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Are We Three?

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A Mindful Trialogue

“I think therefore I am.” – Rene Descartes

“I feel I am, but I think I am not.” – Kedar Joshi

“If we can really understand the problem, the answer will come out of it, because the answer is not separate from the problem.” – J. Krishnamurti

Scene: The philosophy department at Tilak Maharashtra Vidyapith, a university in Pune.

Players: Sushama, a professor at the Vidyapith, is a philosopher who’s joined our familiar friends Ram and Kedar. Actually since the meeting is at her office, you could say Ram and Kedar have joined her.

Sushama: You two are quite the celebrities, being in the Pune papers and all. In fact that’s where I first read about your Pune Journal of Philosophy. It made me want to get in touch with you. It struck me, given our common interests, we could all benefit from collaborating in our philosophical efforts.

Kedar: Well Ram and I usually discuss a philosophical topic, then he goes off, usually on a tangent, and writes a Ram and Kedar dialogue. We’ve written five so far and all but one has been published and by published I mean outside Pune Journal of Philosophy. So we’ve developed a somewhat successful formula; I don’t know if we can tinker with it and produce a ‘trialogue’ instead of a dialogue.

Ram: Hold on. I think a trialogue sounds intriguing. We can at least give it a ‘trial’. Sorry, sometimes I think I make bad puns for a living instead of this non-profit Pune Journal of Philosophy which is just a hobby. But seriously, the one dialogue we haven’t had much success with has been a philosophy of mind dialogue called ‘From Slumdog to Maddog’...

Kedar: My title...
Ram: Yeah, one editor said it was too filled with ‘personal pathologies’ to be published...So anyway we’ve been meaning to revisit philosophy of mind topics for a new dialogue but so far our two-wheeler has lacked a kick-start.

Sushama: At nearly 80 years of age I don’t know how much of a kick-start I can provide. But tell me some of your ideas and I’ll see if I can contribute. Right now I’m working on my doctorate on the subject of J. Krishnamurti’s philosophy so I may also bring some ideas from Indian philosophy to bear.

Kedar (snickering): It’s commendable that you want to plunge right into it but Ram here is very systematic, very top down. He always starts with a title.

Ram: I know Kedar is mocking me but he’s right about one thing. Usually I have some idea of what direction the dialogue should take. My fixing on the title, be it my own suggestion or another participant’s, is a concise way of getting participants to think along the desired lines.

Sushama: Do you have a title in mind right now?

Ram: I do. It’s ‘Are We Three’?

Kedar: That’s a new one. I thought we had agreed on my, ‘The Self-Evident Mind’?

Sushama: I like ‘Self-Evident Mind’ better, though I’m not sure either is best. ‘Are We Three?’ just refers to the fact that this is a trialogue doesn’t it?

Ram: Well it’s true I just now thought of it because it struck me that for the first time, we are three...

Kedar: I get it. And you put it in the form of a question because you’re not sure whether the trial trialogue will peter out back into a dialogue.

Ram: No Kedar. I actually have high hopes for a trialogue. My title has a double meaning. It superficially refers to the fact that it takes three to make a trialogue. But on a deeper level it refers to a philosophy of mind issue I want us to explore: is each of us individually a composite of distinct selves, perhaps three in number?

Sushama: I agree that we’re a multiplicity. But why do you fix on three? Do you have in mind something like Freud’s id/ego/superego classification? You know Freud is very much out of fashion don’t you?
Kedar: It’s OK. Ram likes out of fashion things. His writing philosophical dialogues itself is a case in point. I don’t know if anyone since Plato has written philosophical dialogues. As he says in the banner of Pune Journal of Philosophy, he wants to make philosophy entertaining. Personally I don’t know if philosophy is entertaining to anyone but philosophers. And they prefer academic treatises not dialogues.

Ram: Uh, I can see a trialogue is going to be a challenge. It’s like playing rummy with three people instead of two: sometimes the wrong person throws a card you want.

Sushama: OK we’ll try to be more collaborative. Which card did you want to pick up?

