EIGHT WAYS OF LOOKING
AT SAMUEL BECKETT

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Beckett Symposium: Tokyo, September 2006

One.
In his writings, Samuel Beckett is a philosophical dualist. Specifically, he writes as if he believes that we are made up of, that we are, a body plus a mind. Even more specifically, he seems to believe that the connection between mind and body is mysterious, or at least unexplained. At the same time he – that is to say, his mind – finds the dualistic account of the self ludicrous. This split attitude is the source of much of his comedy.

In the standard account, Beckett believes that our constitution is dual, and that our dual constitution is the *fons et origo* of our unease in the world. He also believes there is nothing we can do to change our constitution, least of all by philosophical introspection. This plight renders us absurd.

But what is it exactly that is absurd: the fact that we are two different kinds of entity, body and mind, linked together; or the belief that we are two different kinds of entity linked together? What is it that gives rise to Beckett’s laughter and Beckett’s tears, which are sometimes hard to tell apart: the human condition, or philosophical dualism as an account of the human condition?

Beckett the philosophical satirist attacks and destroys the dualist account again and again. Each time the dualist account resurrects itself and re-confronts him. Why does he find it so hard to walk away from the struggle? Why does he persist in his split attitude toward the split self of dualism? Why does he not take refuge in its most appealing alternative, philosophical monism?
Two.
I presume that the answer to the last question, why Beckett is not a monist, is that he is too deeply convinced he is a body plus a mind. I presume that, however much he might like to find relief in monism, his everyday experience is that he is a being that thinks, linked somehow to an insentient carcass that it must carry around with it and be carried around in; and that this experience is not only an everyday, once-a-day experience but an experience experienced at every waking instant of every day. In other words, the unremitting undertone of consciousness is consciousness of non-physical being.

So monism does not offer Beckett salvation because monism is not true. Beckett cannot believe the monist story and cannot make himself believe the monist story. He cannot make himself believe the monist story not because he cannot tell himself a lie but because at the moment when the dualist story is abandoned and the monist story is inhabited instead, the monist story becomes the content of a disembodied dualist consciousness.

An alternative and more effective way of answering the question of why Beckett is not a monist is simply to look at propaganda for a monist theory of mind. Here is William James in confident mood, expounding the advantages of having a soul that is at home in the world:

The great fault of the older rational psychology was to set up the soul as an absolute spiritual being with certain faculties of its own by which the several activities of remembering, imagining, reasoning, and willing etc. were explained [...]. But the richer insight of modern days perceives that our inner faculties are adapted in advance to the features of the world in which we dwell, adapted, I mean, so as to secure our safety and prosperity in its midst.

\(\text{Psychology [Briefer Course]}\)

Three.
There have been plenty of people who have themselves experienced Beckett’s plight, which can be roughly expressed as the plight of existential homelessness, and have felt it to be a tragic plight or an absurd plight or a plight both tragic and absurd at the same time. In the latter half of the nineteenth century there were many people who, \textit{pace} Wil-