

Advaita and the Philosophy of Consciousness without an Object

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Abstract: The paper explores Śaṅkara's position on autonomous consciousness, or *cit*, as the fundamental reality. As such, *cit* transcends subject/object duality, and Śaṅkara holds that consciousness is ultimately *nirviṣayaka* or non-intentional. I compare and contrast the Advaita view with the contemporary Phenomenological account, wherein consciousness is held to be essentially intentional, so that consciousness is always *of* or *about* some object or content, and where consciousness without an object is deemed conceptually impossible.

1. Absolute Consciousness

The ontological monism of Śaṅkara's Advaita Vedānta philosophy holds that pure consciousness, or *cit*, is the one fundamental substance. Thus reality is held to be ultimately singular in nature – only pure consciousness genuinely exists and is ontologically autonomous, while all other phenomena which appear to exist are metaphysically dependent upon pure consciousness. On the Advaita analysis, *cit* is characterized as absolute and unconditioned awareness, as immutable and inactive, formless and without limiting characteristics.

The history of Indian philosophy has been dynamically shaped by the longstanding controversies within Hinduism between its rival *darśanas*, and additionally between orthodox Hinduism and the heterodox schools of Buddhism and Jainism. On the topic of consciousness, one of the traditional issues of controversy revolved around the question of whether or not consciousness, by its essential nature, must be *of* an object. In the conventional terminology of disputation, this is the question of whether it is *saviṣayaka* or *nirviṣayaka*, i.e. intrinsically intentional or not. In addition the debate concerned the issue: does consciousness belong to someone – does it have a 'place', or is it 'placeless', belonging to no one? In disputational terms, is it *āśraya* or *nirāśraya*?

According to Śaṅkara's analysis, *cit* is both *nirviṣayaka* and *nirāśraya*, ultimately both non-intentional and belonging to no one. And because *cit* is held to be *nirviṣayaka*, pure consciousness itself is not dependent on any specific content or thing towards which it

appears to be directed. Consciousness *of* an object is a secondary and dependent mode, while the metaphysically fundamental mode is pure consciousness *without* an object. Hence in sharp contrast to the notions of consciousness prevalent in the Western Philosophical tradition, *cit* is intrinsically independent of any particular *objects* that may appear to occupy the field of consciousness.

In common with the Advaita Vedānta stance, various forms of metaphysical Idealism in Western Philosophy also maintain a seemingly related form of ontological monism. However, it is important to highlight a crucial distinction here, since in contrast to Western Idealism, it would be incorrect to attribute to Śaṅkara the view that reality is essentially *mental* in nature. For Śaṅkara, the mind is not to be identified with pure consciousness or *cit*, and as noted above, he not only maintains that *cit* is not intrinsically directed towards an object, but also that it is *nirāśraya*, it has no place and belongs to no one. Hence it belongs to no particular mind, and pure consciousness itself must be sharply distinguished from that which is properly mental.

Although non-dualistic, Advaita ontology is nonetheless committed to a radical *discontinuity* between unqualified, immutable, inactive *cit* on the one hand, versus the manifest world of attributes and form on the other. It is to this latter realm that the mind belongs. According to Śaṅkara, pure unconditioned awareness, as such, must be distinguished from the particular ‘states of consciousness’ associated with individual agents at specific times. It is these particular mental states that are directed towards objects, and where the apparent subject/object duality arises.

2. Conscious Mental States

Advaita monism maintains that the multifaceted, kaleidoscopic and everchanging material world is not ontologically autonomous, but rather is ultimately an ‘illusion’ sustained by *māyā*. The individual human mind and body are manifestations of this illusory material realm. Movement and form are attributes of matter, and they are also attributes of thought, which is a manifestation of matter. In stark contrast, pure consciousness is intrinsically formless and unchanging. The cognitive processes that characterize the mind are governed by the unconscious and mechanical forces of the material realm, and to this extent mental phenomena are viewed in purely ‘naturalistic’ terms. The unfolding of thought forms is simply the result of appropriate transformations of the unconscious material world, the turning of the wheels of *māyā*.