Ram: I just wanted to get back to the title and your observation about Freud. It’s true he’s out of fashion but it’s mostly for his views on sexuality. Though Freud didn’t know it at the time, the anatomical evidence does suggest something like his id/ego/superego classification being realized in the structure of the brain. Specifically, the reptilian part of our brain is responsible for all the primitive appetites, aggressions and fears, like Freud’s id. The mammalian part is responsible for all social and nurturing behaviors, and mutual reciprocity and is, I think, the origin of Freud’s moralizing superego. And the cerebral cortex, the outermost region of the brain, is the decider between these often conflicting impulses and is like Freud’s ego.

Kedar: You know Sushama, since he told me this a while ago, I did some Wikipedia research. It says (pulls out a paper out of his black bag and reads): “Even though (Freud’s) model is structural and makes reference to an apparatus, the id, ego and super-ego are functions of the mind rather than parts of the brain and do not correspond one-to-one with actual somatic structures of the kind dealt with by neuroscience.”

Ram: Well bully for Wikipedia. But seriously, there may be no one-to-one correspondence, but when Freudians say the id is operational in a person, I bet more of the reptilian brain lights up than any other; and similarly for the other classifications. In fact the study of the brain’s structure sheds light on what the id, ego and superego really are in the same way that chemistry has revealed that water is really H₂O. For example, we may discover that the superego is divided between the mammalian brain and the cerebral cortex, indicating there is a rational component to our social impulses.

Sushama: Perhaps this Freud vs. neuroscience debate is unproductive, especially since none of us really know much about it. But isn’t the point that whether
you’re talking about the mind or the brain you are talking about something which has three parts. I am not that familiar with Freud or neuroscience but it reminds me of Plato’s charioteer metaphor.

Kedar: Uh, I don’t know that one. Could somebody explain?

Sushama: Let me. Plato in his dialogue the Phaedrus compares the soul to a chariot with an ego-like charioteer pulled in opposite directions by a noble white horse which seems like Freud’s superego and a baser black horse which seems like his id. Plato views the charioteer as only infrequently being swayed by the baser black horse. I think Freud seems less original when seen in that historical context.

But Ram, before we see id/ego/superego everywhere—ha, ha maybe I see it in the three of us—, let’s remember there have been other tripartite divisions of the soul. Aristotle’s division in De Anima of the soul into vegetative, animal and human components in particular comes to mind. And even to stick with modern psychology, I’m not sure where the conscious/unconscious/subconscious distinction fits in all this.

Ram: You raise an interesting point. Historically I can make out two types of theories about the mind, each motivated by a different goal. Do you want your theory to explain human behaviour or do you want it to explain human functioning.

Kedar: First I want you to explain the difference.

Ram: Gladly. Human behaviour is explained by the fact that we’re individuals living in society. We have our own desires but we’ve also internalized society’s expectations of us and we’re constantly balancing between these. And to the extent the balancing involves a conflict between different desire-sets, you’re going to view the mind as composed of different personalities corresponding to the number of desire-sets.

But if you want to explain not human behaviour in society, but human functioning in the world of forces, objects and other nonhuman constraints, then positing different sub-personalities is no help. Whatever personality-type is operating, it must deal with the world using the one common body and so must interact with the world in the one common way.

As people in midlife crises are fond of pointing out, we are not what we do. The ‘whys’ of behaviour are explained by what we are, the ‘hows’ of function are explained by what our capacities are.
**Sushama:** I think you’re right in assessing the difference between id/ego/superego as well as Plato’s charioteer metaphor on the one hand and Aristotle’s vegetative, animal and human souls on the other; the former explains behaviour in terms of sub-personalities and the latter explains function in terms of capacities. But I’m less sure how your distinction applies to the conscious/unconscious/subconscious classification. It applies to behaviour not function and yet seems to be phrased in terms of capacities of the mind not personalities.

**Ram:** I would disagree with you. It’s true the unconscious explains behaviour, but it seems to lack a personality only when you consider autonomous functions like regulating heartbeat. But that’s not how it’s conceived by psychologists. The unconscious as a psychological term is a faculty that works to suppress memories, emotions, etc. that are too disturbing for the conscious mind to deal with. In that way it has definite desires and manifests a secretive personality. So in general I would say the distinction holds: behaviour is explained by desires and motives and desires and motives constitute a personality…so if you want to explain behaviour you’ll postulate sub-personalities—if you want to explain function you’ll come up with different explanatory entities.

