

DESCARTES' BEQUEATHAL AND THE FUTURE OF PHILOSOPHY

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What did the activity commonly called 'philosophy' in the western part of the world inherit, from Descartes, and what has the inheritance done for it? This is the enquiry in this paper. The questions are sought to be answered in the context of the problem of the nature of mind and its relation to the body.

In part I, I will first elucidate the notion of 'philosophy' as connoted by the term in the western world. Then I will lay out the inheritance that the pursuit has acquired from Descartes. Part II will focus on the philosophical activity from the days of 'Descartes to modern times marked by the take-over of the mind—body problem by Science. The objective of the survey will be to illumine the presence and the role of the inheritance in determining the trend of philosophical activity and the take-over of the problem by Science. A question of crucial significance that will be addressed here is : was the passage of the problem from philosophy to Science brought about in any way by the inheritance acquired from Descartes? Part III will posit the view that 'philosophy' as conceived in the Western tradition is not the means by which Being may be known as Being. An alternative will be suggested, though only biefly, because that does not strictly come under the purview of this paper, and further, a just treatment would require that it be treated as an independent enquiry.

I

A. The term 'philosophy' as employed in the western world points to two facts that together constitute its character : (a) a pursuit to understand Being qua Being, or Being in—itself, in its primitivity and wholeness. Thus philosophy acquires its character of being 'meta-physics'; for its concern is not with the empirical particularisations of Being, but with that which dwelling in the plurality and variety, unites all into a Synthesis (b) the pursuit of the enquiry is both motivated by and synonymous with a force that may be called "Eros or 'love—force'. As the love for knowledge it is both, that which drives the

pursuit as well as the thrill of the knowing-experience. Thus is explained its role as the initiator as well as the sustainer of the enquiry in its never-ending meandering. And now one can see how Philosophy has got defined by the western world as philo-sophia, a pursuit of knowledge for the sheer love of it. And this is what Philosophy has been in their part of the world a pursuit of the knowledge of Being as Being engaged in for the sheer love of it.

Now onwards all that will be said will be in the context of the problem of the nature of the mind and its relation to the body.

B. Descartes' bequeathal to philosophical activity is clearly to its approach and method. Himself a product of a plethora of force-factors, the impact each of these is easily discernible in the inheritance left by him. (Limitations of space prevent me from elucidating on these factors).

The factor that had the most far-reaching influence among the bequeathals is the consideration of Reason as the sole, reliable instrument of knowledge—acquisition. By the 'method of doubt' Descartes evidenced his faith in his conviction. This faith in Reason itself had been spawned by two historical phenomena. The increasingly evident weakening of the authority of the Church emboldened scholars to explore lines of thought regardless of their incongruity with the tenets of the Church. The philosophical significance here is not in the particular content of any specific line of thought, but rather in the phenomena of the liberation of Reason from the stranglehold of the Church. Operation of Reason in independence was a stark contrast to the period of the School men wherein reason was used only as the hand—maid of religion. Another factor that worked in tandem was the fascination that Mathematics exercised on Descartes. The run of sheer reason and the debatable certainty that it yielded subscribed in no small measure to reinforcing Descartes' faith in the power of reason. The net result is the regard of Reason as the final arbitrar, the ultimate instrument of knowledge, higher than which there is none.

Another bequeathal is the dualistic regard of the being of the human being, as a complexity composed of mind and body, the two envisioned as independent and distinctly different substances. One was the 'res cogitans', "a substance whose whole essence or nature consists only in thinking", and which being the unextended, in order to exist, "has need of no place"¹. The other was the 'res extensa', the substance

whose essence was to be extended in length, breadth and depth"². This dualistic regard of the human being too is traceable to a factor in the Culture that was Descartes' milieu. This was the dualistic root-model in the psyche of the western world. Barely discernible as only a hint of a tendency to distinguish matter from something conceived as non-matter, it became the body—spirit dualism in the Thought of the Pythagoreans, was developed further by Plato and finally crystallized as the body-mind dualism in the Thought of Descartes.

Yet another bequeathal was the notion of the possibility of a disembodied mind existing and operating without a body. "It is certain that I (that is my mind by which I am what I am) am entirely and truly distinct from my body, and may exist without it"³.

Having seen the bequeathals from Descartes, the next step will be to see how they are present and the role they have played in determining the trends of philosophical activity in the Western world.