Dualistic ontologies have the pronounced difficulty of accounting for the *seeming* interaction between the two independent realms of existence. In Western forms of mind/matter dualism, the relation between material and mental substance drives the longstanding and deeply recalcitrant mind/body problem. Cartesian interactive dualism posits a causal link between mind and matter, and is thus seen to be at odds with physical conservation laws; while the non-interactive model of Leibniz and Locke requires divine intervention to maintain a ‘pre-established harmony’ between independent realms. In comparison, on the mind/consciousness dualism of the Sāṃkhya-Yoga philosophical tradition, there is the concomitant difficulty of explaining how the absolute and

unconditioned consciousness of *puruṣa* can ‘interact’ with the unconscious material/mental structures of *prakṛti* to yield conscious mental states (see Schweizer 1993, 2019 for further discussion).

The Advaita philosophy of consciousness monism has a not dissimilar problem in accounting for the metaphysical status of the manifest world, and the relation between *māyā* and pure consciousness which makes it seem *as if* there are real conscious mental states. Śaṅkara invokes the subtle notion of ‘superimposition’ (*adhyāsa*) to explain the general projection of attributes and form onto unqualified and unconditioned basic reality. In the current discussion I will not delve into this recondite topic *per se*, but will instead just touch on the phenomenon of ‘conditioned’ consciousness in the context of individual mental states. As viewed from a ‘personal’ perspective *within* the phenomenal realm, pure *cit* is both transcendent but also immanent. In terms of immanence, pure consciousness persists in subjective phenomenal experience as the inner self or ‘witness’ (*sākṣin*) that constitutes the ultimate seat of awareness, the ground of sentience (see Gupta 1998 for a detailed exploration). In this aspect, *cit* is compared to a light which is self-luminous and self-revealing. Thus *cit* dwells ‘inside’ the mind as the self-luminous witness consciousness.

From a more ‘outside’ or external perspective, when explaining how conscious mental states and events are possible, pure consciousness is again standardly compared to a light, which in this case illuminates the particular material configurations or ‘shapes’ assumed by the mind. Hence, on the Advaita account, thought processes and mental events are conscious only to the extent that they receive ‘illumination’ from *cit*. The sanskrit term ‘*manas*’ is often translated directly as ‘mind’, although it is more accurate to observe that it is the combination of both *manas* and *buddhi* which roughly corresponds to the objective or impersonal mental faculties in Western philosophical discourse, and, as will be explicated below, it is *buddhi* which is centrally involved in the occurrence of particular conscious experiences.

Manas is viewed essentially as an organ, the special organ of cognition, just as the eyes are the special organs of sight. Indeed, *manas* is held to be intimately connected with perception, since the raw data supplied by the senses must be ordered and categorized with respect to a conceptual/linguistic scheme before various objects can be perceived *as* members of their respective categories, and as inhabiting a world characterized by the systematic and distinguishable attributes with which sense experience is normally imbued. This imposition of conceptual/linguistic structure on the field of raw sensation is one of the basal activities of *manas*, and forms the distinction between brute sensation (*nirvikalpaka*) as opposed to differentiated perception (*savikalpaka*).

In addition to its perceptual activities, *manas* is held to be responsible for the cognitive functions of analysis, deliberation and decision. It is closely allied to *buddhi*, which is somewhat roughly translated as the faculty of ‘intellect’ or ‘reason’. *Buddhi* is a subtler and more powerful faculty than *manas*, and is responsible for higher level intellectual functions, which require intuition, insight and reflection. The Indian *buddhi* is in some

ways comparable to the Greek *noûs*, while *manas* is responsible for lower level discursive thought and analysis. But *buddhi* is still regarded as a manifestation of unconscious *māyā*, albeit the most subtle and refined form which material patterns can assume.