**Kedar:** You often bend over backwards to rescue a pet theory but here you may be right. Still haven’t we spent too much time on behaviour-explaining theories to use your phrase? The more active debate among philosophers of mind these days is about what you call functional theories of mind.

**Sushama:** Yes, I would say functional theories of mind have ruled the philosophical roost ever since Descartes characterized the mind as a thinking substance. But in that way doesn’t he represent a unified, non-tripartite view of the mind?

**Kedar:** Yeah, from a functional viewpoint, I too would say, ‘We Are One’.

**Ram:** But let’s not forget even Descartes’ uses the term ‘thinking’ to broadly gloss over three distinct activities he himself recognizes: sense perception, rational thinking and belief formation. These are echoed in modern computational theories of mind, which also seem to affirm ‘We Are Three’. Sense perception is receiving input, thinking proper is processing input, and belief formation not to mention willing the body to move is producing output.

To be sure the distinction is not always so clear-cut: after Marr’s work, which showed the eye solves differential equations in producing a 3-D image, we know how process-laden some input like vision can be; and keeping in mind AI’s frame problem, we know how belief-or-output-laden modeling a process like
thinking or even receiving input can be. Perhaps because one biological structure—the neuron—underlies all three, it’s hard in practice to always draw the distinction very finely. Still it’s no accident that the input/process/output distinction has intuitive appeal. On this view, the mind is like a Turing machine, designed by evolution to function in a competitive environment.

**Sushama:** Hmm… input/processing/output definitely sounds more modern than sensing/thinking/willing … but as different as the activities are I can’t help but like Descartes think there is some one thing underlying them all, something more fundamental which we should really identify with the mind, maybe consciousness, as mysterious as that is. Besides being in a state, the ‘machine’ seems to know what state it is in.

**Kedar:** That self-knowledge or consciousness is key. It shows that unlike machines, our minds are not purely physical things. That is the essence of the famous ‘Mary’s Room’ argument.

**Sushama:** The debate between composite/materialist and atomic/nonmaterialist theories of mind is also present in Indian philosophy in the Sankhya Darshan and Nyaya Darshan schools respectively. But Mary’s room is not ‘sublet’ in this corner of India. Perhaps you can give a quick sketch of it.

**Kedar:** Sure. Mary is a super-scientist who has been reared in a black & white room. She learns all the physical sciences from physics to neurophysiology by way of lectures she sees on her black & white TV set. Then one day she’s let out of her room and sees colors for the first time. She asks, pointing out the blueness of the sky, the redness of a ripe tomato, ‘What’s that?’ She’s told by her liberators that those are colors. She responds, ‘No, before I was let out, I knew all about colors—that they were caused by differences in the wavelengths of light—but this is something completely new’.

Since Mary learns something new upon being let out of the black & white room, what she learns—what it is like to be conscious of colors—is not explicable in terms of her complete knowledge of the physical sciences.

**Sushama:** Interesting argument if a little too hypothetical. But I think it’s a bit hard to state. If I’ve understood correctly, the argument is really about all sensations, not just colors, which may’ve been chosen for dramatic effect. In other words, if Mary has no physicalist account of colors, she should for the same reasons not have had a physicalist account of what it’s like to see black & white.

**Ram:** Forget seeing black & white. Consider the sense of smell. Suppose Mary smells only disinfectant smells in the room and has a physicalist account of them;
then on being let out, she smells a rose. This is arguably analogous to the original situation but it would be unusual if Mary was puzzled to her physicalist core by the smell of a rose; it would be unusual because there is no reason why a biochemical account could be given of disinfectant smells but not the smell of a rose.

Similarly consider the sensation of lifting weighted objects, where also we may be more content with physicalist explanations, the point being there is more resistance to physicalist explanations of vision than some other sensations. And not coincidentally more of the brain is devoted to visual stimuli than any other which fits right into the physicalist story.

