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IS THERE ANYTHING AT ALL?

Materialism and Idealism in the Philosophy of Consciousness.

by Paul Jones

Commentary 01

MATERIALISM AND IDEALISM

by V. V. Raman

## CONSISTENCY AND FREEDOM

*by Paul Jones*

I consider the commentary by V. V. Raman as a good example of dialectical negation, aimed to development rather than denial. Prof. Raman's remarks touch important points and there certainly are many statements that demand more clarification and explication, and I am grateful to him for that detailed and thoughtful review. In this response, however, I can only give hints to what should be done in reviewing the issues related to the opposition of materialism and idealism in philosophy, and specifically the methodology of science. A few special topics (like integrity and complexity) have been discussed elsewhere (e.g. [1]); some other problems are still waiting for proper consideration.

To make things clear from the very beginning, I must stress once again that my treatment of the problem is based on a wider view, and I do not belong to neither of the two camps. However, I insist that one should not mix materialism and idealism in an eclectic way, in any particular study, just because some things seem to look better one way than the other. As usual, the opposites have to be carefully discriminated before they could enter any kind of synthesis.

Here, we come to the problem of consistency. V. V. Raman keenly indicates that some people may intentionally admit inconsistencies in their thought and action, just because "inconsistency is quite a pleasant experience", or "it is enjoyable". Certainly, the capability of mental play and experiment is one of the most important achievements of reason, distinguishing a conscious being from animals. However, this is not the only, and in no way determinative, distinction: it has to be complemented by the capability of pursuing one's goals despite the natural inaccessibility. In other words, consciousness implies both *wish* and *will*. The latter serves to preserve the integrity of activity, and, virtually, the integrity of the self. That is, one needs to act consistently to remain a conscious being; otherwise, any activity is bound to degrade into a kind of field behavior, requiring no consciousness at all [2].

This may be illustrated by the well known cases of *divided identity* in psychiatry. Lack of behavioral and mental integrity is also an essential component of schizophrenia, paranoia *etc.* – in any case, it is symptomatic of a mental disease [3].

However, there are different kinds of integrity, and some of them may well admit controlled inconsistency, on the lower levels, to allow more flexibility in choosing the means of attaining the same conscious goal. In dialectical materialism, this idea is reflected in the category of "dialectical contradiction", and the very opposition of materialism and idealism (or dialectics and metaphysics) may be quite dialectical, in the context of the development of philosophy as a whole; however, there is no room for "pluralistic harmony", as V. V. Raman calls it, since, as soon as there is a contradiction, it will objectively lead to the dominance of one of the opposites in every specific activity.

Dialectical materialism is a philosophy of development as an objective process. It does not treat the opposites of a dialectical contradiction as mere "opinions", or the views of the same thing "from different perspectives"; rather, the presence of the contradiction indicates that certain economic, spiritual or cultural formations have not yet developed enough, and the opposites of today are the raw material for a whole to be built in the future. There can be no development without dialectical contradiction; however, the forms of the manifestation of that contradiction may be different in different societies, being indirectly related to the kind of contradiction. The form of the *suppression* of

one camp by another is characteristic for the class of societies that we know as ‘civilization’, which are based on private appropriation of the public product. In a higher-level society knowing no property at all, there will be no economic and social base for any antagonism at all, including ideological controversy.

One of the fundamental principles of dialectical materialism is the directedness of development, from the lower to higher levels. In other words, nothing is destined to last forever, and all the existing things (material or not) are bound to become obsolete and give way to other, more developed (in an objective sense) things of a different kind. In particular, philosophy itself is objectively developing from the primitive to higher-level forms, and it is not a mere juxtaposition of all the philosophies ever known, but an integral whole of a sort different from what it were in Antiquity, or in the Middle Ages. That is, one can definitely assert that dialectical materialism is a *more advanced* form of philosophy than any one of the previously known forms, and that both materialism and idealism are bound to become history, being ousted by with a higher-level philosophy, with its own forms and trends. This certainly depends on the ways of the economic development of the human societies, and philosophies of different level may co-exist for quite a while, as long as their economic roots exist in the same culture.