So, to return to the interplay of consciousness and matter, resulting in apparently conscious mental events – it is the subtle ‘thought forms’ of the *buddhi* which allow mental events to appear conscious, because the refined *buddhi* substance is held to be ‘transparent’ to the light of consciousness. Thus, in order for conscious thoughts and perceptual experiences take place, the ‘translucent’ *buddhi* receives representational forms, both perceptual and conceptual, from *manas*, the ‘organ of cognition’, and it receives conscious ‘light’ from *cit*. So the cognitive structures received from *manas* are illuminated by an external source, and in this manner specific mental structures can appear conscious.

To fully exploit the optical analogy, the conscious representational structures involved in, say, visual perception, can be compared to transparent photographic slides. The photographic image stored in the film is composed of matter, but it is both representational and translucent. Therefore, when the film is held up to an external light source, such as the sun, the illuminated representation is analogous to the structures of perceptual experience which glow with the sentience of *cit*. Only the subtle thought-forms of *buddhi* are translucent with the light of *cit*, while other configurations of matter are opaque to this radiance. And this is why minds appear to be the loci of sentience in the realm of *māyā*, while stones and tables cannot assume conscious guise.

Pure consciousness illuminates the material thought-forms of the *buddhi*, thereby yielding the appearance of sentient states that are directed towards particular objects and cognitive contents. But from the perspective of pure consciousness this directedness is merely an appearance. Consciousness as such is not directed towards these objects, it has no intention to illuminate the limited material structures in question, and it is completely independent of the mental phenomena upon which its light happens to fall. As explicated by Karl Potter,

... whereas ordinary awareness not only has an object but also requires it as the occasion for that specific piece of awareness or judgment, pure consciousness has no more relation to its objects than does the sun that shines on everything without being in the least affected by or dependent on things. (1981, p. 93).

3. Consciousness and Space

Potter thus appeals to *sunlight* as an appropriate metaphor for the non-intentional nature of pure consciousness. But an even more fitting analogy is introduced in the following passage from Śaṅkara (from the verse section of his work *Upadeśasāhasrī*, chapter 10, ‘On the Nature of Consciousness’), which begins with the use of light and progresses to a comparison with *space*:

Pure and changeless consciousness I am by nature, devoid of objects to illumine...
Beginningless and devoid of attributes, I have neither actions nor their results...

Though in a body, I do not get attached on account of my subtleness, like space which, though all pervading, does not get tainted.

Indeed, space provides an extremely apt metaphor when trying to address the conceptual question of ‘how is pure consciousness itself to be understood – what would provide an appropriate *structural model* for such a phenomenon?’ And the highly abstract notion of physical space supplies a fascinating answer. To the ancient Greek classification of the world as consisting of the four ultimate components of earth, water, fire and air, the Indians added a fifth and all pervasive element: *ākāśa*, which is more or less equivalent to classical ‘ether’ or ‘space’. As a basic metaphysical substance, pure consciousness is held to possess several essential features in common with this most subtle, and in some respects most fundamental, of the physical elements.

Consciousness, like space, is ontologically independent of the objects that may happen to fill or occupy it. Thus consciousness *of* an object is a secondary, non-fundamental mode, analogous to space that is occupied. In normal circumstances, we are mostly concerned with and cognizant of space with things in it, and this can hide the fact that space itself is not ontologically dependent on its occupants. Similarly, in normal circumstances we are mostly concerned with the field of *consciousness* only insofar as it is directed towards particular things and contents, insofar as it has an intentional object. And, according to the Advaita view, this can obscure the fact that pure consciousness itself does not depend on the things that we happen to be conscious of.

Another related aspect in which consciousness is held to resemble space is that, in addition to being ontologically self-sustaining, space cannot, even in principle, be *affected* by the objects which fill it. Space itself remains detached and unalterable, even when there are things ‘taking it up’. Space is totally inert – it cannot be displaced or disturbed, and it does not react in any way with its contents. This is very much in contrast to *air*, for example. Objects occupying a place in the atmosphere must *displace* the fluid that would otherwise occupy the same spatial location. And objects moving through a gaseous medium cause turbulence and friction, propagate sound waves and generate heat. The atmosphere will chemically interact with the surface of these objects, resulting in corrosion and weathering, etc.

