



‘Consciousness’ In Advaita Vedanta

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Abstract:

Consciousness has been the most debatable topic in the Indian Philosophy. Whereas there are schools in Indian Philosophy who claim consciousness to be a by product of physical elements there is Advaita Vedanta school who takes Consciousness to be the only reality. This paper is an attempt to unravel how Sankara’s concept of Consciousness has same features as that of Descartes but at the same time is different from it. How with the distinction of Mind, Self & Consciousness, so also vritti, cit & saksin Sankara tries to establish his theory of Consciousness which takes self-luminosity of consciousness as its essential element and finally culminates in Transcendental Idealism.

1. Introduction

Samkara’s Advaita Vedanta is without doubt one of the most known and significant school of Indian Philosophy. The Advaita Vedanta system is based upon Vedas and Upanishads, the Gita and Brahmasutras. He developed his philosophy in alignment with these texts and therefore his method of doing philosophy was called typically Vedantic. Generally, Vedanta philosophy and theory of consciousness in Vedanta are founded upon the understanding and interpretation of Vedas and Upanishads. Upanishadic texts try to establish unity of all things in the universe by claiming a single unifying principle behind everything which is fundamental to everything that exists and which is the underlying principle of everything. This fundamental principle is called ‘Brahman’ in the Upanishads and this same fundamental principle is also substance and essence of everyone which is called ‘atman’. So, in other words what we can say is the Brahman and the Atman are one. In the Upanishads we find epistemological, metaphysical, and psychological discussions about Brahman and atman which at the end reaches where Brahman and atman are considered as consciousness and this consciousness in Upanishads is described as ‘sacchidananda’ (existence (sat)¹, consciousness (cit)² bliss (ananda))³. So also, it is considered as truth (satya), knowledge (jnanam) and infinite (anantam)⁴. Therefore, the theory of consciousness in Advaita Vedanta is developed and built upon such descriptions.

2. General Understanding of Consciousness

When we use the word consciousness ordinarily, we have certain presumptions regarding features of consciousness which were very clear in the thoughts of Descartes. He argued firstly that consciousness is attributed in first person singular to oneself which however does not mean that it cannot be attributed to the other. But attributing to oneself is different from attributing to others in a way that when it is attributed to oneself it is based on observation of one's own behaviour and when it is attributed to someone else it is ascribed based on the observation of others’ behaviour. This is the first feature which can be called the ‘immediacy’ of consciousness. The second one is, Descartes

¹ Swami Krishnananda, *The Mandukya Upanishad* (Rishikesh: The Divine Life Society Sivananda Ashram, 1996), PDF e-book, 107.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., 108.

⁴ Swami Krishnananda, *The Essence of the Aitareya and Taittiriya Upanishads* (Rishikesh: The Divine Life Society Sivananda Ashram, 1982), PDF e-book, 44.

considered consciousness to be 'inner' whereas the body to be the 'outer'. Therefore this 'inner nature' is immediately accessible to one's own self and no one else. And the third one is the 'infallibility' of consciousness which Descartes argued for as opposed to doubtful nature of body as well as the states of consciousness. Now these three viz., the immediacy, the inner nature, and infallibility of consciousness are the most prevalent features of consciousness accepted in the west. However, all these three features are also recognised in the Indian philosophy also as aparoksatva, pratyaksatva and abadhita. It will not be wrong to say that Advaita Vedanta also retains all these three features of consciousness. The 'cit' in Advaita theory of consciousness is aparoksa, pratyak, and abadhita.

However, having retained the same features of consciousness Advaita theory is quite different from the conception of consciousness of Descartes because Descartes' conception of consciousness is founded upon 'I', the self which itself is taken to be an entity in this world as Husserl contents that, "the Cartesian ego is really a part of the world."⁵ But consciousness in Advaita Vedanta is not a part of the world rather the underlying principle or the foundation of the world itself. Immediacy in the Cartesian concept of consciousness is the inner perception of the conscious states of one's own self about which Brentano also said that, "every mental act is conscious it includes within it a consciousness of itself."⁶ But in Advaita immediacy is not the inner perception but 'self-luminosity' of consciousness in which there is no requirement of self-introspection of the ego. The infallibility in Descartes amounts to the idea that one cannot doubt that he is doubting or in other words it impossible to doubt that one is conscious or not. But in Advaita this concept of infallibility i.e., abadhita is the impossibility of attributing any of the form or the negation of the form to the consciousness. Therefore, the concept of consciousness in Advaita Vedanta is vastly different from the Cartesian concept of consciousness.

3. Mind is not Consciousness

There have been many debates regarding the distinction between mind and consciousness but it is important for us to know that not only in Advaita Vedanta but in the the entire Indian philosophical system mind and consciousness are not same but different. Mind is usually understood as the inner sense⁷ which is produced by the material nature and because of the predominance of SattvaGuna in it; it has its cognitive powers.

