

THEME I

Understanding Consciousness: Some Reflections

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Abstract & Introduction:

Contemporary consciousness studies have gained a new height and remarkable popularity in the last few decades. Though science has resolved many mysteries of life and world but the domain of consciousness is still unknown to most of us. Even if no one denies the subjective experience, there are a very few who agree what that experience is. What is consciousness? What are its essential features? Is it mere subjective experience or Universal in nature? Is it the product of this material body or the fundamental cause of this Universe? These are some of the questions which modern scholars and researchers still struggling to answer. The multifaced, mysterious and dynamic nature of consciousness has not only given rise to a ‘hard problem’ but also caught the attention of scholars and researchers from diverse disciplines. Today, philosophers and scientists of all disciplines like cognitive science, physics, biology, neuroscience, neurophenomenology, psychology, Artificial Intelligence etc. have become tremendously curious to understand and explain the intricacies of our conscious experience. It has opened up a door for a transdisciplinary and multidisciplinary discussion and debate and also has become one of the most distinguished, challenging, and rapidly evolving fields. Instead of confining the study of consciousness within one specific discipline, today researchers demand a platform for interdisciplinary and cross-cultural dialogue and discussion, in a free and shared space. Interestingly, many contemporary scholars played an active role in expanding the horizon of our understanding considering the unknown and unexplored traditional Indian theories of consciousness along with cross-cultural perspectives. Hence, in this paper, the aim is to reflect on one very important Indian account of consciousness to examine their relevance in the context of contemporary consciousness studies. Instead of denying either the classical or the modern approaches an attempt will be made to propose a comprehensive and holistic approach that promises to expand the horizon of our insights that can be a gateway for restating the problem of consciousness.

The Problem of Consciousness:

Now, let us understand what exactly is the problem of consciousness and how it can be addressed or what is the methodology of studying consciousness. But before that, the most pertinent question we encounter here is - Is this quest for consciousness a new and unknown domain of research? The answer is 'No'. At least, in the context of Indian tradition, this is not at all a new quest rather it would not be a mistake if we say that it is one of the most fundamental questions that Indian scholars have tried to answer and dealt with again and again over the centuries. So, it is not at all a new question but undeniably one very relevant subject of inquiry for all the ages and for all the seekers. But then why are we still worried about it? Why there is so much eagerness among scholars and scientists about the nature or structure of consciousness? There are multiple reasons for that. One primary reason is that there is no precise definition or connotation of consciousness. It is because consciousness is not an entity that can be known or pointed out through our cognitive means. It is not like a tree or a table that is given to our sense perception. But it is self-evident and immediately known. According to the Vedāntic Nondualists and some contemporary thinkers, the problem of consciousness is that we intend to define something that is essentially indefinable and indeterminate. Now, here again, the question pops up – whether the problem of consciousness is merely a problem of definition or a problem of understanding, why there is a conscious experience at all. Now, for David Chalmers, the well-known cognitive scientist, the problem of consciousness or what he calls 'hard problem' is the problem of explaining why there is an inner subjective world in the material physical world (Chalmers, 1997). In other words, the problem is how does subjective conscious experience appear from the physical brain or the body that is quite objective. We all know that there is an inner conscious experience that is extremely private, subjective, intimate, and ineffable but it is self-evident. The uniqueness of our consciousness is that it is our common and the most fundamental basis of all cognitions, emotions, and communications yet it is solely personal. No one can deny this conscious experience but there is no ubiquitous language or mode to define it. Here, I would like to quote a very interesting statement of S. Shigematsu who writes, "*A word is word. An experience is an experience. Both are different.*" And we make a mistake when we try to describe experience through words. Many contemporary scholars like him have refused any attempt to define the phenomenal consciousness which is intimate, personal and subjective. In contrast to those who deny the very being of consciousness. Here, I again remember one unique illustration cited by Sri Ramakrishna while