In contrast space is absolutely detached, passive and inert. Space *cannot* be touched or altered by the things that fill it. And conversely, space cannot affect its occupants. So it is significant that this highly abstract notion of *ākāśa* or space, rather than air, is used as the structural metaphor for consciousness. Clearly, the Indian notion of *ākāśa* is in many ways comparable to the Newtonian conception of *absolute space*, and hence on this view, consciousness itself is structurally analogous to Newton’s classical conception of space as an independently real, objective and fundamentally detached manifold (see Schweizer 2016 for further discussion on this topic).

4. Comparison with Western Phenomenology

In sharp contrast to the Advaita view, the phenomenological tradition of Western philosophy maintains that all mental states, by their very nature, must be *directed towards* something, and hence *pure*, non-intentional consciousness is ruled out as theoretically impossible. According to the Phenomenological account, consciousness is essentially *intentional* – conscious states are always *of* or *about* something (although this ‘something’ may well be a non-existent object, such as Pegasus or Meinong's ‘Golden Mountain’). Husserl’s analysis stems from his modification and development of the notion of intentionality as revived by his teacher Franz Brentano, who adopted the notion as a basic criterion for distinguishing properly mental from purely physical phenomena. And for Brentano as well, consciousness is viewed as essentially intentional, so that the very notion of consciousness without an object is seen as self-contradictory.

Thus the Phenomenological stance on the intentionality of consciousness is in opposition to the Advaita analysis on two major points. First, the latter claims that the mind and the processes by which it is directed to external objects are essentially *physical* in nature, while Brentano uses directedness as the key feature distinguishing minds from mere physical systems. Second, Śāṅkara holds that, far from being self-contradictory, consciousness without an object is indeed fundamental, while directed states of awareness comprise a secondary and dependent mode. In contrast, Husserl maintains that there is an indissoluble link between consciousness and ‘meaning’, where this meaning encompasses both the semantical directedness of Frege’s *Sinn*, which does the essential work of linguistic reference, as well as a perceptual form of directedness to account for conscious experiences of, for example, the-tree-as-perceived, i.e. as seen from a particular perspective on a particular occasion. In phenomenological terminology, it is the noema which comprises this structured mode of presentation inherent in all episodes of consciousness.

Husserl’s position is notoriously intricate and complex, and in the following discussion I will rely heavily on Aron Gurwitsch’s (1982) elucidation. Regarding Husserl’s stance on the intentionality of consciousness, Gurwitsch states that

It pertains to the essential nature of acts of consciousness to be related and correspond to noemata... *consciousness must be defined as a noetic-noematic correlation*, that is to say, a correlation between items pertaining to two heterogeneous planes: on the one hand the plane of temporal psychological events, and on the other hand that of... ideal entities that are the noemata, or meanings understood in the broader sense [his italics] (p. 65).

Indeed, according to Gurwitsch, consciousness is then to be characterized by an intrinsic duality between psychological events and the correlated ideal objects, where this duality takes the place of Descartes’ schism between thinking substance and extended substance.

Thus, while Śāṅkara's views on metaphysically autonomous *cit* are highly analogous to the classical Newtonian conception of absolute space, the contrasting phenomenological stance on the intentionality of consciousness is in many ways comparable to Leibniz's competing views on physical space. In opposition to the Newtonian camp, Leibniz and his

followers put forward an alternative and rather deflationary account. They deny that space, as such, has any independent reality. The only things that properly exist are material entities and physical events. All spatial assertions should be interpreted not as attributing features to space *itself*, but rather as attributing spatial *relations* between material existents. So objects ‘occupy’ space only to the extent that they bear the salient geometrical relations to other bodies and to subparts of themselves as extended objects.

As with the Leibnizean notion of relational space, on Husserl's model of intentional consciousness, there is no provision for a substantive or real structure, over and above conscious states that are *directed*, i.e., that are determined by the *relation* of subject to object.

