed operates with, his knowledge is in unity with God: he becomes the Mind of God. Kumārila Bhāṭṭa firing his final salvo at the fishy sage remains skeptical that such a being has ever been seen, and besides if we allow *sarvajñā* for one being to go through then what is there to prevent so many Buddhas (who supposedly ascend to near-omniscient state through strenuous practice of yoga) proclaiming themselves to be God? Thus believers in *yogajapratyakṣa* (realization attained through yoga), God, and other such transcendental superstitions at the expense of Dharma are the real heterodoxists, not those who wish simply to live by the pair of naturally endowed eyes and matching originary textuality, albeit of *apauruṣeyatva* (impersonal) class, which require no presuppositions of *Īśvara*, Divine Revealer, or any other sort of personal author, let alone elevation of corporeality to such an exalted state of being that it reeks underneath or is threatened inexorably with non-being, here as there also.

Shankara (8th century C.E.) had complained that in overlooking the question of the necessity of an intelligent being the Naiyāyikas could not extricate themselves from physicalist and naturalist cosmologies. He also rejected pantheistic and substance theories of God. For, he reasons, things in the world involve change and are contingent, and thus pantheism and substance theories imply change in God. But it seems this criticism applies equally well to Shankara's notion of the immutable Brahman. If we take Shankara to be suggesting that Brahman is the primal substance from which objects (*bhūtavastu*) of the world emanate or are created, then Brahman *qua* substance must also undergo change and transformation. A plurality of substances necessarily implies differentiation in the ultimate reality conceived of as a substance. Unless the ultimate reality is conceived of as an indeterminate and abstract whole, or the relation between the world of existents and the ultimate reality is regarded as absolutely contingent (as that implied in the one and immaterial God of the Old Testament and the world), we cannot avoid this difference. And if any substantial relation is denied, then how would one explain the dependence of the world on Brahman for its sustenance? Does Brahman stop playing host to the world once the task of creation is over? If not, and if the world continues to have its being in Brahman, then, like Spinoza's substance-God, everything that is true of the world is also true of Brahman. This could raise a serious moral problem for Shankara's otherwise truthful (*satyasya satyam*) Brahman.

Consider the blanket answer to these questions which was first voiced by Hegel. The suggestion is that Brahman is essentially conceived of, not as a spirit, or as the Judeo-Christian personal God, but as a purely abstract, impersonal principle, without self-consciousness and whose being is potential not actual, and that because of this the world of particulars can have no part in it, rather they are entirely 'outside' it, alien and independent of it, never in any true sense being created or sustained by Brahman. It follows that such a world is not a cosmos, but a chaos, wholly lacking in either order or structuring form of reason. This is not what Shankara intends.

Shankara reconciles his cosmology to a theistically conceived Brahman in the first instance precisely because he wants to obviate the sorts of charges laid against him above. But at the same time, he is concerned to retain the immutability of Brahman. He also wants to argue for an indeterminate and undifferentiated One without presupposing either dualism or nihilism. Nor does he want to accept creation *ex nihilo*. That being so, how could he have a Brahman that at once creates the world of substance from its being, sustains it, retrieves it into itself, and yet does not undergo any modification or transformation, and is not held responsible for the moral degeneration of the inhabitants of the world? This is Shankara's dilemma.

Shankara proposed to describe Brahman in terms of two definitions, one primary, the other secondary. The primary definition, called here *svarūpalakṣaṇa*, is an *essential* description. The secondary, called *taṭastha-lakṣaṇa*, is a modal, conventional, or *accidental* description.

According to Shankara, one set of scriptural texts speaks of Brahman as the cause of the origin, and so on, of the world, and thus it conforms to the latter definition, while the former definition is found in another set of texts that describe Brahman as *sat-cit-ānanda* (being-consciousness-bliss). Now the *essential* definition is one that does not necessarily predicate any properties of the thing being defined, but gives a description of its essential nature, that which it uniquely *is*. For example, when we

say that God is a necessary existent, we are not predicating the property of existence to God, for God's existence is, by definition, his *essence*. And when we say that God is omniscient, omnipotent, and transcendent, again we are not predicating properties that are apart from God's being. These are identical with God's being.

Shankara's reading of the scriptures tells him that Brahman is infinite, not like any particular in the world, and visibly imperceptible. It would follow that sense perception cannot deliver knowledge of Brahman. Brahman therefore transcends the realm of perception.

