

Two Day International Conference
on
The Problem of Consciousness and the Brain/Brahman Dichotomy
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Organized by
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Concept Note

Consciousness has proved elusive despite all the combined efforts of philosophers and scientists to grasp it in its entirety, to say the very least. After being subject of a fierce debate among philosophers regarding its nature for almost half a century towards the end of the last millennia it still remains as one of the most fascinating riddles yet to be solved to everyone's satisfaction. The problem is to explain how something apparently non-physical and phenomenal in character can be a feature of the world which is arguably physical in nature. In other words, either consciousness is like any other physical entity from quarks to rocks, which sounds counterintuitive, or the world is essentially nonphysical, which flies in the face of all the hard scientific evidence. This is the reason why consciousness has aroused awe and wonder in philosophers and scientists alike and has proved to be notoriously difficult for scholars to arrive at an agreeable solution. In the last sixty years or so, the revival of interest in consciousness of scientists and philosophers alike has been mostly dominated by physicalism or more broadly naturalism. Modern day philosophers do not ignore hard scientific data and restrict their views on consciousness within the limits of the physical (Armstrong 1968; Dretske 1995; Gennaro 2011; Kriegel 2009; Levine 2001; Metzinger 2003; Rosenthal 2005; Tye 1995). Even those who agree that consciousness is not reducible to neurobiological processes, and by extension not to be classified as a purely physical phenomenon, do not believe that it is totally independent/free of/from its physical basis (Block 2007; Chalmers 1996; Dennett 1991; Searle). In other words, they argue for dualism of mental and physical properties but do not claim that mental properties are supernatural. Rather they argue that mental properties are supervenient on the brain, the physical. They take reality to be physical and its description by physics a complete one.

According to physicalism, consciousness is a natural phenomenon, arising out of the same physical processes of which the rest of the non-conscious universe is a product. The most influential contemporary western thinkers argue that consciousness is just one phenomenon in the long chain of evolution, which extends back to non-conscious phenomena in the past. In other words, consciousness is not fundamental, according to the contemporary western thought, but a mere product of contingent physical processes.

Taking their cue from Neurobiology physicalist philosophers claim that we know the brain better than before. There are various kinds of creatures with brains of their own kind compared to the human brain. Human brain is the most complicated of them all: a complex structure of billions of nerve cells with trillions of connection in between them. This complexity of neural structure of the brain is the source of consciousness and its functions. Most importantly, it is a product of evolutionary process at this stage like many other creature and organisms. The brain we know about is just a lump of biological matter constituted of the same

fundamental particles of which stars and galaxies are made. So essentially, it is physical in nature. Many philosophers adhere to this naturalism about consciousness.

With notable exception of Cārvāka, the Indian counterpart of contemporary reductionism, Indian theories of consciousness are directly opposed to the physicalist theories. Most of the Indian philosophical schools believe that consciousness is the fundamental constituent of reality. Even the dualistic schools, for instance, Samkhya, advocate a dualism of pure consciousness (*puruṣa*) and primordial matter (*prakṛti*). (It is important to note that, the phenomenal consciousness that contemporary philosophers of mind talk about is a product of *prakṛti*) In fact, consciousness has been consecrated to such a high level since the very beginning that Advaita Vedānta, one of the most influential Vedanta schools, defines ultimate reality as absolute, undifferentiated, pure consciousness or Brahman-consciousness. According to this view, the ultimate reality or Brahman-Consciousness is non-dual consciousness, and individually differentiated consciousness is mere appearance, an illusion. Advaita thesis, which is essentially a theory of consciousness, is supposed to be the culmination and the final message of the teachings of the Vedas, Upanishads, and Bhagavat-Gītā.

Clearly, the views on consciousness may be divided into two categories. On the one hand, there are the physicalists who argue that consciousness is a product of brain. In other words, they claim that consciousness is brain-consciousness. On the other hand, there are Advaita spiritualists who argue that consciousness is the very nature of reality and it is non-dual, undifferentiated consciousness. We can call this Brahman-consciousness.

Thus, we may say that Advaita and physicalism represent the two contrasting, and perhaps most basic, world views respectively: either consciousness is ontologically fundamental or it is developmental. We can term the former *fundamentalists* and the latter *developmentalists*. The fundamentalist will claim that consciousness was there from the very beginning of everything. The Advaita tradition tells us that consciousness is ontologically more fundamental from which everything else has originated. This implies that according to Advaita, Brahman-consciousness is not an ordinary, empirical consciousness. But, it is a transcendental entity, something which is beyond space and time and hence transcending experience. Consciousness transcends experience because it is the very source of experience. The developmentalist, however, will argue that consciousness is a product of later development in the evolutionary process. The best candidate to be the locus of consciousness is the brain. According to them, consciousness is reducible to neurobiological processes. Thus, the debate between fundamentalists and developmentalists is about the essential nature of consciousness. The developmentalists will say that brain is the locus of consciousness. For fundamentalists, however, the answer is much more complicated. If consciousness is fundamental then it is the locus of everything. But how does this world full of plurality of things, animate and inanimate, originate from non-dual, undifferentiated Brahman-consciousness is less convincing. Nonetheless, leave the metaphysical manipulations of the *māyā* and *mithyāttva*, the distinction between phenomenal and absolute reality, and you will find the two views are irreconcilably connected. You cannot hold both the views to be true together. Yet, from the Indian perspective, it is not easy to give up belief in the Brahman, the ultimate reality, which is one without the other, non-dual, pure consciousness and bliss even in the face of overwhelming empirical evidence in favor of brain. This view is supposed to be the crest-jewel of intellect, essence of message by all the scriptures, and logical conclusion of all philosophical thought.

