

# Advaita Vedanta answer to the hard problem of consciousness: A philosophical review

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## ABSTRACT

For thousands of years, human beings have been exploring the fundamental nature of the world and the self. In this process, modern science and Vedanta philosophy do not differ in conceiving the physical body as a material and mind also as a material. But now and then, the question is asked that so-called matter is not sentient, it cannot be aware or conscious, and how does matter suddenly become conscious/aware/sentient being? For this reason, consciousness studies have become very important in the last two to three decades and it has opened up. These studies are now turn out to be multidisciplinary by the interest of brain scientists, neuroscientists, psychologists, philosophers of mind, language, physicists, computer scientists, Artificial Intelligence. A lot of work has been done in this field of science to address what is this subjective conscious experience which a human being has internally. Consciousness studies are not new in the east, about two to three thousand years ago texts called Upanishads which are originated from Vedas are clearly stated about consciousness and its nature. In this article, the nature of consciousness is discussed and demonstrated according to Advaita Vedanta Philosophy. The article also encompasses the standpoint of modern science on consciousness. Finally, an attempt is made to answer the so-called hard problem of consciousness from the Advaita Vedanta perspective.

**Key Words:** Advaita Vedanta, consciousness, hard problem, neuroscience, Upanishads

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## INTRODUCTION

The fundamental question about consciousness and its nature is raised long ago in all schools of philosophies and discussed comprehensively in the philosophical texts. But for the past two to three decades, modern science especially brain and neuroscientists are puzzled with the question of what the consciousness is and how it can be understood? (Baars, 1997; Block, Flanagan & Guzeldere, 1997; Chalmers, 1996). In Vedanta, the same question is asked in a different way such as; impelled by what light or inspired by what power mind thinks? What luminous being directs the eyes and the ears? What is that giving the experience of seeing internally? It is remarkable to

have a conscious experience of hearing, talking, listening, and so on in the material body. So the question is, what makes it possible to have this conscious experience in the material body? (Swami Sivananda, 1985).

As per recent Oxford University publications, there are five great unsolved questions in Philosophy which are: first, do we have free will? Second, can we know (knowledge) anything at all (skepticism regarding epistemology)? The third one, who am "I"? (fundamental nature of human beings), the fourth one is what is death (not physical death but as a psychological/sentient being) and the fifth one is what would "global justice" look like?

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(5 Great Unsolved Philosophical Questions, Oxford University Press, 2018).

The essential point in the above first four questions is that these questions are directly connected with consciousness. A very interesting thing is whether it is ancient eastern philosophy like Advaita Vedanta or Modern Western Philosophy all of them are vitally connected with consciousness.

## MODERN SCIENTISTS STUCK WITH CONSCIOUSNESS

The physical body is described differently by different scientists like chemists, physicists, and biologists. Apart from all descriptions, a person is experiencing different internally called first-person experience or qualia and this is not explained by any of these modern scientists (Chalmers, 1996). So what is the connection between this physical substratum of body and conscious being living in the body? Some brain scientists even now arguing that this consciousness is generating by the brain (Robert, 2018), but on contrary, some other scientists from the same field like David Chalmers saying that the physical brain can't generate consciousness (Chalmers, 1995). He also says that never makes a big mistake of transition from brain to consciousness as both are fundamentally different (Chalmers, 2006). This includes the reductionists or materialist's approach of reducing consciousness to the brain and states of the brain, quantum or superstrings, etc. This is a big mistake as per David Chalmers due to jump made from one category to another category in principle.

## THE HARD PROBLEM OF CONSCIOUSNESS

In consciousness studies today, what is the central and essential question is something called the hard problem of consciousness (Block, 2002) (Dennet, 1988). David Chalmers who is an Australian philosopher & cognitive scientist coined this term the hard problem of consciousness. What is this hard problem is, so far what is accomplished in brain science is the science of correlation and with this, they are trying to understand neuronal activity reports in the brain and matching with that of related activities like listening to a speech or tasting coffee, etc. But here there is a huge problem which is pointed first time by David Chalmers is "how can a physical system as physical as inert substance the brain and nervous system can generate first-person experience or qualia" (Searle, Dennett & Chalmers, 1997). Any sentient being in his routine activities like listening, seeing, tasting, remembering, thinking, loving, and including all the conscious activities of life are generating the first-person experience internally rather he/she doesn't experience anything about neurons firing in the brain during any of these acts. How can a physical system generate this first-person experience is the central question in today's consciousness studies (Baars, 1997). The distinct point here is that this kind of internal experience is not possible with any physical constructs in nature except sentient beings.