II

Once spawned, the mind-body problem continued to plague every thinker who sought to find a resolution of it. No theory has enjoyed universal consensus. Descartes himself, after expending considerable effort in devising the new well-known hypothesis of interaction without direct contact, was constrained to confess that his theorisation of the mind-body relation was yet far from apprehending the truth. He had realised that as regards mind and matter there are "several properties of which we have no idea."⁴

Theories in the post-Descartes period have been either dualistic or monistic. In the dualistic mould we have had besides Interactionism, Occasionalism, Psycho-physical parallelism and Epiphenomenalism. Each one of these theories begins with the implicit presupposition of the fact of the body-mind dual realities, each as real as the other. The objective is then to discover a mode of relation in which the independence and duality of the two factors would be preserved. Reductionism of any sort is thereby eschewed. Undeniably there has been much effort and ingenuity. However, that all the effort, despite the ingenuity is inevitably doomed to come to nought should be clear to one who would see what the task called for: two substances acknowledged as independent and distinctly different realities are to be shown to be inter-linked without the independence

and distinctness being affected in any way. Thus we have the paradoxical situation of a task-demand (relating members of a duality) that contradicts the very pre-supposition (of irreducible duality) with which the task is undertaken. Nicholas Humphrey's statement in this regard is apt. The theories, he says are merely "a handshake across a metaphysical divide."⁵ But the fact appears, not inexplicably, to have been allowed to pass by most western thinkers. The dualistic root-model, deeply embedded in the psyche of the west makes it incapable of conceptualising in any other mode except the dualistic one. In fact the root-model would have received reinforcement from Descartes' pronouncement of his 'clear and distinct' perception that body and mind are independent dual realities. Since then the presupposition of duality has been the bed-rock on which the paradoxical situation the paradoxical situation of western dualistic body-mind theories have stood.

There are no doubt, the monistic theories of Double Aspects, Neutral Monism and Identity, each of them appears to challenge and deny the conception of dualism as characterising the body-mind phenomenon. While the first two theories enumerated here seek to effect this by positing a third reality conceived of as mere basic and thereby foundational to the dual realities of body and mind, the identity theories have resorted to reductionism, more specifically physicalist reductionism, seeking to explain Mind as no more than physical processes in the nervous system, more specifically the brain. However on close scrutiny the denials are revealed to be not entirely convincing. First the all-synthesising foundational reality posited by the theories of Double Aspects and neutral monism as the final synthesis in which the duality of body-mind gets subsumed is revealed to be no more than an arbitrarily posited fact. Neither theory offers any light on how the apparent dualities get subsumed in the synthesis. This gives scope for suspecting that the problem of duality is not really resolved. And in the light of the fact of the dualistic root-model entrenched in the psyche of the Western culture, it may even be surmised that the duality remains unresolved due to the root-model functioning as an inhibitory counter-force to the attempts to be loss of strong will to correct the conception of dualism, this being the consequence of the inhibitory force of the dualistic root-model. And it should not be forgotten that the prompting from the dualistic model is further reinforced by the inheritance in the form of an affirmation of the dualism by Descartes.

The brain-mind identity theories, by studious labour, seek to demonstrate that the term mind denotes nothing more than physical processes in a physical hardware. However a question that becomes confounding for this attempt at establishing monism is, if as the identity theories assert, the mind and brain are not in any essential sense different from each other, then why are these theories so beleaguered to demonstrate this as fact? One may rightly conjecture that the matter is not as simple as the theories, would have one believe. The mind is not so amenable to being disposed of as nothing more than a free-floating name in what is essentially a physicalist monism. And affirmation of the validity of the skepticism about mind-brain identity comes from some powerful counter—arguments such as those from qualia and consciousness, neither of which the identity theories are able to accomodate or explain. Thus the monistic theories too failed to resolve the problem. However it may be recalled that neither did the sort of out-right dualistic theory asserted by Descartes succeed in showing itself to be the truth. Thus neither dualism nor monism then appears to be able to explain the mind-body relation.