**Kedar:** That’s an interesting point. Others have also pointed out that conscious experience changes with brain damage which is a physical thing. But these arguments only show that physical things are involved in perception, not that they constitute perception.

But perhaps we’re getting ahead of ourselves. You two are right: the argument is really about all sensations; it’s just more dramatic with colors. Sometimes I prefer how Leibniz puts it. I read in a Wikipedia article that Leibniz asked his readers to imagine a person enlarged so you could enter him like a mill…

**Ram:** Maybe the person could be called John Stuart Mill?

**Kedar:** You just can’t help it can you? Anyway, Leibniz argued that though you might see all sorts of things inside ‘John Stuart Mill’ like gears, pulleys and levers, you would never see a sensation.

Both Leibniz’s version and Mary’s room show that sensations, and therefore the mind, cannot be explained by purely physical processes.

**Ram:** Hold on. That’s too quick. I read Jackson’s paper, ‘What Mary Didn’t Know’ after you mentioned him. (turns to Sushama) Jackson is the originator of the Mary’s room argument and I didn’t want to just rely on Wikipedia summaries. Jackson formalizes his own argument as follows (writes on a blackboard in Sushama’s office):

(1) Mary (before her release) knows everything physical there is to know about other people.

(2) Mary (before her release) does not know everything there is to know about other people (because she learns something about them on her release).

Therefore,
(3) There are truths about other people (and herself) which escape the physicalist story.

For purposes of the argument, Jackson summarizes physicalism as follows:

“If physicalism is true then if you know everything expressible in explicitly physical language, you know everything.”

Kedar: I don’t know why Jackson states the argument in terms of other people. The argument is most forceful when restricted to what Mary knows about herself. Despite knowing all physical facts, Mary doesn’t know what it’s like to see red.

Ram: Perhaps Jackson wants to emphasize that it’s a broader swath of knowledge that is left out of the physicalist picture than just personal knowledge. But I agree: the argument is most forceful when confined to what Mary doesn’t know about herself. That being suggested by the title, it’s curious Jackson doesn’t flush out the argument exclusively in those terms...

Kedar: Maybe unlike you, he doesn’t start his article by coming up with a title. Ha Ha.

Ram: Anyway, I wrote Jackson’s version of the argument on the blackboard because it is stated as a formal, deductive argument with what I think are true premises. Therefore I believe the conclusion. But I want to maintain that the nonphysicalist truths the argument shows the existence of are fully explainable by purely physical causes to the extent that they can be explained at all. Before her release Mary, though she knows all physical facts about seeing red, doesn’t know what it is like to see red. But I don’t think it shows that seeing red is not caused by the eye being a certain way and the tomato being a certain way, etc., i.e. by purely physical things. In the future we may be able to build a robot that truthfully says, ‘I see red’.

Kedar: How would you know the robot was being truthful?

Ram: We would presumably know whether we’d programmed the robot to lie or not.

Sushama: No I think Kedar’s point is that the robot could be mistaken, not that he’d intentionally lie. For example, he might not be able to see anything like we do—just his programming dictates that under certain conditions he’d say he sees red.
**Ram:** True, but we might also know whether the robot has been merely programmed to simulate human behaviour or is actually exhibiting human behaviour. I admit this is tricky. In fact Searle’s Chinese room argument seems to show that things like understanding a language are impossible purely as a result of following a program or set of instructions. Understanding has to come up out of the hardware involved in what we’ve called input.

But if we have reason to think that the hardware is as appropriately complex as our own, we might say the robot sees red purely as a result of the hardware, i.e. physical things. Searle does allow for this possibility.

**Sushama:** Hmm…I wonder if a color-blind scientist would be able to build such a robot. Wouldn’t that show the distinction you want to make? The scientist wouldn’t know what it’s like to see red but he would know all the things that go into seeing red because he’s able to reproduce them.