Any reasonable theory of consciousness should have its beginning in the psychology then it should move up to epistemology and then move towards and culminate in metaphysics finally. Therefore, the Advaita theory clearly differentiates between the cit (consciousness), the ego sense (ahamkara)⁸ the intellect (buddhi) and the mind (manas). Now cit is not considered to be a sense organ and it is also not like an instrument which produces an effect like cognition rather it is 'self-luminous' entity which is always present and being present always it manifests everything. In other words, it is the source which is responsible for the manifestation of everything.

In the Nyaya-Vaisesika theory knowledge is produced in the self by an appropriate coordination of the entities like sense organ, mind, and object in the world. So, the consciousness for them is the by-product or the result of coming together of all these natural entities and subsequently the self which is not conscious becomes the origin place of the consciousness.

⁵Edmund Husserl, Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology, 'Second Meditation' trans. Dorian Cairns (The Hague: MartinusNijhoff, 1973), 24.

⁶Franz Brentano, Psychology From an Empiricist Standpoint trans. C. Rancurello, D.B. Terrell, and Linda McAlister (New York: Humanities Press, 1973), 35.

⁷P. Deussen, The System of the Vedanta (New York: Dover Publications, 1973), 330.

⁸Bina Gupta, Perceiving in Advaita Vedanta(Lewisberg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 1992), 225-226.

The Advaita theory of consciousness does not accept this naturalistic account of the origin of consciousness as well as knowledge because according to Advaita nothing non-conscious can give rise to consciousness and no non-being entity can become being. In Advaita theory consciousness is self-luminous. However, this self-luminosity can be covered or uncovered by the natural elements.

4. Nature of Consciousness

In Indian philosophy the consciousness may be related to the self in three ways. First as a 'property of the self' as we see in the account of Nyaya-Vaisheshika where the consciousness is the property of the self which is also contingent. But we have seen that Advaita theory rejects this conception. Second way is consciousness as 'an act of the self' which is accepted by many of the Mimamsakas. For them consciousness is the act of self which makes the object known. However, this conception also can be reduced to the Nyaya-Vaisheshika concept because if the purpose of consciousness is to manifest the objects, then this activity can be considered as a property of the self again. And in this way, it will lead to an infinite regress because one activity will need another activity to manifest itself. Therefore, according to Advaita, the consciousness should not be considered as an act or property of the self rather its 'essence' which is ever-present. Now this essence also should not be taken as that necessary property of a thing without which the thing cannot be of its real nature otherwise consciousness cannot be considered as an essence of the self because again it will become its property. Therefore, according to Advaita when they say consciousness is the essence of the self, they mean that consciousness and self both are identical. For example, in a red rose according to Advaita Vedanta there are not two things 'the colour red' and the rose which is substance and the colour inheres in the substance rose. Rather they both are one entity and one substance that is Rose of which redness is only one aspect. And accordingly, they both become one identity. In the same way the consciousness is also not a property which inheres in self rather being conscious and the self are not two but one and the same.

According to Samkara all problem are because the true nature of consciousness is not properly understood. The natural elements in the world arise and perish. They come last for some go. They themselves are different from one another but all these things are object of knowledge of consciousness. Therefore, the consciousness is completely different from these natural elements. Now the two empirical aspects of human person that is his body and mental states pain viz., pain and pleasure, love and hatred etc. constitute the role of human person as the agent, the knower, and the enjoyer and all these things make up a system known as world (a samsara) which is interrelated. This world and all its constituent elements are also object of knowledge of consciousness and therefore that is also not consciousness. This is what Samkara tries to clear that there are two fundamental categories of human experience i.e., 'self' and 'non-self' and both are opposed to each other. One cannot be the other and there also cannot be the superimposition of the properties of one onto the other. When these superimpositions are dissolved then only the true nature of the consciousness gets manifested i.e., the one, eternal, difference-less consciousness.⁹

5. Vritti, Cit and Saksin

To understand the Advaita theory of consciousness more precisely we must understand the three important concepts viz., vritti (mental modes), cit (pure consciousness), and saksin (the witness consciousness). The vritti is mistakenly identified with the pure consciousness and the witness consciousness but the vritti is different from both.

Vritti is an epistemic process through which ignorance which covers the object to be known is removed. Since it is an epistemic process, it is also called the mental mode. Advaita speaks of two kinds of mental modes. One is the transformation of 'inner sense', second is transformation of

⁹Bina Gupta, *Cit: Consciousness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 104.

'nescience'.¹⁰ When in perception the inner sense is involved, for example perception of a chair or the table and then the cognition results which is because of the transformation of the inner sense but when inner sense is not present still the cognition results for example in the case of wrong perception of shell and silver, in this case cognition takes place because of modification of nescience.