5. The Vedāntic Theory of Intentional States

According to Śāṅkara, pure unconditioned awareness, as such, must be distinguished from the particular ‘states of consciousness’ associated with individual agents at specific times. Though the underlying story is quite different, these states of consciousness are meant to capture the same basic set of phenomena as that which Gurwitsch calls ‘acts of consciousness’, *viz.*, particular instances of directed conscious experience. However, the Indian view diverges from the Phenomenological analysis with respect to the fundamental status of these ordinary states. It argues that the more basic absolute consciousness is a necessary precondition for these directed states, *if* they are to appear conscious. Conversely, if these directed states are taken on their own, they remain both unconscious and purely material. But, as the following section will maintain, in spite of their extreme differences, there is still far wider scope for agreement between the two frameworks than might first be suspected.

In marked contrast to the contemporary Western stance, Vedāntic philosophy takes an extremely non-metaphorical approach to intentionality. The paradigmatic case is sense perception, where the mind is said to literally ‘go out’ (*prāpya-kārī*, Indich 1980, p. 71) through the sense organs into the world and ‘assume the form’ of the objects of perception and knowledge. Thus intentional directedness is founded on a veritable ‘noetic ray’ (normally described as ‘of the nature of light’, or *tejas*), which itself makes actual contact with the external objects on which the mind is focussed. When the mind thus assimilates the form of its external object, this results in an appropriate modification of *manas*, the organ of cognition. This modification of *manas*, this structural reflection or mental likeness, then becomes manifest in the *buddhi* substance and is illuminated by pure consciousness, thus resulting in a particular directed conscious state.

So a conscious state of an individual agent, directed towards a specific object, is treated as a metaphysical hybrid. The properly *intentional* aspect of this hybrid is seen as an alteration of the ‘inner instrument’, *viz.* a modification of *manas* effected by its literal contact with its respective object, which cognitive modification is then transferred to the vitreous *buddhi* substrate. And this component of the hybrid state is purely mechanical or ‘naturalistic’, a direct consequence of the causal transformations governing the physical domain. In more contemporary raiment, this could be seen as a physically implemented

formal representation or form of information processing. Then this structural modification of the mental substrate, a kind of essentialist representation, is passively illuminated by pure consciousness, resulting in a 'directed' configuration of matter that appears to be sentient. Hence on this account the mind is held to be in motion, and actively extends into space, rather than remaining passive in its cognitive container, merely the recipient of causal impingements from the outside world. The Vedāntic view does not posit an ontological gulf separating mind from matter, and thus the mind can actively 'pervade' objects and modify itself in response to the structures it contacts.

In contrast, Phenomenological views in particular, and western views in general, tend to be highly metaphorical about intentional 'powers'. The mind is said to be 'directed towards' objects, it has an intentional 'aim', etc., but these locutions tend to lack explicit force. To be sure, on Husserl's view, the noema serve as the vehicle by which the mind is directed. It is thus the correlation with the salient noema which gives the mind intentional access to an external realm. According to Gurwitsch, "... the perceptual noema must not be mistaken for an Idea in the Cartesian sense – that is to say, the substitute for, or representative of, a reality only mediately accessible" (p. 68). And again, "... because of the intentionality of consciousness, we are in direct contact with the world" (p. 66). Thus for Husserl, there is a strong attempt to repudiate the Cartesian heritage which preconditions so much of western philosophical thought about the mind.

According to Gurwitsch, "The temporal events called 'acts of consciousness' have the peculiarity of being actualizations or apprehensions of meanings, the terms 'apprehension' and 'meaning' being understood in a very general sense beyond the special case of symbolic expressions" (p. 65). It is certainly worth noting that these 'actualizations or apprehensions of meanings' are highly analogous to the Vedantic 'modifications of *manas*', where both types of structured event are meant to characterize the internal or subjective/mental reality of perceiving and understanding.

Indeed, Gurwitsch's talk of 'consciousness' as a correlation between items from different planes, the psychological and the noematic, looks more like the characterization of particular, content-laden mental states, rather than a characterization of *consciousness* simpliciter. Apparently both of these correlated items, when taken separately, remain unconscious. In this manner, 'apprehensions of meaning' and 'modifications of *manas*' are reasonably compatible, except that on the Indian model there is only one plane (the material) involved. But in terms of intentional structure, and the unconscious status of the elements invoked, there is a fair degree of resemblance between the two analyses of directed mental states.