talking about the nature of the Highest Reality, “*How will you explain the taste of ghee to someone who has never tasted ghee?*” Similar example is stated by well-known Neuroscientist, Christof Koch when he writes, “*if you were born blind, I can never describe what it means to see colours. You are simply unable to comprehend that. So, it is with Consciousness*” (Koch, 2017). This is exactly ‘the hard problem’ of consciousness. How can we explain the qualia or subjective phenomenal consciousness? For many scientists and contemporary philosophers, the phenomenal consciousness is inaccessible because there is an explanatory gap. Both language and our cognitive apparatus fail to apprehend this conscious experience which indeed is the very precondition for all thinking and articulation.

Scientific and Philosophical Approaches:

There are multiple approaches or methodologies for studying and understanding the nature of consciousness. But broadly we find two prominent approaches. One is based on the analysis of the third-person data regarding our brain and behavior which we call the scientific approach and the other is based on the first-person study of our conscious experience which has been followed in some philosophical schools and also in the religious sphere. While the scientific third-person approach allows us to accumulate the information through the proper analysis of data related to the brain, neurons, and psychological states; the first-person approach is about experiencing the experience itself, the very self or subjectivity – its behaviour, structure, dynamism and intricacies.

Science, in general claims to explain consciousness through physical properties, more specifically through the neuron functions in the brain. According to neuroscience, all conscious living beings depend on the activity of the brain. Modern well-known Neuroscientists - Francis Crick and Christof Koch have tried to explain consciousness by means of NCCs -- the neural Correlates of consciousness. For Koch and Chalmers, the question is, what are neural correlates for conscious phenomenon? Or more specifically, what neural phenomenon is causally sufficient for consciousness? Precisely, scientists being reductionists in nature want to provide an answer based on the systematic analysis of relevant neural properties. This is an explanation of correlation rather than answering what consciousness is *as such*?

(<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/consciousness-neuroscience/>)

On the other hand, we have the radical first- person phenomenological approach that strongly challenges the claim of modern physicalism and reductionism. In the west, it is Husserl the founder of European phenomenology who have given us a new method for understanding the nature of consciousness going beyond the theory of correlation, naturalism and psychologism.

He emphatically argues that the domain of consciousness is the transcendental domain and that cannot be reduced into the realm of psychology. Consciousness is not a natural phenomenon that can be objectified through the tools of natural science rather it demands a transcendental science to understand the nature and structure of transcendental domain of consciousness. Certainly, Husserl's approach towards consciousness was revolutionary, he has shown us a new path in consciousness studies.

It is imperative to mention that Indian thinkers too have also used several techniques to study the nature of consciousness. Both Upaniṣadic and Non-Upaniṣadic, Classical and contemporary Indian philosophers at several times conducted rigorous rational analysis and also phenomenological study of our conscious experience transcending the state of waking experience into the realms of dream and deep sleep states of experience.

Non-Dual Vedāntic Approach to Consciousness:

The philosophy of Vedānta is a philosophy of consciousness. Consciousness is the core concept and the fundamental truth in Vedānta. Of course, all these sub-schools of Vedānta have provided us with multiple interpretations of consciousness. Yet, they all agree that the ultimate being of consciousness cannot be questioned or denied. Advaitins have employed several philosophical methods and techniques to endorse their claim for pure and transcendental consciousness. Besides Śruti they employed a thorough phenomenological method, a rigorous analysis and the traditional method of *adhyāropa* and *apavāda* to argue that consciousness is not a mere fleeting mental state nor it can be reduced into the material body but the one that illumines and observes all the bodies. In *Brahma sūtra Bhāṣya*, Śāṅkara writes, 'Sarvo ha ātmāstitvam pratyeti na nāham asmīti'... (S. B. I. 1.1). This self is not an entity that can be pointed out as 'this' or 'that' but the mass of consciousness that pervades everything as the precondition of all our cognitions, volitions and actions. Consciousness is not an ordinary quality or feature of the self that persists for a certain period rather the very basis of the self. It is the universal and unchangeable awareness – *samvid ekarūpānabhidyat*. An autonomous existence that reveals itself immediately without any aid, it is aware of its own being without cognizing itself as an object. Consciousness is thus called self-luminous or *svayamprakāśa*. It must be noted that consciousness is not treated as an additional or accidental attribute of the self as we see in Nyāya and Viśiṣṭādvaita schools. Nor the self is assumed as an entity over and above our conscious experience. Self is not something outside of consciousness rather the very consciousness *as such* which is again both fundamental and universal. While from the