According to Advaita the pure consciousness is that light which manifests every object. According to them in the absence of pure consciousness all the other objects physical or mental, apparent, or actual they remain in the darkness of ignorance. Objects and entities are manifested in the universe only through the light of consciousness and if there is no consciousness there will not be manifestation of any kind. Strictly speaking there cannot be absence of pure consciousness because that is all there is. Through the same pure consciousness both the subject and the object are manifested. Through this light the subject knows the object and the object is manifested to the subject. Therefore, it is different from vritti because this pure consciousness expresses itself through the help of vritti in every cognition. The pure consciousness is the foundation which is self-established and self-luminous but the vritti appears in relation to entities and is subject to change.

Saksin according to Advaita theory is that which perceives everything directly and immediately. It is not the doer but it is a passive observer or a witness in phenomenological sense, the pure observer who observes or witnesses without contaminating the observation. It is that disinterested observer who itself is not involved in the cognitive process but functions as an uninvolved seer or the witness consciousness.

Empirical knowledge in Advaita Vedanta arises only with the help of these three categories. In the beginning the pure consciousness should reflect itself in the mental mode i.e., vritti, secondly there must be a direct perception of whatever is given to the senses through the witness consciousness and at last pure consciousness must manifest the object with the help of mind the inner sense because objects cannot manifest themselves on their own irrespective of their being internal or external. Before the removal of the ignorance, they are all covered by the ignorance and only revealed by an appropriate vritti and when the vritti removes the ignorance, the object and the vritti also are manifested by the witness consciousness.

One important point to mention here is that the distinction between pure consciousness and vritti is very clear that they are two different ontological categories but pure consciousness and witness consciousness are not two different categories but it is the same thing which plays two different roles. Consciousness by itself and in itself is pure as we have seen earlier it's only function is to manifest the other objects. It is that same identical consciousness, which is the nature of Brahman metaphysically, and epistemologically which makes the knowledge possible through the help of the function of manifestation and in this epistemological context it plays the role of witness consciousness. Pure consciousness whatsoever does not need any proof for his existence, it is self-evident, immediate and the only reality without the second.

6. Self-luminosity of Consciousness

Discussion of the self-luminosity of consciousness starts with the question what does it mean when we say that consciousness is self-luminous? Does consciousness have a form or is it formless? Is it intentional or does not have an object? Why this self-luminous consciousness which is one and difference-less appear to be many and having differences?

¹⁰Ibid., 105.

Here it is important to mention that Advaita concedes with the position of Buddhism regarding consciousness that is self-luminous or self-shining (svayamprakasa).¹¹ According to Buddhism every cognitive event is self-shining which illumines itself. However, in Advaita no cognition like perception of a chair or table is self-manifesting rather according to them every cognition or the mental modification i.e., vritti is directly perceived by witness consciousness without the arbitration of another vritti. Therefore, in Advaita the cognition is considered self-manifesting because it is directly apperceived by the witness consciousness which is self-manifesting and there is no need of another witness consciousness to manifest it. But in Buddhism cognitive events do not have any witness consciousness there is no concept of witness consciousness in Buddhism, according to them each event is self-aware and self-shining.

The major dissimilarity between Advaita and Buddhism is in their conception of consciousness as having form(sakara) or formless(nirakara). In Buddhist account the consciousness is sakarai.e., having a form but Advaita Vedanta does not agree to this theory because they argue that consciousness cannot have a form or content. It's only function is to manifest every object as a light shows the object on which it is put.

Another important point to discuss is that whether the consciousness is intentional or unintentional? Advaita Vedanta in this regard argues against the Nyaya and Mimamsa theory of consciousness as intentional for Advaita the consciousness is entirely non-intentional. But here it is important to understand that it is only the pure consciousness which is non-intentional whereas the vrittis are intentional in structure because they are influenced by the external object and the mind.

And to the question regarding the consciousness appearing to be many and with differences Advaita has one simple answer that it is only because of the ignorance that this difference-less consciousness appears to be many and with differences. However, this answer may not be fully satisfactory but compared to Nyaya-Vaisheshika and Mimamsa, Advaita theory of consciousness is more plausible as an account of consciousness.

7. Conclusion: Consciousness is the only reality

Advaita Vedanta theory of Consciousness is an all-encompassing theory where the consciousness is not like an entity or God as some fictitious creator of the world dwelling somewhere in a remote place transcending this world of experience rather consciousness is immanent and present in all experiences. At the same time it is not any worldly entity but it is the foundation and the basis of this world of experience in that way it is transcendental. Advaita thesis Consciousness as the only reality is based on Upanishadic statement, "All this is Brahman (sarvamidamkhalu brahma) and so consciousness."¹² And therefore according to Advaita the Brahman as consciousness is all-pervading which enters into every entity as it is the underlying principle and innermost nature of all things. Advaitins will agree that one cannot reach to this reality of the true nature of consciousness until and unless one experiences the presence of this same consciousness in all beings (atman) and presence of all beings in this consciousness (Brahman).

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¹²Swami Krishnananda, *The Mandukya Upanishad* (Rishikesh: The Divine Life Society Sivananda Ashram, 1996), PDF e-book, 32.

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