The development of consciousness obeys the same dialectical laws, and all the forms of human activity, and specifically the forms of spirituality like art, science and philosophy, can be considered as a manifestation of the current level in the development of consciousness. This provides a basis for an objective study of consciousness. However, dialectical materialism stresses that consciousness cannot be the same in different epochs; moreover, every act of cognition drives human consciousness to a somewhat higher degree, so that our consciousness is bound to change in the course of reflection, which resembles the situation with quantum mechanics, with an important difference that there is no external (‘macroscopic’) observer for the humanity, and we have to judge about it ‘from within’.

In particular, the admissibility of certain forms of behavior is never absolute, depending on the general level of cultural development. The ability to correlate one’s behavior with the objectively progressive norms is one of the fundamental components of consciousness, along with awareness and self-determination. In other words, people admitting acts inferior to the level of spirituality already reached by the humanity demonstrate a lack of consciousness, and they could not be called conscious but with a certain reserve. This directly applies to the consistency and orientation of one’s philosophy. Thus, ideological eclecticism may be acceptable as long as the distinctions between the ideas involved are not yet clear enough. In a way, the statement “ $2 \times 2 = 13$ ” is much closer to the truth than “ $2 \times 2 = 45$ ”, provided one does not know that  $2 \times 2 = 4$ .

In other words, consistency is one of the *internal criteria* of truth understood as objective phenomenon developing in a dialectical way. Consistent thought can still fall in error – but no truth can be inconsistent. Denying the need of consistency means inability and refusal to understand anything, hence imposing the limits for the growth of one’s consciousness.

Of course, this is no reason for blaming inconsistency as such: it may be quite appropriate in many cases, within definite limits. In general, since every activity is hierarchical, a specific fraction of consistency is involved on each level, and it is the topmost level that determines the overall tendency. For instance, one cannot arbitrarily decide whether to trust binary logic or not; this is determined by a number of objective cultural processes. Eventually, inconsistency itself is to exhibit an internal consistency.

Deliberate deviation from the culturally established routes in physical or mental activity can be innocent enough, when it takes the form of a *game*. That is, one perfectly knows that one’s gestures do not mean anything real, though they may *pretend* to be for serious. Thus, a materialist can *play* idealist reasoning on certain issues, to probe the possible ways of extending the current circle of views, or seek for the limits of their applicability. However, all that play gets immediately put aside, as soon as anything practically important is concerned. One of the manifestations of consciousness is the ability to discriminate the situations where it is allowed to play from the situations demanding seriousness. When philosophers become driven by their play of ideas, forgetting about the practical needs, this is a typical symptom of a lack of consciousness.

Talking about consistent idealism, I indicated that it has to admit the existence of just something to

discuss, picturing this entity as a unique supernatural mind (though one could hardly characterize it as a mind in this case). “What’s wrong with admitting the existence of only the supreme mind?” V. V. Raman asks. Well, there is nothing wrong in mere imagination; one is free to invent myths and tales of gods or demons, or the absolute idea, or the world’s soul... or anything. The real problems show up when it comes to practical activity, with the everyday necessity of making decisions. Since there is no supreme mind anywhere at hand, people implicitly substitute it *with their own minds*, thus pretending to be gods in their contacts with the others. Shall I repeat that this ‘upper position’ is generally induced in a person by his or her actual social position? – one can hardly imagine oneself a god being socially deprived; however, there is an inverse mentality, when the very inferiority becomes an absolute value, which formally makes it equivalent to a god, and as misleading. V. V. Raman correctly indicates that “idealist philosophy has come to the help of many struggling and suffering people”, providing them a kind of narcosis by suggesting that everything they experience is but a dream. Still, is it always moral to make people drug addicts?