## STUMBLING BLOCK FOR MATERIALISM IN UNDERSTANDING CONSCIOUSNESS

Recently, there is remarkable observation is taking place in the philosophy of mind including behaviorism and psychologism which is the approach used in materialism for understanding that consciousness is itself became a stumbling block (Shear, 1997). This is because science is about objectivity that's works fine absolutely when studying objects, but when we are studying the subject itself by the same approach, then it will miss by a wide mark. Due to this reason despite desperate attempts made by most scientists come out with no understanding about what is consciousness and its nature. Then what is a solution to the hard problem of consciousness according to David Chalmers, says that though it is hard to accept we have to consider consciousness as one of the fundamental realities of this universe (Chalmers, 1996). It means no need to reduce consciousness to the brain or matter because it is fundamentally irreducible in principle so it is also as fundamental as like matter, time, space, and energy in the universe. That implies consciousness is ubiquitous in the universe by itself and it interacts with the physical world through the nervous system and brain (Chalmers, 2006).

## THE IDEA OF PANPSYCHISM AND ANCIENT SANKHYA PHILOSOPHY IS ON THE SAME PAGE

In the philosophy of mind, panpsychism is the view that the mind or a mind-like aspect is a fundamental and ubiquitous feature of reality. It is also described as a theory that "the mind is a fundamental feature of the world which exists throughout the universe (Hartshorne & Charles, 1950).

About four to five thousand years ago one of the Indian Philosophies called Sankhya states a similar thing that there are two fundamental realities exists independently in the universe (Vangiya, 1969) According to this philosophy entirety of the universe including human bodies, brains, nervous system, and mind (thoughts, emotions) are the "nature" (Prakriti in Sanskrit). That which experiences the world, body, brain, and mind is the "consciousness" (Purusha in Sanskrit). (Sankhya, the theory of creation, Duality and Enumeration by Seer Kapila Muni).

## ADVAITA VEDANTA AND CONSCIOUSNESS

Advaita Vedanta is a school of Indian philosophy developed based on texts called Upanishads. In Advaita Vedanta, the focus is different for understanding the consciousness from that of the Modern studies. The focus was given to how one does overcome suffering in life and how to attain lasting, profound peace, happiness, and joy/wellness. In a most profound sense, the focus is transcendence or cessation of sorrow and attainment of lasting happiness/wellness. All the schools of Indian Philosophies are addressing the same point, i.e., freedom to self from sorrow. But the self is closely associated with consciousness. That

is how Vedanta and other schools of Indian Philosophies are interested in the Self and Consciousness (Gambhirananda, 1996). The central teaching of Advaita Vedanta is “That Thou Art” (Tat Tvam Asi). The fundamental reality in this universe is Brahman meaning the vast or limitless. Brahman is also described as Existence, Consciousness, and Bliss. What in general considers this external world is the appearance of the underlying reality which is Brahman. The individual being is none other than that underlying reality. It does not include body, brain, and nervous system as a fundamental reality except the consciousness principle which functions through this body-mind complex (Chandogya Upanishad, Cha. 6, Verse 6.9.4) (Thibaut, 1890).

## BIG CLAIM OF ADVAITA VEDANTA

The Advaita Vedanta claims that self is perfect, certain, existence, and pure consciousness which is beyond suffering, eternal, immutable all-pervading in nature which firms the fundamental reality of this universe. The individual self is already this pure consciousness nothing to attain except need recognition/cognizance of this truth by removing ignorance. As Swami Vivekananda says each soul is potentially divine and the goal is to realize divinity and manifest this divinity within (Eastern H, 1983). This makes the Advaita Vedanta paradigm to give irrefutable proof of the existence of God (consciousness in totality) is the existence of the individual soul itself, this is unique and the highlight of this philosophy (Sarvapriyananda, 2014; Tathagatananda, 2011).

An ordinary person in day-to-day life does not experience anything about quantum mechanics, superstrings, and data, but everyone is access to consciousness while thinking, remembering, feeling, seeing, hearing, etc. in fact what we call life is a series of experiences in consciousness. It implies everything is an experience in consciousness and therefore consciousness is a fundamental datum of life. As per Advaita Vedanta, everything an individual self does in his life is in the consciousness; therefore, everything in the universe is the manifestation of consciousness (Vivekananda, 1983 & 1984) (Burke, 1984).