It is probably the quandry of both monism as well as dualism failing to provide a theory of mind-body relation that brought about the latest development in the western philosophical milieu, the abandonment of the mind-body problem by philosophers. Those who have done this are nevertheless of two different hues. On the one hand are those who opting out of the task of finding an explanation of mind-body relation, turned their energies to another of the inheritances from Descartes: the notion of the stand-alone mind, a mind existing independently of the body : a notion that again Descartes had endorsed by declaring it to be a clear and distinct perception.⁶ It was the notion of the mind as 'res cogitans', a substance the whole essence of which was 'thinking' and its nature such that, it did not need the body to make possible its own existence. Thus was born Functionalism, the meta-physical counter-part we might say, of the science of Artificial Intelligence. The notion of the mind here was clearly an amalgam of Descartes' notion of 'res cogitans' and its capacity to exist independently of the body. Mind was the functional organisation, algorithms in operation, the 'res cogitans' that could operate through any sort of hardware. And what was worthy of investigation, the Functionalists demonstrated, was not the hardware, but the possibilities of the employment of the

notion of the stand-alone mind. In this is revealed a fact of crucial significance for Philosophy : the Functionalists being philosophers was only incidental, their primary interest being the empirical realizations of the potentialities of the notion of stand-alone mind.

Thus although Functionalism was a development from ideas inherited from Descartes, it is scarcely a pure metaphysic. It is more a pursuit that strides the divide between Philosophy and Science. Regarded in one way it is the metaphysics of Artificial Intelligence, considered way it is the abstract archetypes, a Platonic realm of Ideas, that neurobiologists seek to translate into the language of neuro-electro chemistry⁷ the physicist into the language of Bose-Einstein condensate the mathematician⁸, into the language of a new as yet unenvisioned mathematics⁹; all with the objective of accomplishing an empiricist triumph over the puzzle of mind-body relation. A few facts here deserve critical notice (a) the mind-body problem has thus passed into the realm of scientific investigation and (b) the philosophers are not sore about it. They seem to have given up a long time ago; the reason they extend being their discovery that there are certain issues that are inevitably opaque to us because we are bound into finitude by our 'cognitive closure'.¹⁰ On such issues then, it is considered good sense to withdraw effort, for what appears as a puzzle could never be cracked. We would, so to say, only play around with it. (c) both, the surrender by the beleaguered philosophers and the dynamic efforts and optimism among the scientists ironically follow from adherence to ideals set up by Descartes : the regard for reason as the supreme instrument for acquiring knowledge, non—acceptance of anything as true unless it is clear and distinct, to strive for clarity, precision and exactness as they are exhibited by mathematics and mechanics. While the philosophers' efforts flounder on these ideals, forcing them to give up efforts, the scientists with their conditioning in favour of empiricism, verificationism and measurement, find the ideals perfectly in place in their paradigm.

Such has been the metamorphosis of the body-mind problem. Arising as a sort of an epiphenomenon¹¹ of Descartes' search for the indubitable truth, it soon became a subject that caused great philosophical turbulence, though ultimately to be abandoned by them on the ground that it demanded capacities made unavailable by the finitude of the condition of the human being. The questions that arise here are : should the fact that success has eluded the philosophical efforts so far made,

be reason enough for abandonment of the pursuit to know the mind-body relation? Is cognitive closure really reason enough to prescribe cessation of efforts? Or is it the fact that the puzzle has remained unresolved because the approach and method have been incorrect? Is a purely rational cognitive effort (as all philosophical efforts have been) the only way or even the right to endeavour to know the mind-body relation? And finally is Science to be expected to succeed where Philosophy failed? The question is not urged by an intention to indicate any sort of superiority of Philosophy over Science. Rather the justification of the question is the fact that science too is as Philosophy has been earlier, a pursuit employing Reason as its chief instrument. This paper asserts the view that the answers to all the above questions must be in the negative. The next section provides the elucidation.

III

The first fact to be asserted is that it is an error to believe that reason is the supreme instrument of knowing, and that where it fails, the pursuit must be abandoned. It needs to be realised and acknowledged that in the mode of being as human beings there is a further potential. This is intuitive apprehension. It is different from both sense apprehension and Reason. It transcends them and thereby has no need of them in its functioning. Also unlike senses and reason, it does not fragmentize and operate with discrete units. Its approach is holistic, apprehending the whole as whole. The details are worked out subsequent to the apprehension of the whole and serves only as an elucidation of the total vision. This is in contradistinction to the West's habit of working with discrete units of information and seeking to synthesize them into a whole. That this is a fruitless pursuit should become evident when it is realised that operating with discrete units, successively discovered, the whole is to say never complete. Consequently perception and understanding are forever incomplete and this in turn gives rise to the impression of there being contradictions where in truth here are none, units appear disjointed and in jagged incongruency while in truth there is continuity, and what are in fact polar opposites¹² appears as mutually exclusive independent reals. An example of the last is what has now got entrenched in the Western psyche as the mind—body dualism.