Dialectical materialism says that nothing can be “logically established”, since it only is in practical activity that anything can be proven as ‘true’ or rejected for inadequacy. The demand to logically demonstrate the existence of matter is essentially idealistic. This is yet another paradox of philosophical idealism: being logically inconsistent (and sometimes even hostile to logic), it demands logic from its opponents. We observe that logic in general is deliberately truncated to one of its components, namely, the deductive schemes; however, logic is much wider than that, encompassing the variety of schemes that cannot be all reduced to deduction [4]. In the same way, the demand to “clearly define” what dialectical materialism (or any other philosophy) is should be considered a manifestation of the same idealistic tendency to reduce anything to deductive schemes; in reality, nothing can be defined in any exhaustive manner, since such complete definition would be equivalent to the very existence of the thing defined, which is infinitely hierarchical and hence irreducible to any finite construction. Limiting thinking to the “clearly definable” only, would violate the universality of human activity and mind, and hence deny consciousness itself.

“Why cannot consciousness explore the nature of consciousness, as one would see one’s image in a mirror?” The question answers itself: because there is no mirror. The only way to reflect anything is to reflect it in something different, and it is only the reflection of a thing’s traces in the world in the same thing that is the basic mechanism of self-reflection.

Can one study anything “without appealing to dialectical materialism”, or any other philosophy? Yes, if it is an explicit appeal that is meant; no, if the directing role of philosophy in scientific research is thus denied. Refusing to ‘talk philosophy’, one is bound to involve it implicitly, in a confused and inconsistent way, which often leads to methodological problems and inadequate special techniques. In some cases a wrong methodological orientation may make hundreds of scientists waste their effort and time in the attempts to solve a scientific problem either incorrectly formulated or demanding a quite different means of investigation.

Thus, the idea that consciousness is not a biological phenomenon but rather a social (cultural) formation was introduced in dialectical materialism after a careful analysis of the previous attempts to comprehend consciousness; the search for a material substrate of consciousness was an indispensably materialistic requirement, while the necessity of finding a substrate of a special kind allowing for the development of all the features of consciousness, including its apparent independence of matter, was a part of the dialectical approach. Human society was found to be the only possible carrier of consciousness, and individual consciousness was logically interpreted as a projection of the social process onto a biological body – in analogy to how a living cell regulates molecular flows, a molecule constraints the motion of the atoms constituting it, an atom binds the nucleus and electrons etc. Once the social nature of consciousness is accepted, it becomes clear that it’s no use in seeking for consciousness on the biological level, and no brain function can be said to ‘produce’ consciousness. However, many scientists educated in the line of primitive materialism cannot accept that indication, and their scientific potential is bound to be wasted in the endless attempts to reduce consciousness to physiology.

“Does the author imply that a child left in the woods (obtaining nutritional sustenance in some way) without any human interaction will grow up to be without any consciousness?” Yes I do assert that.

Human physiology has developed to support consciousness, but it cannot produce consciousness on itself. Accordingly, there can be no language in a child deprived of any communication with other humans. Certainly, some human features can be developed in an individual grown to some (but not too old) age in a wild nature environment and that adopted back by the society; however, the examples known show that the range of human capabilities will remain very limited in such people for the rest of their lives. Consciousness cannot grow outside the society. However, in interpreting observations and experiments, one should account for the fact that the individual's social life begins very early, before the physiological birth, since the woman's organism is very sensitive to the social environment during pregnancy, and the very chemistry of fetus development is dependent on the range of the mother's social contacts; on later stages, a month or two before the birth, a child can participate in the social life, reacting on outer events in a relatively independent way.