**Kedar:** You two are missing the point, the point Leibniz made when he described walking into a person as into a mill. Even if the scientist could build such a robot, the robot might know what it’s like to see red; the scientist, being color-blind, still wouldn’t know. Mary’s room still works: there is a gap between all the physical accompaniments of seeing red and the experience of seeing red. And the EXPERIENCE of seeing red, seeing blue, etc. is what consciousness is. So the scientist has no real understanding of consciousness even though he’s able to reproduce it. Consciousness may arise when certain physical things are present but that would only show constant conjunction not a causal relationship.

**Sushama:** Hold on Kedar. I think you’re in danger of straying from your best point. The color-blind scientist could use his knowledge of neurophysiology to repair his own color-blindness. Still I think you’d say he wouldn’t by his physical tinkering have an explanation of what it’s like to see red. He would have an understanding of what it’s like to see red but that understanding isn’t identical to the knowledge involved in his self-repair. I think I agree with this.

But you should be wary of describing the gap in terms of constant conjunction and causal connection. After all, following Hume, we know in any causal chain, it’s only constant conjunction we observe, not some necessary causal connections. The feeling of necessary connection comes from habit.

**Ram:** Good point. Maybe the habit of making a necessary connection between seeing red and the usual physical accompaniments will arise only after sufficient repetition, after not just the brilliant scientist reproduces consciousness but every kid on the block has a toy do-it-yourself consciousness kit. Seeing red may then become as prosaic as the sensation of lifting a weight.
**Kedar:** Look: consciousness is most certainly a real event or phenomenon. A real event or phenomenon cannot exist without the existence of some real, physical substance or thing. Consciousness, however, in logical or conceptual terms, is, SELF-EVIDENTLY, absolutely distinct from any possible spatial structure or system; most undeniably, no knowledge of any possible spatial structure or system can give the knowledge of consciousness, the knowledge of what it is really like seeing the color red for example. Furthermore, if A, in logical or conceptual terms, is absolutely distinct from B, A cannot be physically identical to B. Consciousness is, therefore, a non-spatial physical thing.

**Sushama:** Whew! Now I see why you suggested ‘The Self-Evident Mind’ as the title. But seriously, I think Ram would agree that consciousness is not identical to physical objects and processes but he would nevertheless say it is constituted by them. Isn’t that right Ram?

**Ram:** Yep. Maybe I can summarize our disagreement as follows. I think the physicalist story will someday give a full account of what’s involved in seeing red. Like Kedar I also think any physicalist theory will fail to explain what it’s like to see red. But if someone asks me to explain what it’s like to see red, what can I say? Maybe I’d say, it’s like seeing orange but without the yellow tinge. But if someone asks me what it’s like to see colors or be conscious, I’d be at a loss. This is because explanations are always in terms of more familiar things. I can’t imagine anything more familiar than seeing color or certainly being conscious. Therefore, I don’t think we’ll ever have an explanation—physicalist or otherwise—of what it is like to be conscious, though we may someday have an account—I think a physicalist account—of what consciousness is. If the former is what Chalmers has called ‘the hard problem of consciousness’, I think it should be called the impossible problem of consciousness.

**Sushama:** I agree that the problem may be insoluble but I think you want to therefore characterize it as a pseudo-problem and that I disagree with. We may be tempted to compare physicalist attempts to understand consciousness with 18th century attempts to understand electricity. This may make us think that the former too though initially mysterious will ultimately be brought within the physicalist fold. But there’s a crucial dissanalogy between the two: ‘What is consciousness?’ can be interpreted as two distinct questions: ‘What causes consciousness?’ And ‘what is it to be conscious?’ ‘What is electricity?’ can only be interpreted as ‘What causes electricity?’, ‘What is it to be electricity?’ being meaningless. Maybe physicalists have gotten so used to explaining phenomena where only the one question is applicable that they, I think erroneously dismiss those who entertain the other question. But the blame is not all one way. Those who entertain the ‘what is it to be conscious?’ question, think that because there is no physicalist answer to that question, therefore there must be a gap in the
physicalist answer to the ‘what causes consciousness?’ question, a gap they try, like our friend here, to fill by postulating non-spatial things. Needless to say, these things don’t answer either question.