The realization that reason is not the supreme instrument of knowledge,

that it is beset with limitations, is of more crucial importance for philosophers than for scientists, for it is philosophy that concerns itself with the deepest issues that lie as the common substratum of all the specialized enquiries. The concern being the common substrate, it becomes very important to the cause of truth that the continuity and oneness be apprehended as the wholeness that they are. The individual sciences on the other hand are self-consciously self-restricted enquiries that keep within clearly delineated boundaries, both with regard to their horizontal extension or scope as well as their vertical reach or depth. Reason being dialectical in its operation, it cannot apprehend the whole in one act. It needs to work with discrete units acquired from fragmenting the whole into convenient discrete units.

Therefore Philosophy cannot be a purely rational pursuit. Reason must occupy second place only; the first being accorded to intuition. The task of reason must begin only after the 'intuitive apprehension has occurred, and the objective of its use must be to prepare a systematic elucidation of the holistic vision accomplished by intuition. Reason itself cannot be expected to reveal the wholeness of the whole. Reason serves best when it is employed as a dialectic by which a system of facts can be formulated out of the holistic apprehension.

Further the philosophers must realize that precision and clarity are not absolute notions. Their interpretation in the sciences as the measurable exactitude and clearly delineated discretions in stark logical relations cannot be the ideal of Philosophy. The scientists' interpretation of precision and clarity clearly militate against the very character of Philosophy as the study of that which runs as a continuum through all the specialized enquiries, and also is the deepest substratum, at which level truth is one and differentiations lie subsumed and synthesized in it. By this suggestion it is not intended to invite and accord respectability to confused thinking. Rather what is sought to be illumined as the fact that precision and clarity will inevitably suffer a discount in Philosophy because the latter, as the systematic elucidation of a holistic vision must be expected to throw up situations that involve something of the vision that defies being strait-jacketed into precise logical forms and relations. Hence analogies and metaphors may need to be used, and some things may even be required to be left to the intelligent sensitive tuning in by the philosopher-aspirant who has accomplished the state of preparedness for receiving the truth and as consequently

ready to apprehend the unexpressed by a wordless act of intuitive apprehension.

Philosophy, it needs to be realized cannot be commanded to deliver truth entirely in clear and distinct perceptions. Logical forms and definitions may come in handy as useful instruments, but they must not be allowed to become the very definition of Philosophy.

For one whose notion of 'philosophy' is that of a rational enquiry conducted in the mould of formal logical dictates, the views propounded here may appear to herald confounding confusion. However this is only as long as one does not acknowledge what forms the content of philosophy as we have it now in the Western tradition is only a plethora of contradictory views that neither themselves to any common source nor offer any suggestion for being brought together as dimensions of a single truth. The different theories of mind-body relation serve as a case in point. Each theory is an independent view and each of these views claims to be the only truth. Interactionism, parallelism, epiphenomenalism, double-aspects, neutral monism and identity are only so many distinctly different and independent views on the issue of the mind-body relation. Philosophy has only been an endless search. The mind-body problem, after rising in Descartes' Thought, has been with us for around 400 years now, without any definite clue as to its resolution.

The take-over by Science of the philosophical problem of mind-body relation must not be imagined to be auguring well for the prospects of the resolution of the problem. What the sciences have taken over is not the mind that Philosophy investigated, but a naturalised version of it : for only as the latter, could the issue become fit subject for scientific investigation. Consequently what science may declare to have resolved will not be the mind-body problem as it had been envisioned by Philosophy, but the naturalized version that is convenient for Science. The scientists' interest in the mind-body problem therefore is not a signal of the recognition by Science of the validity of philosophical pursuits.