subjective standpoint it is conceived as witness-consciousness or Saksi, from the objective standpoint it is called Indeterminate Indefinite Brahman.

One important claim of Advaita Vedānta or Upaniṣad is the essential difference between mind and consciousness. The realm of consciousness is not limited to the mind or identical to mental faculty rather it transcends the region of mind or intellect. The mind *as such* is a product of Prakṛti and therefore, it is essentially material. It is a subtle cognitive faculty that not only cognizes the object but also creates the sense of ‘I’-ness or subjectivity within us. According to *Vedānta Paribhāṣā*, the nature of our cognitive faculty or mind is like water that has no original shape or form but assumes the form of a container (Dharmarāja, 2015: 15). Being transparent like a mirror the mind easily reflects the light of consciousness and thereby, appears conscious. Hence, a thorough investigation into our conscious states is required to have a clear view of the nature and role of the mind in all our physical and psychological spheres. On the one hand, it will enable us to distinguish the mental faculty from consciousness; on the other hand, it proves the dynamism of the mind in generating the sense of ‘I’ in us.

Advaita has offered multiple proofs to establish the being of the pure consciousness; analysis of *pañca-kośa* is one such very critical and rational method. Advaitins firmly argue that consciousness is not only opposed to the body, it cannot be also reduced into vital energy, mind, intellect and any other state of existence. Though our ordinary experience is found attached to all these five sheaths of existence, consciousness *as such* is the witness and the ultimate underlying principle that persists alone. Through the technique of seer and seen distinction, Advaita argues that which is known cannot be the knower and that which is the knower cannot be known. One may find this analysis of *pañca-kośa* quite unsatisfactory and baseless as it does not unfold the real nature of self or consciousness. But it must be stated that the whole purpose of this analysis is not to identify the knower but to discriminate the knower from the known. Since the ultimate knower is unknown, the goal is not to mistake it as something it is not. In our most ordinary experiences, the body is conceived as the substratum of consciousness but as we reflect carefully it is proved that the physical body too is known and therefore, cannot be the knower. In a similar fashion, the Upaniṣad proves the objective character of the *prāṇamaya-kośa*, *manomaya-kośa*, *vijñānamaya-kośa* and *ānandamaya-kośa* as all of them are known and revealed in and through consciousness. To put it differently, the self being the pure observer is neither the *annamaya-kośa* nor the *prāṇamaya-kośa* nor the *manomaya kośa* nor the *vijñānamaya kośa* nor the *ānandamaya-kośa*; it is the one who witnesses all these five *kośas*(sheaths), their functions, and changes yet it persists as an

unchanging awareness who is not associated and involved in any acts. Explaining this subtle idea in *Upadeśa Sāhasri* Śaṅkara writes, “*The knower and knowledge are not different as they are in the argumentative philosophy*” (Śaṅkara, 2012, 51). Because the knower is none other than the eternal knowledge. It is the very reason that knowledge cannot be an object to itself, though it proves its presence just being the experience itself. The Upaniṣad declares, ‘*Yat sākṣād aparokṣād brahma ya ātmā sarvāntaras tam me vyācakṣvaiti*’. (Bṛhadāraṇyaka III.4.I) Being the *aparokṣānubhūti* consciousness is directly and immediately known yet it is not known like an object.