Shankara admits that there might be another kind of experience by which Brahman can be realized, though such an experience must transcend the distinction of the subject-object relation and therefore would have to be supra-sensory. Since empirical consciousness has been ruled out, the only kind of consciousness he can now allow for is some sort of undifferentiated consciousness, but a consciousness nevertheless with content. That would imply an intuition, like the thought-form of Kant, that admits of no differentiation, or a consciousness which in itself is infinite. But how can human consciousness, which is finite, be said to be or become infinite consciousness? Is not the human intellect part of the phenomenal world, even if its uniqueness lies in its capacity for intentionality, i.e. being able to relate consciously to objects towards which it is directed?

Shankara thinks that we can talk of Brahman as the cause without modifying the definition in its essential form, for what we are talking about is the undifferentiated ground on which the world is dependent. Causation of the world, then, belongs to the second definition, along with other properties we might want to predicate of the world. Thus contingency, change and activity are aspects of Brahman by virtue of the conventional definition. We thus have two truths, but they are not mutually contradictory since they are at categorically different levels, one higher than the other. The lower is subordinated to the higher and only has its worth in virtue of the higher, but the higher is not conditioned by the lower. Shankara finds this device a convenient means of locating his theistic predilections (which he had earlier used against the Sāṃkhya, Vaiśeṣika, and non-existence theories) in the secondary definition. Thus, in his view, there is a real world which is constituted of divine substance, and, on the other hand, there is a divine all-knowing and caring *Īśvara* who dispenses 'grace' according to the individual's *karma*. The same *Īśvara* collects the essences of sacrifice performed simultaneously in different spatio-temporal coordinates, and so on. The retention of the all-pervasive *Īśvara* solves the problem of discerning two identical terms in the same space-time co-ordinate. Unlike *sat-cit-ānanda*, none of these descriptions of Brahman, however, are literal or definitive.

Two questions arise here: does this two-truths scheme not make the world a mere configuration of appearance and render *Īśvara* superfluous? What is the exact nature of the relation between Brahman and the world? Here we could turn to Shankara's much-discussed model of *māyā* (illusion) to get an idea of how he explains the connection between the world, which is illusory on his model, and Brahman, which is real. There are in fact two models, one based on mistaking a rope for a snake, and the other on the differences between the dream, waking, and deep sleep states. But for lack of time, since we have yet to examine Rāmānuja and Tantra, we will skip this discussion. Suffice it to conclude Shankara's key position is that, despite the greatness of *Īśvara*, Brahman should not be defined in terms of the

properties of *Īśvara*, for there is a transcendence that *Īśvara* does not exhaust in its being.

The differential status given to *Īśvara* in Shankara's metaphysics has divided him from Rāmānuja and most other Vedāntic philosophers. As far as Shankara is concerned, there is Brahman alone and the self (*ātman*) is a term synonymous with that; the self does not subsist in *Īśvara*. Nor are there individuated selves or souls (*jīva*). There is, on the contrary, only one soul, and that Soul is the universal Brahman. Thus, it follows that there is only one transmigrating entity. However, this does not mean that individuals do not exist or that their respective *karma*-s are not capable of determining their own retribution, rebirth, and dispensations. The individual is basically a structure of layered entities (*upādhi*), each with its distinctive body, mind, psyche, senses, and karmic dispositions from previous existences. But the spirit that inhabits each is one and the same generic spirit, namely, Brahman. And this identity, Shankara believes, is asserted in the Upanishadic statement: *tat tvam asi* or 'you are that [Brahman].'

Rāmānuja, on the other hand, claims that *Īśvara* is one with Brahman in a non-different identity relation, and the world is the body of *Īśvara* in a different relation to Brahman, namely that of qualifier to qualified. Nevertheless, Brahman is the material cause of the world, and the world, in turn, is real and not mere *māyā* (illusion). And although *Īśvara* is the universal Soul, within him there are individuated and distinct souls and these souls are as beginningless as *Īśvara* himself. In their distinctive marks, namely of *sat-cit-ānanda*, the souls are in a non-different relation to the universal Soul, but in their conditional existence, in respect of the body-complex, mind, and so on, they are in a relation of difference—but only to *Īśvara qua* Soul, not to *Īśvara qua* Body. That is to say, the individual as a body, and so on, is part and parcel of God's body and yet delimited by a soul. Neither are essentially different from the greater Soul. The category of minimal differentiation we referred to earlier is invoked by Rāmānuja to explain the difference between one individual person and another. For Rāmānuja, it follows that there can never be a *complete identity* or merging of the individual and Brahman (because they are not one to start with and they do not end up being one) in strict ontological—as distinct from epistemological or even devotional-mystic—terms. Thus to Rāmānuja's way of thinking, the material modification of Brahman is more radical than Shankara's appearance or transfiguration criterion implies.