It need to be realized that to hope for Science's validation of philosophical pursuits and for the philosopher to seek to emulate Science's approach and methods is a confounding error. The two pursuits are of different sorts and operate at different levels. While Science inquires into the manifest, Philosophy as the study of Being qua Being is the enquiry into that which is so manifest. Now the manifest by the

very fact of being so, is object to a perceiving subject. Hence in order to study it, the subject must enter into an intentional relation with it. Objectification in other words, is the pre-requisite for scientific enquiry. Now philosophers must realize while the approach and method of objectification works in the sciences (because of their exclusive concern with the manifest) the same if transposed into the realm of Being qua Being, causes a fatal rupture. In place of Being qua Being there will now be Being as objectified to Being, that is Being forced to be an object to itself. The consequence is a false dualism where in truth there is only a Oneness. The mind-body duality is the classic instantiation of this error of objectification.

Now, if it is sought to be understood why this error should have been committed, the answer must perforce be in terms of the inheritance from Descartes. If the latter, in his search for indubitable truth, had not stopped at the 'cogito'/the thinking I, there would not be the mind-body duality. By making the thinking I the foundational reality, Descartes posited intentionality as the fundamental truth of the human being. And by it was ousted the possibility of the conception of a final synthesis as an ultimate all inclusive Absolute. On the contrary Descartes' notion of foundational reality brought forth as its necessary consequence the notion of a fundamental subject-object dualism. For the intentional 'I' all that is other to itself is 'object'. Thus the human being got transformed (conceptually) into the 'cogito' and an 'other'; the thinking I and a non-thinking extended something. Being was thus ruptured.

The conception has since then got preserved. One may conjecture that what has sustained it has been on the one hand the attractiveness of the clarity that distinctiveness, differentiation, fragmentation accords, and on the other hand a historical factor—the growing influence of Science, enabling it to usurp for itself the status of Final Arbitrar of good sense.

Husserl did castigate Descartes for stopping short of the reach of the logic of his own conceptualisation. "it so happens that he stands before the greatest/of all discoveries— in a sense he has already made it— yet fails to see its true significance, that of transcendental subjectivity. He does not pass through the gateway that leads into the genuine transcendental phenomenology", stated Husserl.¹³ However Husserl himself

did not do much better. Though he perceived what Descartes evidently did not even suspect— the need for greater inwardness as the right direction for philosophical enquiry. Husserl, in truth, did not do much better than his predecessor. The epoch left one with 'consciousness as intentionality', that 'other-directed' consciousness. And the subject object dualism was thus ensured and preserved. In fact one may even say that Husserl did worse than Descartes; for unlike the latter who revealed an innocence about any realm transcendent to the thinking I; Husserl by his notion of 'consciousness as intentionality' caused dualism to be posited as the transcendental truth.

As we have already seen, the conceptualisation of the human being as a mind-body duality has only served to generate a plethora of contradictory views, ultimately leading philosophers to declare defeat. This paper maintains that what is required is not the decision to cease work, but rather to realize that no solution has been forth-coming because we have been looking into the wrong wood-pile.

It is time that philosophers acknowledged that as their pursuit is at a level different from that of Science, it needs a different sort of approach and method. This in turn requires that philosophers overcome their diffidence if not their embarrassment about their own calling. Philosophy must be acknowledged as the distinctively different enquiry that it is, and it must then be acceded that as such it calls for a radically different approach and method. It must also be realised that old ideals of objectivism and public verification simply have no place in this realm of enquiry. Also old phobias clouding such terms as 'subjectivity' 'inwardness', 'mystical' and 'spiritual' must be cleared. This would require that the notions be re-examined with an openness, an approach liberated from and thus unhampered by prejudices of western interpretational moulds. Hence the philosophers from the Indian sub-continent are in a privileged position for in the philosophical tradition here inwardness and holism (as opposed to objectification and fragmentation of the west) are its integral character.