Both perspectives could still agree that particular mental states with specific content or form must, by their very nature, be intentional. To deny this would seem to be committing a kind of self contradiction. And Śāṅkara could potentially agree with the phenomenologist insofar as the Vedāntin's pure, autonomous consciousness is not properly a *mental state*. In this regard, all conscious *mental states* are intentional for

Śaṅkara as well, because pure consciousness is said to illuminate the ‘directed’ modifications of matter intrinsic to such states.

So the critical differences obviously emerge with respect to the status and role of pure consciousness. The distinctively phenomenological claim that pure, undirected consciousness *itself* is theoretically impossible seems much less compelling than the weaker assertion just delineated, *viz.*, that all conscious *mental states* must be intentional. What are the underlying grounds for this additional claim, and what is the force of the ‘impossibility’? Actuality is generally accepted as a proof of possibility, and in the final section I will examine some traditional notions regarding the experiential reality of pure consciousness.

6. Mystical Experience

Ultimately, the Advaita stance on pure, objectless consciousness cannot be established or derived as the conclusion of a deductive argument or intricate chain of philosophical reasoning. According to Śaṅkara, the real nature of consciousness does not follow from mere argumentation or rational speculation. And similarly, empirical investigation and scientific methodology will also not yield this knowledge.

Especially in the past 400 years, Western science has made remarkable progress and should in no way be downplayed or underestimated – empirical investigation and scientific theorizing are extremely powerful tools. However, it is essential to note that empirical methods cannot in themselves underwrite a theoretical closure principle. Physics provides us with a deep and rigorous grasp of physical reality, but it cannot support the further *metaphysical* claim that physical theory is fully exhaustive, and that there is nothing beyond its the scope. Such a closure principle does not follow from empirical investigation or scientific experimentation, and it is entirely consistent with physical theory that the closure principle is *false*. Thus if one defines ‘empiricism’ as the doctrine that we should only accept that which can be empirically established, then the closure principle is in fact *inconsistent* with empiricism.

Similar considerations also apply to the scope and limits of human reason itself. Without the prior intellectual resources of advanced mathematics, there could be no physics. The *a priori* knowledge gained through logic, mathematics, and conceptual analysis provides the essential foundation upon which our mighty scientific edifices are constructed. But these abstract disciplines are equally incapable of underwriting their own theoretical closure principle. It is entirely consistent with logic, mathematics and human reason that there are truths which fall outside the scope of these intellectual methods. Thus if one defines ‘rationalism’ as the doctrine that we should only accept that which can be established on the grounds of reason and logic, then the closure principle is in fact *inconsistent* with rationalism.

Hence the Advaita stance on pure, objectless consciousness is entirely compatible with a ‘hard-headed’ acceptance of all the truths that can be legitimately derived on the basis of both science and reason. But on Śaṅkara's view, the ultimate nature of consciousness

cannot be accessed by empirical or rational methods. It is beyond mental processes in general and cannot be grasped via an act of cognition, since all cognitive activity incorporates the subject/object duality. Pure, autonomous consciousness can only be accessed through the mystical experience of direct realization. Because pure, absolute consciousness is held to be self-luminous, it can be directly and immediately self-realized (see Maharaj, 2018 for an insightful cross-cultural defense of the epistemic value of mystical experience).

According to those who have attained this realization, Brahman, the ultimate Reality underlying the external universe, is identical to Ātman, the ultimate Reality underlying the inner self. Ātman is Brahman (*ayam Ātmā Brahma*). Thou Art That (*tat tvam asi*). The non-duality of pure consciousness without an object thus closes the circle – inner and outer are experienced as one. And although it is held to transcend conceptual understanding or linguistic characterization, this singular reality is canonically depicted as *sat, cit, ānanda* – existence, consciousness, bliss.

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