**Ram:** That’s a very good way of putting it Sushama. The distinction you’re making is essentially made by Earl Conee, between acquaintance knowledge and propositional knowledge. But your way of putting it almost inclines me to see the hard problem as a legitimate problem. Still I don’t think we’ll ever solve it because we’ll never find anything as familiar to us as the feeling of consciousness to explain consciousness by. If non-physicalists would grant that we could have a purely physicalist account of what causes consciousness, I and most physicalists would be happy.

**Kedar:** Far be it from me to stand in the way of your happiness but am I wrong or are you willing to concede consciousness is an atomic, fundamental component of the world? Consciousness, like any self-evident logical or mathematical fact or proposition, cannot be decomposed or explained. It’s an atomic thing, an entity that is logically and physically indivisible. It’s a non-spatial atom.

**Ram:** Well since not even the atom is atomic, I should be wary of conceding anything is atomic. I think consciousness has only physical causes but what is it to be conscious can only be answered by the likes of poets not scientists nor, for that matter, philosophers. So when considering that question, maybe it can be regarded as atomic. But what is it to be conscious is not a question about anything so public as the world. The world is that which we can agree on, and what is it to be conscious may be different from person to person as well as be different for the same person at different times.

**Sushama:** I think this is as much agreement as we’re likely to have on the subject, so let’s move on. Being confined to Mary’s room is starting to make me claustrophobic. Either claustrophobic or forgetful—how did we get here?

**Kedar:** We were entertaining the possibility that we are three and Sushama was suggesting that on a fundamental level, something like consciousness may underlie all the different divisions we may make of the mind be they functional or behaviour explaining. That led us to take up the ‘what is consciousness’ question.

**Sushama:** Good summary but identifying consciousness as the characteristic which makes us one in spite of being three is problematic. It’s true that we can be potentially conscious of everything that we characterize as the mental, but we’re
not always self-conscious in this way, nor do I think this self-consciousness is a desired state.

Did you know children have to learn to use the pronoun ‘I’? In the beginning they only refer to themselves in the third person.

Krishamurti thinks we all need to observe our internal processes to understand this ‘I’. When there is awareness of our thinking or any other mental process, the I doing the thinking disappears. Only then do you have true peace, true love. So rather than characterize the mental as the potentially conscious, I would characterize it as the potentially unconscious in the sense of beyond the self-conscious.

**Kedar:** The unconscious—is that anything like the undead?

**Ram:** C’mon Kedar! Sushama took our Western approach to philosophy of mind seriously. We owe her the same courtesy. In fact, if what it is to be conscious can be better answered by poets than scientists, we can benefit from taking Krishnamurti seriously.

**Sushama:** Thank you, Ram. I really don’t have much more to add. Except to say that Krishnamurti didn’t think we could actively seek the self-transcendent state. He says, I forget where, “That which is eternal, timeless and immeasurable comes into being. You cannot go to it; it comes to you.” I think by this he means that meditation or acutely observing your inner processes can only leave you open to the experience of the eternal, timeless and immeasurable. Actively seeking it out, you’ll only be injecting the I into your experience and so you’ll be frustrated. Acutely observe yourself and the self will disappear and then the eternal will come to you.

**Kedar:** Hmm… observe the self and the self disappears. Sounds a little like Hume’s bundle theory of consciousness, where even the ‘I’ is just another idea. But I don’t see how realizing as I do that the bundle theory is true will leave me open to peace and love.

**Ram:** Sushama, I can’t claim to have experienced anything like what Krishnamurti describes. But maybe I can transcend the self not by self-observation but acutely observing others. Maybe writing dialogues makes me sympathetic to others’ views more keenly then if I just listened to them. To do them poetic justice, I have to take them much more seriously than I would otherwise.
We are collectively three but maybe after our discussion, each of us is individually three as the words of the others reverberate inside us. After all, I now take the hard problem of consciousness more seriously though not as seriously as Kedar would wish.

Earlier we discussed my preference for dialogues over academic treatises. The debate is as old as Plato and Aristotle. Aristotle if you remember disparaged Plato’s reliance on the dialectic, saying that we think more clearly in isolation than with others. Though I’ll have to write the triologue in isolation, I hope your words and thoughts continue to reverberate in me, making me in effect three.