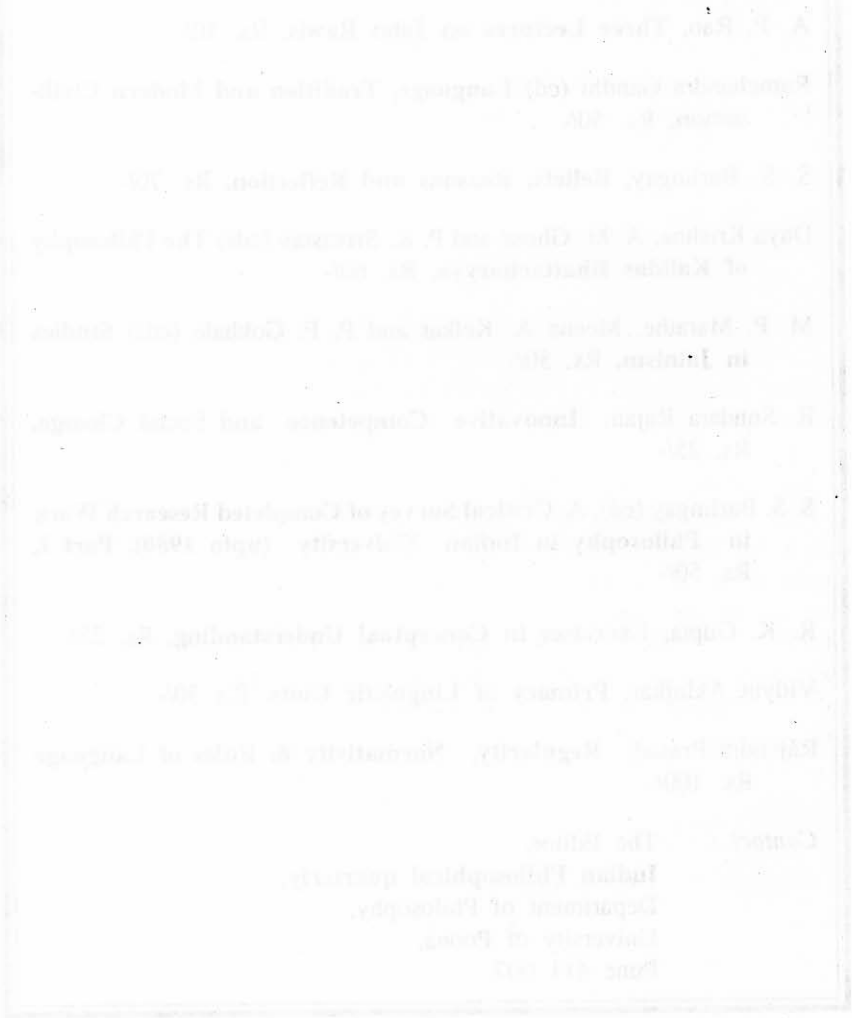
To one who is yet skeptical about the views propounded here is addressed the following : it is not disputed that there must be the motivation to know and there should be a sustaining force. But what meaning can there be in undertaking a search for ever? Philosophical activity then becomes an end in itself and this akin to play, joyful

for a time but inevitably ending with a feeling of having had too much of it. The surrender by philosophers over the issue of mind-body relation is a symptom of this phenomenon.

NOTES & REFERENCES

1. Descartes *Discourse on Method*, Veitch (1912) London : Dent & Sons Ltd., p. 27.
2. Descartes *The Principles of Philosophy*, Veitch *ibid* p. 200.
3. Descartes *Discourse*, *op.cit.*: p. 27.
4. Descartes made this confession in a letter to his friend Father Gibieuf dated January 19, 1642. Quoted by N. Kemp Smith in the 'Introduction of N. Kemp Smith (1958) *Descartes Philosophical Writings* New York, Random House p. xv.
5. Humphrey, N(1992) *A History of the Mind*, London: Vintage p. 4.
6. See fn. 3.
7. See Ed. Blakemore, C. & S. Greenfield (1989) *Mindwaves*. U.K. : Basil Blackwell. This book has a number of articles on the neuro-science in relation the mind-body problem.
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9. Penrose, Roger (1989) *The Emperor's -New Mind*. Oxford : OUP
10. Colin McGin used the term in propounding the view that by the very mode of our being what we are, there are some things that we will never be able to know. See McGin, C. (1991) *The problem of Consciousness : Essays Towards a Resolution*. UK : Basil Blackwell.
11. I use the term "epiphenomenon" because the mind-body problem was not what set off Descartes' investigation. It arose in the course of the investigation.

- 12. "Poles' being the opposite ends of a single reality, polar opposites are as Troy Organ and states : harmonious disords or contrasting concords". Non-polar opposites are in contrast separate independent and non-contiguous. See Organ T. (1976) in *Philosophy East & West* Vol. 26, No. 1 January 1976 pp. 33-39.
- 13. Husserl & (1967) *The Paris Lectures* Trans. Peter Koestenbaum. 2nd Ediion. The Hague : Martinus Nijhoff.



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