## FOUR POSSIBLE APPROACHES TO RELATE CONSCIOUSNESS TO OBJECTS

Now a common question put forth to all branches of philosophy and modern science is, what is the relationship between the consciousness and its objects? Four possible approaches are useful to understand the relation; the First one is Object is primary and consciousness is a by-product of it, this is the modern materialistic and reductionist view of consciousness. The second approach is Consciousness is primary and matter, space, energy (universe) is a product of it, and this is almost all theologian's view of the world. The third option is neither created the other one, both are fundamental and independent realities by nature, but they can interact with each other means consciousness can function through the body-mind complex and gives rise to conscious experience, this is the ancient Sankhya and Yoga Philosophy which are already discussed. The

fourth approach is the Advaita Vedanta view which is not that the object produces consciousness or consciousness produces objects but the radical claim of Vedanta is there is only one nondual reality (not two) that is the Consciousness. It is nondual because it appears to be two such as consciousness and the world but in reality, it alone exists. According to Vedanta a good example to understand this approach is a dream, it's the mind alone which appears as a dreamer, and the dream world (people, things, events) all of this is the mind alone. Consciousness does the same thing, as Swami Vivekananda says one alone exists and it appears as Nature and Soul.

Advaita Vedanta further claims that every individual can “experience” the Consciousness. According to this philosophy, it's not a journey in time or space to understand consciousness, but it is possible now and here (Bhajananda, 2010). There are methodologies/techniques given in Advaita Vedanta like “Seer and the Seen,” an inquiry into “three states of sleeping, dreaming and waking” and an inquiry into “Five layers of Human Personality.” These techniques take oneself in understanding the nondual reality of Advaita Vedanta.

## DEMONSTRATION OF CONSCIOUSNESS IN VEDANTA

The method of “Seer & the Seen” (Drig Drisya Viveka) can demonstrate the consciousness which is based on a text called Panchadasi wrote by the author Vidyaranya from the southern part of India about seven hundred years before. This method works based on the operating principle the seer and the scene are must be two different entities like eyes are different from its objects scene and similarly, the experiencer and the experienced are also different entities. This method comprises three steps in understanding. The first step is, eyes (seer) are different from its objects known as forms (seen), note here forms are many, but the seer is pair of eyes and forms are continuously changes and seer is unchanging relatively means the experience keeps changing but experiencer is constant. The second step is eyes themselves become a scene and the mind is the seer as the mind aware of the vision of eyes and no vision when eyes closed. So here eyes are known and the mind is the knower. Last step, the mind itself becomes the scene and consciousness (self) is the experiencer. It means the modifications of the mind like thoughts, feelings emotions are experienced constantly by the experiencer. These states of mind are continuously changing, but the experiencer is unchanged. So if the mind is experienced, the experiencer must be different from it according to the operating principle (seer & scene are different). This witness (Sakshi in Sanskrit) is none other than consciousness because it is aware of the contents of the mind. This witness/consciousness/awareness is equated with self but not in a sense of individual self but as a nondual impersonal self. Finally, the method indicates that consciousness is unknowable in a sense like an object; it never is objectified means one cannot know it as an object. (Krishnananda, 1989).

The method of three states can also demonstrate clearly how consciousness is an unchanging reality. Sleep has two aspects

which are dream sleep (REM sleep) and deep sleep (non-REM sleep). In dream state, there is an experience of dreams that is supported by awareness of dreams. But in deep sleep also there is the persistence of consciousness (not a sense of "I") but this is questioned by modern science by saying deep sleep seems to be an unconscious state. But Vedanta responds to this by saying it seems to prove opposite that means consciousness remains intact during deep sleep, not that there is an absence of experience in deep sleep, but it is an experience of the absence of objects. Therefore consciousness is experiencing all sensations and thoughts in the waking state, dreams in dream state, and absence of all above (experience of blankness or nothingness) in the deep sleep state. According to Vedanta deep sleep is the sleep of the mind, waking is the waking of the mind, dreaming is the dreaming of the mind, but consciousness is one unchanged and remains as it is in all the three states. Until an object is presented to consciousness, it cannot be experienced because an object is needed to be reflected. (Sarasvati, 1995).

Vedanta defines experience as consciousness plus an object like the experience of seeing, hearing, touching, and so on. So if no object is there to experience, then consciousness alone illumines but cannot be experienced (Gambhirananda S, 1996). This is what happens precisely in the deep sleep state. Evidence for consciousness presence in deep sleep is only possible from a subjective point of view as a first-person experience such as experiential knowledge of not knowing anything or nothingness with enormous peace expressed after waking. This is beyond the science of correlation.

## CONCLUSION

Advaita Vedanta states that this nondual self or consciousness alone shining as the subject and everything else is known, by its light everything else illumines. It can never be an object of epistemology. But all knowledge and experiences are made possible because of this fundamental nondual self-luminous principle. This is the answer to the hard problem of consciousness by the philosophy of Advaita Vedanta, the fundamental reality is the consciousness only, which reveals itself and everything else in the universe, which gives us the first-person experience or qualia. This consciousness is unchanging, immortal, immutable, and undying.

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