Now, given the naturalist stand on consciousness the problem today is to formulate a response to the problem of consciousness from the spiritualist Vedanta perspective vis-à-vis physicalism. One is compelled to ask if the Advaita view of the non-dual, undifferentiated Brahman-consciousness is right, how are we to reconcile this truth with the contention that consciousness is supervenient on the individual brain? Which one of these is the fundamental truth: individual consciousness located in the brain, or non-dual, undifferentiated Brahman-consciousness? One even wonders how the identity of undifferentiated Brahman-consciousness remains concealed from individual brain-consciousness. And even more intriguing is the possibility of realization of Brahman-consciousness by the individual brain-consciousness.

The brain-Brahman dichotomy is a dilemma to choose between spiritual or scientific approaches to consciousness. Indian theories and Advaita in particular, emphasizes on the spiritual approach to consciousness. As C. Ram-Parasad (2001) points out, “classical Indian theories of consciousness generally evolved within a soteriological context in which the ultimate goal was some transcendental spiritual state. Contemporary consciousness studies, apart from where it is approached from the specifically religious concerns of Christianity (and, increasingly, Buddhism), is generally oriented to scientific goals that allow no place for transcendental concerns” (p. 378). Therefore, it becomes important to ask which Indian theories of consciousness are “relevant to contemporary physicalism-conditioned consciousness studies” (Ram-Prasad 2001, p. 380). In other words, Ram-Prasad (2001p. 378) believes that whether and where, Indian theories of consciousness can be linked to the naturalization of consciousness project being carried out, is itself a significant question. Although, Ram-Prasad accepts that the spiritual concerns of Indian Philosophy are not compatible with the physicalist approach to the consciousness. However, contemporary physicalism can benefit from the ideas found in rich Indian philosophical literature. Ram-Prasad writes:

“Classical Indian philosophy, then (and that includes the Buddhist systems that, even though they deny a metaphysical self, nonetheless have the soteriological goal of liberation), has concerns that are simply incompatible with the framework of physicalist consciousness studies. On the other hand, it is undeniable, for those who know anything about the classical Indian texts, that there is much in these texts on issues of selfhood, consciousness, self-consciousness, mind, mental activity, and so forth that appear germane to contemporary concerns.” (Ram-Prasad 2001, p. 379)

He further points out that Advaita conception of non-dual, undifferentiated, de-individuated, general, Brahman-consciousness which is never an object of knowledge challenges the very presupposition of physicalism that consciousness is something that can be studied. In effect physicalism hopes to study the causal basis of consciousness, namely the brain. It is noteworthy that Physicalism, which sides with the brain in the brain-Brahman dichotomy, develops in response to the problem of phenomenal consciousness, the hard-problem. In fact, physicalism is the umbrella term to be used for various reductionist theories of mind and consciousness, which covers theories such as behaviorism, identity theory, functionalism and representationalism. Now, one goal of this proposed seminar will also be to compare the notions of phenomenal consciousness which is essentially brain-consciousness with Brahman-consciousness in order to assess the points on which Indian tradition can contribute to the debate. It is also important from the following observation on contemporary literature on consciousness. We find that contemporary philosophers have developed naturalist/physicalist theories, which they attribute originally to the ancient and modern western thinkers. For instance, the proponents of higher-order perception theory of consciousness attribute this theory to John Locke and

Immanuel Kant's view of consciousness as an inner-sense or inner-awareness of mental states. Another version of higher-order representational theory of consciousness, namely, self-representationalism is attributed to Aristotle.¹ The recent proponent of the theory, Uriah Kriegel, has argued that self-representationalism is not only better than other competing theories of consciousness such as *higher-order perception*, *higher-order thought* and *wide intrinsicity view*, but it also fits the requirements for a natural theory of consciousness.

Moreover, the supporters of the phenomenological tradition have already pointed out the significance of phenomenological method developed by Husserl to the contemporary cognitive science research. Phenomenology provides the first-person description of consciousness which cannot be ignored but must be adopted as the major dimension in understanding the mind. Some contemporary cognitive scientists, for example Varela (1993), have shown interest in the Buddhist methodology of studying personal consciousness and have used it to develop a methodology of studying consciousness scientifically.