It is worth dwelling on Rāmānuja's counter position a bit longer, as the consequences of his qualifications have probably had more far-reaching impact on both scholasticism and popular practice alike in India than did Shankara's metaphysics. Rāmānuja begins his major text, *Srībhāṣya* (commenting on the same canon, the *Brahmasūtra*, as Shankara had), with the claim that the word 'Brahman' denotes *puruṣottama* (supreme person). So he seems already committed to the locution of the Highest Person, who he describes as the Supreme Reality through whom the world is actualized and who is characterized by omniscience, omnipotence, and supreme mercy, and who is antithetical to all evil. Elsewhere, the Highest Person is also referred to as the Supreme Self (*paramātman*), developing the Upanishadic theme of Brahman as the self of all things. He invokes the famous theophonic vision that Arjuna has of Krishna in Chapter 11 of the *Gītā* which we discussed above.

Bringing these two notions together, Rāmānuja wants to argue that Brahman is a mode-possessor, that the world belongs to Brahman as his mode. Anne Hunt Overzee writes:

[Rāmānuja] illustrates this by referring to the way in which class characteristics are dependent upon particular examples for their meaning. In the same way, he says, individuals are dependent upon Brahman as their Self to enable them to be who they respectively are. To grasp Rāmānuja's meaning here it is important to realize that he argues for the primacy of substance over the class or generic structures that inhere in them. The attribute or mode only attains its status as such through its relation with the substance it modifies and these, he maintains, are inseparable. You could say that the substance is modified by its attributes, but in the case of Brahman and the world, only part of Brahman is thus modified Thus, a body is a 'mode,' since it serves 'as a distinctive feature for a certain substance,' namely, a self. And a body can have no function apart from that self. In this case [of selves *qua* embodied selves], he adds, it is quite correct to co-ordinate . . . [embodied] selves with Brahman, and to declare them as his mode. Thus 'the sum-total of [conscious] and [non-conscious] entities [i.e., the world] is ensouled by the Supreme Brahman inasmuch as it modifies him.'¹⁰

One can also substitute 'mode' and 'modified' with 'supported' and 'support' or just as well with 'in-dwelt' and 'in-dweller'. Brahman in-dwells each embodied self and threads them together as the one Soul which also awakens awareness and self-realization through meditation, devotion, and so on.

This does not put the individual self on par with individual bodies, however. The latter are finite and divided while selves *qua* selves are infinite and undifferentiated. Hunt Overzee writes:

Rāmānuja goes on to explain that the goal of each seeker (devotee) is precisely to distinguish the body/world from the self/Brahman: and to realize the self's proper form, which is, in itself, Brahman-knowledge or consciousness.¹¹

In the meantime, however, there is considerable space for play and *joissance* of devotional/mystical life in the body plenum, since the world-body is also some kind of *vibhūti* (divine realm)¹², the Lord's divine form manifestations are revealed in this realm. This is the sublime virtue of Rāmānuja's differentiated nondualism: the individual self is different from Brahman (the Self), and yet there is a fundamental identity within the difference. Bhakti Yoga (yoga of devotion) is the means, but it is also the end, of attaining and remaining united in loving devotion with the *puruṣottama*. There is initial severance, then supervenience, then the realization of the world-divine unity or oneness in essence with Brahman. The devotee is not fully the same as Brahman though, because unlike Brahman's consciousness, which is unconditioned, that of the individual is conditioned. Nevertheless, for all intents and purposes, it follows that the individual is also intrinsically divine.

¹⁰ Anne Hunt Overzee, *The Body Divine*, Cambridge University Press, 1992, p. 68.

¹¹ Hunt Overzee p. 71.

¹² Hunt Overzee p. 73.