It will be interesting again to reflect on the phenomenological method Advaita employed following the *Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad* to understand the nature and transformations of consciousness in different states of our experience. Advaitins have made a thorough study of the waking state, dream state and deep sleep state and argue that while in the waking state consciousness manifests through the joint association of gross and subtle bodies, the dream experience only affirms a subtle body that is extremely dynamic and creative. In both these two states, consciousness is always correlated with some objects, which affirms its intentional character. A study of dream experience shows how the mind generates a sense of subjectivity or ‘I’ even when the body is inactive or only passively persists. Unlike the waking state, in a dream, it is the mind that projects the objects and it is the mind alone that experiences all its creations. In dream, consciousness manifests through this subtle body or mind only. However, the experience of deep sleep or *Suṣupti* reveals neither any gross body nor any subtle body. Deep sleep is not a state of unawareness or a sub-conscious zone rather an experience that is free from any material modifications either mental or physical. Consequently, the epistemic trinity that constitutes all cognitive experiences in the first and second states, is collapsed in the third state and what remains is one isolated undifferentiated awareness without any objective-content. There is no sense of ‘me’ or ‘I’ as we claim after waking up ‘I was not aware of anything’. It does not prove the non-existence of consciousness rather the absence of the objects of consciousness. “*But Its non-existence cannot be admitted as It is the witness of all things existing and non-existing*” (Śaṅkara, 2012, 177). The non-intentional awareness still endures and reveals the general ignorance along with a blissful experience. Thus, the *Kārikā* writes, “*when there is only consciousness but not consciousness of anything, that is your third state known as prājña*”. The study of deep sleep firmly proves that the sense of subjectivity or ‘I’-ness is not an essential nature of consciousness but an offshoot that emerges due to the involvement of the psycho-physical body. Consciousness is not merely a sense of ‘me’ or

‘mine’ but an awareness that reveals the sense of ‘me’ or ‘mine’ which eventually disappears in the state of deep sleep. Hence, even if it is not a mistake to hold that subjective experience is generated through our interaction with the phenomenal world, it would be a blunder to hold that consciousness is a byproduct of this physical body or material world. Precisely, the study of three states confirms the intrinsic difference between consciousness and mind that generates the sense of ‘I’ or ‘me’.

Advaitins have realized the technical limitation to conceptualize this nature of consciousness as it cannot be categorized either as a subject in the true sense or an object but the one that transcends both. Though many times it is referred as a knower or subject, consciousness is neither the cognitive agent nor the doer that performs our cognitive and volitional actions. It is important to note the profoundness of the concept of consciousness as Sākṣin in Advaita which is not just distinct from all psychological and physical activities but also not the subject or knower in the true sense. According to Tara Chatterjee, the witness is the Transcendental principle who is self-contained and has no reference to an object (Chatterjee 2003:12). As the pure consciousness, it reveals its own being without being the part of the epistemic triangle that ordinary empirical cognition presupposes. Let me here quote S. Radhakrishnan, who emphatically urges, “*Though, this witness-consciousness arises with the experience of objects, it is not due to the experience, but is presupposed by it*” (Radhakrishnan 2011:560). The best illustration of the Advaitic concept of witness-consciousness is found in the *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* which tells the story of two birds sitting on a tree while one is absorbed in eating, dancing and singing the other is silently witnessing the other without performing any activity. The former is the ‘enworlded subject’ the psycho-physical being who is the agent, the doer, the knower; the latter is the witnessing consciousness which is unattached, disinterested and isolated. Showing the essential difference between consciousness and mind at the subjective level, Advaita points towards the infinite region of consciousness that cannot be categorized into knower and known or subject and object. This is the universal consciousness that escapes all characterization and determination but endures through all transformation as a passive eternal existence. A state of eternal and infinite Bliss. Brahman.