The following questions must be addressed in this context:

How do we reconcile the dichotomy between the Indian perspectives on consciousness, which declares it to be a transcendental reality on the one hand, with the contemporary efforts to develop an objective methodology to study consciousness by the scientists on the other, who are convinced that it must be an immanent reality in the fundamentally physical world?

Here again we can outline two contrasting approaches to the study of consciousness. There is the method of observing and studying conscious states like any other physical event distinct and different from the observer. This method assumes that consciousness must be like any other complex physical phenomena which are studied by breaking down into their constituents and by discovering casual laws governing their behavior. This is the method of scientific objectivism adopted by physicalists. However, eastern traditions, such as Vedanta and Buddhism, do not treat consciousness as a phenomenon to be studied objectively. They rely on subjective method of introspection in which consciousness is self-illuminating (Wallace 2000). This method is based on the understanding that consciousness can never be an object but is always a subject of consciousness. It is not surprising that a lot of contemporary literature is devoted to the discussion and delineation of the concept of subject of consciousness or *self*.

On the one hand there are contemporary philosophers like Daniel Dennett, Owen Flanagan, Miri Albahari (2006) and Thomas Metzinger, who argue that there is no such thing as self. According to Metzinger (2009), the problem 'how does physical brain produce conscious self?' is irresolvable unless we give up our belief in self as an entity. Evan Thompson has called this view "neuro-nihilism". Neuro-nihilism is the tendency to deny existence of the self as a non-physical entity which is another extreme of admitting self as an abiding, permanent entity. The idea of self does not necessarily mean a "homunculus that manages or observes the cognitive process" (Dreyfus, 2011; p. 118). Evan Thomason in *Waking, Dreaming, Being* takes the middle path, he advocates the view that self is a process and not thing or an entity. Moreover, Physicalism has asked inconvenient questions to the metaphysical conception of self as well. The skepticism regarding the conception of self as an immaterial, non-physical entity free from its biological moorings has led the contemporary philosophers to talk about embodiment: to be a self is to be embodied. From the cognitive science perspective, philosophers have argued that

¹ The credit goes to Franz Brentano, a 19th Century philosopher.

idea of self makes does not make sense as a disembodied entity. Since metaphysical conception of the self is an illusion, the self as a natural entity cannot be free from its biological moorings. The most sensible conception of self is of an embodied self. The self is not just confined to the brain but results from the cognitive capabilities of the body as well. Body is no more a vehicle of the self but it is self. The notion of self as reflected in the thought of embodied cognition and enactivism also needs to be considered with respect to the Brain-Brahman Consciousness dichotomy.

Even if the self is an illusion and there must be some explanation of the sense of self that we all seem to have. More importantly, before getting into reductionist-antireductionist debate about self we must be clear about the meaning of self. Apart from the question of reality of self the debate on the nature and reality of self gives philosophers another point to ponder upon: Can we talk about conscious experience meaningfully without reference to the subject of experience? Buddhism does say that the reality is momentary. But does this mean that the observer or the subject experiencing that momentary, changing reality is in flux too? In other words, the subject of experience is also changing with respect to the changing experiences of reality caused by it. The object of experience and the subject of experience are connected by the flux of cognitive moments and hence each moment the object, the subject and the experience are new yet related to the last moment by its traces. Or, the self is like the Advaita witnessing consciousness. Indian Philosophers, like Sangeetha Menon, start with the thesis that all subjective experience requires brain, but they point out that subjective experiences do originate from the brain but do not end in the brain rather belong to the self. Subjective experience is the link between the self and the brain. Menon put this into the slogan: “Self-in-the-brain and brain-in-the-self”.

The upshot of the above discussion is that we need to revisit the contemporary debates on consciousness and its related issues from the classical Indian perspective and vice versa. It is very important for the present generation of philosophers working on consciousness must address the most fundamental issue regarding the nature of consciousness expressed in the form of Brain-Brahman dichotomy. In other words, the question is how we might be able to show that Indian theories are not utterly irrelevant to the context in which consciousness is being studied as a natural phenomenon. If consciousness is what science tells us it is, then the belief in the Advaitic notion of absolute, pure and undifferentiated, de-individualized consciousness will be refuted.

The conference aims to explore and examine Advaita view of consciousness in contrast with the physicalist theories of consciousness in the light of relevant recent developments in cognitive science. The aim will be to show that Indian theories of consciousness can contribute to the better understanding of consciousness. The conference invites papers written on any of the following topics but not limited to:

- Advaita view of consciousness
- Brain-Brahman dichotomy
- Contemporary theories of self
- Dualism and Idealism
- Enactivism
- Nyaya-Buddhism debate on the concept of self
- Consciousness in other Non-Dualistic Traditions, e.g. Kashmir Shaivism
- Physicalism

- Panpsychism and Non-Dualism
- Relationship between consciousness and the self
- Self-Brain dichotomy
- Science of consciousness
- The hard problem of consciousness

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