The assertion that "ALL mental forms are nothing but schemes of activity provoked by material/economic factors" is one of the most important achievements of dialectical materialism. The dialectical side of it is that the influence of economy on mentality can be *indirect*, with so many mediating steps that a spiritual phenomenon may seem to have no economic roots at all. However, this circumstance is quite common, say, in many sciences, which have to extract meaningful results from experimental data using a number of elaborated techniques based on a definite theoretical model; one could just mention the physics of autoionizing states in atoms and ions [5], or the standard practices of psychoanalysis, for another example. Still, "the claims of Vedic rishis, [...] of the Prophet Mohammed, [...] the dedication of Albert Schweitzer and Mother Teresa, and the creativity of Pushkin and Tchaikowski, can all be explained [...] in terms of economic factors". In this quotation from V. V. Raman, I have omitted Moses and Jesus for the reason of their mythical existence, and replaced the words "explained simply" with only "explained", since the explanation is in no way simple in complex cases. Basically, one has to consider culture as a hierarchy of all the products of human activity, and distinguish *material culture* (things made and relations established) from *spiritual culture* (skills of production acquired = schemes of activity = mental structures and social climate); further, any element of culture (either material or spiritual) can be used to construct another product, which will become a part of culture through the process of socialization, and hence become able to generate other products, related to the primary products in a more indirect way.

But "how does dialectical materialism explain the many random thoughts that also arise in the human mind?" Well, as most psychoanalytic therapists would agree, there are no random thoughts at all. Every thought can be explained, if one had enough time and patience to trace its origin. Schematically, one has to consider self-communication as a kind of social process, governed with the same objective laws. There is no experience that "is ineffable and cannot be communicated", since one has at least to communicate it to oneself, to make it conscious; otherwise, there is nothing but animal sensation, having nothing to do with human spirituality. There is no 'esoteric' knowledge, since it cannot be referred to as knowledge until it has been socialized, and communicated to the society as a whole, to become an element of the culture.

It should be stressed that the acceptance of the universal determinism in dialectical materialism denies neither randomness, nor freedom. The former refers to the level of physical things and characterizes a particular way of the representation of the lower levels of hierarchy on a higher level, when it is only certain average motion that matters, the rest of the system's behavior remaining 'arbitrary'. Since the formation of hierarchical structures is an objective process [6, 7], randomness should not be considered as mere interpretation or mental construction – though such constructions could be considered as a natural phenomenon too, being just another case of interlevel relationships. Freedom is different from arbitrariness in that it refers to the level of consciousness (social motion), being an expression of the consistency of an individual activity with the current level of cultural development. Thus, one cannot be free if one's actions contradict to the cultural background, which will result in a kind of conflict and hence restrict the person's access to cultural resources. Freedom is the ability to use the possibilities opened by the culture, and nobody is free without being aware of the available possibilities or sufficient skills in using them. In particular, a scientist ignorant in philosophy is not free in his or her studies, being driven by random circumstances rather than purposefully applying an adequate methodology. The same restrictions on freedom are imposed by inconsistent reasoning, save in the case of its conscious imitation (play).

Finally, just a few words about 'praxis'. Any philosophy is nothing but a way of organizing people's orientation in the world and their activity. Idealism leads to the acts that differ from those suggested by materialism; however, in many cases, this difference is not apparent, referring more to the spiritual side of activity rather than its material side. This makes it possible to use 'good' ideas to disguise 'bad' acts (never forgetting about the dependence of the very notions of 'the good' and 'the bad' on the level of cultural development and social positions).

As V. V. Raman rightly indicates, some ideas of dialectical materialism may resemble those of Christian theology, Yoga, various kinds of Humanism *etc.* No wonder, since dialectical materialism has grown as a natural continuation of the general line of the development of philosophy, including all its positive content. However, there cannot be mere 'embedding' of an idea from one philosophy in another; ideas get transformed in a different context, up to becoming very far from what they originally were. Sometimes, this may cause difficulties and misunderstanding: thus, a few extracts from the works of L. Vygotsky are textually close to some texts by M. Bakhtin, which even caused the claims of plagiarism; however, a careful reading will make it clear that the same words mean quite different things for a materialist (Vygotsky) and idealist (Bakhtin), and there are no 'stolen' ideas, despite of all the possible influence of Bakhtin's works on Vygotsky.