In *Crossing Boundaries*, a collection of essays on the ethical status of mysticism, Jeffrey John Kripal and G. William Barnard examine the various forms of monism and unqualified nondualism, especially those stemming from commentaries of Shankara, for their ethical basis or lack thereof, coming to focus on twentieth-century debates that appear to have gone precisely in this monistic direction.¹³ In an epilogue (which he called a ‘post-logue’) to this volume, Bilimoria argues that without a close re-reading of Rāmānuja and Caitanya’s Bhakti Vedānta fusion as the backdrop, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan’s defense of the ethical nature of monistic Hindu mysticism responding to the charges of Albert Schweitzer is not likely to be appreciated. But then how much mileage can one get out of defensive and apologetic gestures, as distinct from clarity in the original articulations? Here Bilimoria agrees with Kripal’s suggestive insight that equivocations in the tradition precisely on moral issues give little clarity on where the argument is really going. Consider, for example, the case of the epic *Mahābhārata* (of which the *Gītā* is part). It is interesting how the *Gītā* has become a focal site for this discursive battle in the twentieth century. Michael Stoeber is more sanguine on this score and criticizes Arthur Danto for overlooking other kinds of felicities made possible by the Hindu meta-narratives on ethical dilemmas precisely as depicted in the *Gītā* and the Epics more broadly: narrative as ethical instantiation.

Other scholars, too, have resisted the logically necessary connection that German critics like Paul Hacker had made between monism and the absence of ‘a real agent and real other’ in this metaphysics. Taking the Hacker-logic seriously, it would appear that, apart from the few moral injunctions that serve as a preparatory repertoire, ethics is all but absent in Advaita Vedānta. But there are writers who step outside all traditions and attempt to draw out a transcendental vision of the connection of the mystical and the ethical. W. T. Stace, in his quest for a perennialism or essentialization of monism across all religions, promoted a kind of stuporic complacency and in Bilimoria’s view did little to cut deeply into the debate. Thus the reaction to any kind of detached moralism is understandable.

Danto had earlier concretized such a reaction by focusing on Hinduism as harboring an amorally bankrupt ontology, since it preaches a life of escapism from the world which, in turn, is entailed by its defective picture of the universe. In this view, the *Gītā* is veritably an inhuman tract because it does not care about human beings or their real conditions of suffering, for Krishna would sooner have one kill than heal. In this regard its teaching, if it is representative of Hindu philosophy, is peculiarly immoral. On the face of it, it is hard not to agree with the overall sentiment of Danto.

A more decisive assault came from the painstaking scholarly work of R.C. Zaehner. Zaehner betrayed a particular bias towards monotheism and placed monism at the very bottom of the mystical ladder, hence his annotated translation of the *Gītā* has lost its sales, dissuading a reprint. And he tried to underscore the excesses of mysticism across the Eastern and comparable Western cultures by indulging in testimonial experiments and commenting at length on the Charles Manson debacle.

¹³ Jeffrey John Kripal and G. William Barnard eds., *Crossing Boundaries: Essays on the Ethical Status of Mysticism*, New York: Seven Bridges, 2002.

A third approach to nondualism or monism in this respect is that of the free-wheeling mysticism of Agehananda Bharati. Bharati was a staunch believer in the truth of Advaita (nondual metaphysics) even as he appealed to reason. While Bharati denounces the puritanical ethicism of Hindu philosophy along with its equally troubling metaphysics, he is interested in underscoring the neglected Hindu Tantra and an ontology-free mysticism which he would construct around a nondual metaphysics of the kind Shankara advocates. And here he follows the Kashmiri Shaiviate aesthete, Abhinavagupta, who develops a mysticism of *excelsius* on a corporatized nondualist metaphysics. Bharati, incidentally, was an Austrian-born scholar who had himself initiated in the Dasnami Shankaraite sect in south India (hence his adopted name). So Bharati was a forceful advocate of rational mysticism with ethics, as Carl Jung was an advocate of mystical psychology without ethics. One might call this a ecstatic-hedonistic nondualism enacted on Brahman's impersonal body. To appreciate what Bharati was on about, one has to understand what Tantra has been about.

Part III

Tantra means extension (from *tan*, to stretch, as the warp on a loom). It refers to a broad and diffuse body of yogic practices and teachings, and often also to texts in which they are captured. Beginning in the 4th or 5th centuries C.E., Tantra arose as a religious movement which crossed lines of orthodoxy, school, and even culture. So great was its influence that we speak of the 'Tantric revolution.' Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, and Jainism all came to incorporate Tantra in some way and to be significantly, and permanently, altered by it. Persian, Greek, and Tibetan religious practices were impacted as well.