Advaitic Response to the Hard Problem:

The philosophical implication of Advaitic Non-dualism is profound and groundbreaking. Advaita refutes any causal connection between consciousness and the physical body or the world. There are two reasons for holding this position. First, consciousness being the enduring

and motionless core principle cannot be either the cause or the by-product of any process. Secondly, any form of correlation between consciousness and the phenomenal world shall distort the basic tenets of Advaita. Here, we need to examine the status of the world in Advaita. Advaita does not deny the existential reality (*vyāvahārika satta*) of the world but it also does not enjoy any independent ontological status apart from Brahman. The world is not unreal but it is not real either, and thus it is called *anirvachaniya* or indescribable. Much of the controversies that have emerged against the Advaita philosophy are due to the inexplicable nature of the world. Apparently, Advaita seems to advocate the theory of causality known as *vivarta-vāda* but a little effort shows that any causal theory is logically untenable from the Advaitic standpoint. The world is a mere appearance and not a substantial reality, it persists as long as one does not realize the Absolute Universal nature of consciousness Sat-Cit-Ananda. Just as a dream is real as long as one does not wake up from a dream state and realize the truth of the waking state.

Concluding Remarks

It is necessary to keep a critical attitude towards every approach before we endorse it as the ultimate way to define the nature of consciousness. Modern philosophers of mind, and scientists, have done enormous investigations in this area and uncovered many unknown facts about our conscious experience, brain functions, and neuron activities. The important point is that while modern scientists implicitly advocate a theory of materialism, there are Indian scholars who strongly uphold the fundamental irreducible thesis of consciousness. The Non-dual Vedāntic account of consciousness can be summarized in the following ways:

Firstly, Consciousness is consciousness and there is no other best way to define it through words. Neither thought can grasp it nor words can explain it. Because both are objective contents of consciousness and presuppose the inevitable being of consciousness. Any attempt to theorize consciousness is therefore, a logical error. **Secondly**, all objective and scientific methods can only naturalize our conscious experience. It can rightly explore the realm of mental states as well as physical states but that does not unveil the intrinsic nature of pure consciousness. The methods themselves operate based on consciousness and therefore, cannot be directed towards that which is unobjective and indeterminate. Further, thought always conceives an object with its form, shape, qualities and locus, it is irrational to talk about any method that can grasp a formless, attribute-less and space-less existence. Admitting the notable distinction between consciousness and our faculty of knowledge Śāṅkara writes, “As it is the

witness of all intellects and their modifications, the Self, unlike the intellects, is not of limited knowledge and has no change, impurity or material nature in It” (Śaṅkara, 2012, 102). **Thirdly**, Advaita ascertains that consciousness is not an outcome or product of any process rather the default existence that is the source of our subjective awareness and the basis of this world’s appearance. In other words, to argue that matter is the fundamental reality is an assumption of science. It is contradicted by our experience of the phenomenal world and objects which are constantly changing, appearing, disappearing and so on. Matter can be composed and decomposed but not awareness. Śaṅkara asserts, “*The Self is conscious even in deep sleep as well as in waking and dream as Its power of Consciousness never ceases to exist and as It is changeless. It is only in the object of knowledge that there is a difference...*” (Śaṅkara, 2012, 203). It is observed that AI scientists have achieved tremendous success in extending and creating artificial intelligence. They have made machines those are extremely dynamic and sensible but could not generate any self-awareness in them. **Lastly**, the present study argues that it may not be wrong to ask how does subjectivity appear. However, it is a mistake to ask ‘How does consciousness appear from the physical body or brain?’ The material world, gross body and subtle body along with the sense of ‘I’ ness or ‘me’ are the objects that appear in and through consciousness. Science thus can explain the material world, and psychology also can theorize and explain our empirical identity and mental faculty but there is a ‘built-in limitation’ in reason, language and scientific methods that does not allow us to define consciousness. Consciousness is not the fragmented episodes of mental states but the one foundational underlying principle of awareness without any inner polarity that supports the gross and the subtle bodies to survive.

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