In the same way, acts motivated by different ideologies will be different acts, despite of all their apparent similarity. Just take the example of a person saving another person for a reward as compared to saving another being for mere desire to help (which does not drive out the possibility of being eventually rewarded). There is a difference in the degree of freedom: the act motivated at a lower level is less free than the act following higher-level motivation – while the very hierarchy of motives is objective, corresponding to the current level of cultural development.

It should be stressed that the difference in ideology often results in the many forms of the 'same' activity, which may produce different effect in the end. Thus, a monk working as a nurse in a hospital will perform basically the same functions as a professional nurse, but the monk may additionally impose certain ideological preferences, which may be helpful in curing the disease, but may also lead to social inadequacy in the patient's post-treatment life. If, instead, there were a nurse with some experience in materialistically oriented psychotherapy, the treatment might be much more successful, since the patient would have been trained to efficiently cope with the difficult situations in their life and work, rather than vainly hope for help from the sky. Pray and meditation may help some people to overcome the stress and regain self-control, to consciously act; with all that, they may be harmful if exercised with excessive devotion, in an uncritical way: this is much like driving a nail into a plank with a hammer, and then continuing to hammer the plank until it splits. Conscious behavior implies concentration, but not obsession.

With idealistically minded people, one is always to distinguish the apparent and actual motivation. Since no idealism can be consistent, the actions of an idealist are often caused by quite materialistic reasons, being re-motivated afterwards. On the other hand, one could recall that materialism does not exclude moral commitment, dedication to serve the humankind, compassion, caring and other similar instance of 'idealistic' behavior which have nothing to do with philosophic idealism and religion, though there have been many attempts to oppose them to any materialism. Dialectical materialism treats the sphere of morality as one of the levels of spirituality in general, corresponding to certain objective phenomena in economic and cultural development. Quite often, this materialistic approach to humanism makes its practices much more 'humanistic' than any variety of abstract humanism, or any religion [8].

To conclude, the problem of consistency and freedom has to be considered in the context of the objective development of human culture, and the growth of social and individual consciousness as one of its aspects. One is free to experiment with diverse procedures, within the limits of social responsibility. However, no action is arbitrary on the level of consciousness, and there are economic and social grounds for every subjective phenomenon, which in no way restricts personal freedom, much more endangered by animal-like behavior, irresponsibility and inconsistency, lack of understanding and comprehension of the objective roots of the cultural processes, and hence inability to efficiently use them in one's activity.

**References and Notes**

- [1] P. Ivanov, "Qualitative Complexity" <http://unism.pjwb.org/arc/1996cx/cxe.htm>
- [2] The role of the bridge between the wish and the will is performed by *knowledge*.
- [3] Today, some people argue that there is no such thing as a mental disease at all, and all the kinds of behavior should be considered as equally normal. I do not share this opinion, being convinced that the level of cultural development is an objective premise which eventually determines any conceptual distinction, including that of the 'norm' and 'deviation'.
- [4] P. Ivanov, "Hierarchy of Logic" <http://unism.pjwb.org/arc/1997hl/hle.htm>
- [5] A. L. Godunov, P. B. Ivanov, V. A. Schipakov, P. Moretto-Capelle, D. Bordenave-Montesquieu, and A. Bordenave-Montesquieu, "Excitation of autoionizing states of helium by 100-keV proton impact: II. Excitation cross sections and mechanisms of excitation" *J. Phys. B* **33**, 971-999 (2000)
- [6] E. N. Yeliseyev, *The structure of the development of complex systems* (Leningrad: Nauka, 1983)
- [7] B. Drossel, "Simple Model for the Formation of a Complex Organism" *Phys. Rev. Lett.* **82**, 5144 (1999)
- [8] P. Ivanov, "Unism and Humanism" <http://unism.pjwb.org/arc/1996uh/uhe.htm>
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