In India, Shankara contributed to this movement by drawing attention to Tantra through metaphorical references in his writings; other nondual scholastic writers also adopted, rather freely, the symbolism of Tantric practices for their own ends. Like Shankara, however, they remained stoically opposed to the practices themselves which most Vedānta schoolmen considered to be antinomian, abominable, and sure paths to insanity. Tantrics, on the other hand, tend to the view that the Jñāna Yoga of Shankara's Advaita, the Bhakti Yoga of the *Gītā*, and other more traditional yogic paths lead to spiritual impotency.

The variety among Tantric teachings and practices is great yet there is, to be sure, syncretism of paths. To name some commonalities: Tantrics typically devalue world renunciation and instead promote the goal of world enjoyment. The body, they commonly affirm, is not an obstacle to liberation but a means thereto; practices typically aim, ultimately, at transformation of the body into a divinized, immortal form.

Yogic means vary widely among Tantrics but generally involve initiation and ritual, meditation, *prāṇāyāma* (controlled breathing), *mantra*, *mudrā* ('seals' including hand gestures, special visual focal points in the body, *bandha* or energetic 'locks,' and combinations of some or all of these with bodily postures), *yantra* (geometric diagrams which are visualized), and more—even philosophic inquiry is part of it. Interest in alchemy, as a system of transmutation of base metal into gold or

gem stones, is another commonality. Some Tantrics actually engage in the practice, while others find in it potent metaphors through which to understand their practices. Similarly, some lineages include ritualized sexual intercourse among their practices, while others engage in the symbolic performance of intercourse. The Kashmiri Shaivite Abhinavagupta (11th century C.E.) employs alchemical imagery to describe the yogic value of sexual intercourse. He explains sexual fluids, and their symbolic correlates, as the 'base metal' the practitioner seeks to transmute into the spiritual 'gold' of the divinized body. Thus, the flesh-and-blood human body figures centrally in his Tantric method and the goal is envisioned in terms of the body.

As for the metaphysical underpinnings of their teachings, Tantrics typically hold a pantheistic view in which the practitioner as a whole, including his body, is seen as a manifestation of the Divine and the Divine is the universe understood to be a great embodied conscious being. But there is diversity of metaphysics as well; as we will see, Abhinavagupta's view is pantheistic.

Along with the emphasis on the notion of body, gender is often important in Tantra. Some lineages assign the feminine gender to the Divine, others the masculine, while still others understand the Divine as having masculine and feminine aspects and recognize some kind of relationship between these two as metaphysically fundamental. Lineages of the latter sort may teach, for example, that the manifest universe is the body of the Divine *qua* Goddess, and that the Goddess, is the divine consort of the unmanifest Supreme Divine Being to whom is attributed the masculine gender.

Abhinavagupta holds a nondual view in which the masculine Shiva is the one Supreme Divine. Shiva is absolute, the totality of all things. The manifest cosmos is his body, as well as his consciousness—the view is idealist—and power. Due to this identity with the world, Shiva appears to be divided. But this is just how it seems for ultimately Shiva is one and indivisible. He creates the cosmos of apparently distinct phenomena by blissful, spontaneous emission¹⁴—and a sexual metaphor is certainly intended. As human semen shares, in some sense, in the essence of the man who produces it, the world emitted by Shiva possesses his essence. Just as creation is explained as an activity of Shiva so is differentiation which results in apparent diversity. Differentiation is the activity of Shiva concealing his wholeness.

Abhinavagupta explains that the world is emitted by Shiva's *śakti* or power. *Śakti* is employed by many Tantrics as a name of the Goddess. Abhinavagupta speaks of the Goddess, equates her with Shiva's power, and recognizes for her a role in ritual and other yogic practice. He maintains, though, that ultimately the Goddess is not other than Shiva.

Under this view, subject and object are ultimately like in essence as manifestations of Shiva's consciousness; Abhinavagupta is an idealist. All things share the two fundamental qualities of Shiva: *prakāśa* (self-illumination) and *vimarśa* (self-awareness and will). K. C. Pandey explains the view: subjects exhibit self-illumination and self-awareness in their making themselves known to

¹⁴ Paul Muller-Ortega, *The Triadic Heart of Śiva*, Sri Garib Dass Oriental Series No. 214, Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications, 1989, p. 101.

themselves.¹⁵ (Much like Descartes, Abhinavagupta argues that the existence of the subject cannot be doubted as it is the basis of all experience.) Pandey further explains that objects of experience are at once *prakāśa*—for if they were not intrinsically luminous they could never be experienced—and *vimarśa* for, according to Abhinavagupta, objectification, which amounts to differentiation of that which is ultimately one with the subject, is an act of will on the part of the subject.¹⁶ Of course, all subjects are essentially Shiva and are one with all objects of their experience, which are essentially Shiva as well.

With a commitment to nondualism that arguably runs deeper than Shankara's, Abhinavagupta contends that Shiva cannot be non-whole, that everything he creates must be essentially, and wholly, Shiva. Human beings, then, contain the entire universe in their bodies. The practitioner is promised that he possesses all the powers of Shiva, though it may take lengthy and intense yoga practice to realize them. Total autonomy, omniscience, superhuman powers, bodily immortality, and identification with the godhead—although not at the expense of his autonomy, as Shiva is inherently free—are the aims. Control and cultivation of the body—which include not just the physical aspect but *prāṇa* or vital breath, vital energy, mind, and consciousness—lead to realization of one's fully divine nature and thereby liberation. In fact, David Lawrence notes that 'Abhinavagupta praises the body as the supreme *līṅga* [phallus, a common symbol of Shiva] and *mandala* [sacred symbol of the whole] in which there is worship of . . . God.'¹⁷

Abhinavagupta also insists that Shiva transcends the cosmos. His view panentheistic, not pantheistic. Paul Muller-Ortega calls it a 'dual-non-dual viewpoint:' while Shiva's power, which manifests as the cosmos, is inseparable from him, Shiva is independent of his creation.¹⁸ The arguments seems to be that since Shiva is the cause of the cosmos, he must be independent of it; he seems to imply *asatkāryavāda*, the view that the cause and effect must be distinct. At the same time, it seems that Abhinavagupta's conviction that each element of the cosmos is wholly Shiva implies *satkāryavāda*, the view that the effect pre-exists in the cause. How can he maintain both these views? We cannot explore this question here, but will simply suggest that perhaps Abhinavagupta's commitment to nondualism extends to the metaphilosophical level and inclines him to embrace both of these seemingly incompatible views.

This issue aside, one's body *is* Shiva's body under his view, and so for Abhinavagupta, Shiva's body is of tremendous value to the one seeking liberation (as is, comparatively, the practitioner's body). Abhinavagupta has this in common with the *Gītā* which, as we have argued, implies that the Divine Form is of great value to Arjuna. However, it is *seeing* Krishna's luminous, many-limbed body that proves a transformational moment for Arjuna. According to Abhinavagupta, one's own body is Shiva's body; he emphasizes being over seeing.

¹⁵ K. C. Pandey's introduction to Abhinavagupta, *Īśvara-Pratyabhijñā-Vimarśinī* vol. 2, ed. R. C. Dwivedi, K. A. Subramania Iyer, and K. C. Pandey, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1986, pp. xiii–xv.

¹⁶ Abhinavagupta pp. xiii–xv.

¹⁷ David Peter Lawrence, *The Teachings of the One-Eyed One*, Albany: State University of New York Press, p. 141.

¹⁸ Muller-Ortega p. 103.

We have seen that the *Puruṣa Sūkta*, Upanishads, and *Gītā* each accept, in its own way or ways, the view that the Divine has the cosmos for its body. Each expresses homomorphism or homology between the human and Divine. With the Tantric revolution, the notion of the Divine as embodied again gains wide acceptance along with the notion that there is some important correlation, such as the homoessentiality Abhinavagupta maintains, between the human body and the Divine body. This is significant to our understanding of the broad historical curvatures of the tradition. It is also curious. While the roots of Tantra are obscure, Tantra is often thought to be non-Vedic and, rather, aboriginal in origin. Did the Tantrics inherit their views of the body of the Divine from Vedic thought? Or might the Vedic notions of human-Divine homology derive from the same source(s) as do Tantric pantheism/panentheism? We can merely raise these questions.

Conclusion

We have made a long journey, beginning with the early Indian religious tradition as represented by the Vedas, Upanishads, and *Gītā*, then moving from Nyāya, Shankara, and Rāmānuja's open-ended devotional yoga, and finally to the nondualist Tantric philosophy of Abhinavagupta. Centering our discussion on the notion of Divine embodiment, we have encountered a variety of views. This is no surprise; the Indian religious tradition is as varied as it is old. Some understand the Supreme Divine Being as embodied; among those, some such as Abhinavagupta see great value in the body of the Divine for the practitioner while Upanishadic thinkers seem divided or undecided on this issue. The Divine may be embodied, but this may be ultimately of little import to the spiritual aspirant. We have seen that others argue that the Divine cannot be embodied while still others contribute the view that there is no Supreme Divine Being.

Given the diversity of the tradition, the commonalities we have found are all the more notable. All views we have presented that affirm Divine embodiment posit some sort of human-divine homology. History provides a partial explanation for this. The early views of Divine embodiment which we presented were all found in texts of the Brahmanical tradition, the Rig Veda, Upanishads, and *Gītā*. These texts, arguably, represent an historical continuity of thought. However, that continuity, at least on the question of whether the Divine has a body and if so, what kind, is broken in the classical era by the wide-ranging speculation in which the philosophical schools engaged. Yet, when the tradition eventually produces new notions of Divine embodiment, they emerge from the Tantric milieu which also takes the human body and Divine Body to be homologous—of course, according to Abhinavagupta, all finite individuals and things are homoessential to Shiva. The historical connection between Tantra and the Brahmanical tradition is quite unclear and the return of the view that the cosmos is the body of the Divine raises questions about this connection which we have ventured to ask but cannot answer. Nevertheless, this similarity between Tantric metaphysics and those of the early Brahmanical tradition is evidence that the millennia-old Indian religious tradition is marked by certain similarities that balance its great diversity.

Of special interest to the Western reader may be the examples of panentheism we have discussed from the Rig Veda, *Bhagavad Gītā*, and Abhinavagupta's Tantra.

Charles Hartshorne is one name in modern philosophy prominently associated with panentheistic thinking. His process theology is more panentheistic than it is pantheistic. Hartshorne indicates his serious commitment to the body metaphor when he employs it in elaborating upon the organic character of the world.¹⁹ The world consists of individuals which are the constituents of a larger, all-inclusive whole. Like a living creature, this whole is both composite and simple; it exhibits complexity and integrity. When one is speaking of creatures, the emphasis falls upon multitudes of individual components of the world. When one is speaking of God, the emphasis falls upon the unity and singularity of the world. God is the one truly cosmic individual. It follows then that he is the all-encompassing, unencompassed one who is without peer or rival.

Stephen H. Phillips has carried out a careful comparison of Hartshorne's view of God and God's mutability with that of the modern Indian theist Sri Aurobindo.²⁰ There seem also to be resonances between Hartshorne's thought and that of Abhinavagupta which indicate fertile ground for comparative work. The notion that the world is the body of the Divine is a correspondence that could provide a nice jumping-off point for such work. For, while the two find common ground here, we find that even the body metaphors they employ vary. For Hartshorne, finite beings and things are elements of God's body. For Abhinavagupta, quite differently, apparently finite beings and things can be seen in one sense as microcosmic replicas—in essence, even if not in apparent morphology or function—of Shiva the macrocosm. However, in another important sense, all beings and things are fully Shiva; they are the macrocosm.

The ways in which Hartshorne and Abhinavagupta handle other key issues, such as the coordination of unity and multiplicity and God's rulership of the world, differ as well, but not so much that meaningful comparison is precluded. Rather, side-by-side examination of their views promises to deepen our appreciation of panentheism just as comparison of the facial features of two brothers can serve as a platform for exploring, understanding, and celebrating a family's genetic heritage.

We cannot, for obvious reasons, engage in this project here. Our goal has been to provide brief exploration of numerous important views of the Divine, and Divine embodiment, of the Indian tradition. If our work here has any value, it cannot be in its depth of detail but can be in its providing a sketch of a vast terrain, a sketch which might reveal entry points for further study into, and comparative projects involving, the constituents of this rich tradition.

¹⁹ Charles Hartshorne, *Man's Vision of God and the Logic of Theism*, Willett, Clark & Co., 1941, p. 175.

²⁰ Stephen H. Phillips, 'Mutable God': Hartshorne and Indian Theism,' in *Hartshorne: Process Theology and Philosophy*, eds. Robert Kane and Stephen H. Phillips, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989.